

***SELAH* IN THE PSALMS**

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I. Derivation of סִלָּה

A. From the root סָלַה, “to rest” or “be silent.” סִלָּה (penult accent) is taken as a pausal form of סָלָה (ultima accent), directing the leader to pause or be silent presumably for an instrumental interlude (Gesenius). It always has the same form.

B. From סָלַה, “to lift up” (Sampey, Leupold, and “most modern scholars”). It is thus a direction

1. to the orchestra “to raise” the volume of the accompaniment momentarily—like a *fortissimo* or *sforzando*.
2. to the reader “to increase” the volume of the reading.
3. to the congregation “to lift up” their voices in benediction—like an *amen*.

II. Against סָלַה, “to be silent”

A. It is a rather doubtful Hebrew root that does not seem to occur anywhere in the text of the Old Testament.

B. It would necessitate stopping the reading (though perhaps only for a pause like a *sforzando*, or emphatic blast of the accompaniment).

1. סִלָּה occurs (rarely) in the middle of a verse: Psalm **55:19**; **57:3**; Habakkuk **3:3**; **3:9**.
2. It sometimes occurs where there is no natural break in thought (see VII).

C. *Selah*, “to be silent,” would be superfluous at the end of a psalm.

1. Passages (see Chart IV): Psalm **3:8**; **9:20**; **24:10**; **46:11**; **88:10**
2. For some reason, the Septuagint omits all the *selahs* at the end of the psalms except for Psalm **9**, which it combines with Psalm **10**. Whatever the reason, the LXX translators did not seem to understand סָלַה to mean “be silent” because they did not translate it that way.

III. In support of the root סָלַה, “to lift up”

A. It is a less obscure root—although that fact might tell against this derivation since its meaning was evidently uncertain by the time of Aquila (died about A.D. 150). Perhaps the meaning was lost during the exile, when the temple performance of the psalms was not possible.

B. The usages of סָלַה in the text of the Old Testament (Job **28:16**, **19**; Psalm **119:118**; Lamentations **1:15**) seem to come from this root.

1. It means “to value” in Job **28:16**, **19** (“to lift up,” hence, “to suspend,” then “to

weigh”).

2. It means “to condemn” in Psalm **119:118**; Lamentations **1:5**. What can be raised is light; hence, unimportant. *Light* and *weighty* are used this way in English for “insignificant” and “important” respectively.

C. They are all poetic passages (as were the Psalms and Habakkuk).

D. The Job passages show that it was a root in use at a time early enough for all the usages in the Psalms.

E. The LXX always translates הָלַל with διάψαλμα. Symmachus and Theodotian usually do also.

1. διάψαλμα is a word of expression rather than silence. Διά means “through” or “th(o)roughly”; ψάλλω means “to pluck an instrument.”
2. If הָלַל meant “silence” (for a musical interlude to be raised), the Septuagint would not be translating directly, but would be using a word for what occurred during the pause rather than referring to the pause itself.

F. In Job **21:12** the root הָלַל, meaning “to lift up,” is used in a musical context similar to the proposed usage of הָלַל: “*They sing [lift up] to the timbrel and harp and rejoice at the sound of the pipe.*”

G. *Selah* does not necessitate interrupting the reading in those places where *selah* would seem to interrupt the thought.

IV. Charts regarding *selah*

<u>Ref.</u>	<u>LXX</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Poetic Type</u>	<u>Musical Notations</u>
3:2 4 8	διάψαλμα " (omit) ^A	psalm	David	ind. lament	Psalm of David
4:2 4	διάψαλμα "	psalm	David		on stringed instruments ^J , Psalm of David, for the chief musician
7:5	"	<i>Shiggaion</i> ^C	David	ind. lament	David
9:16	ὥδῃ διαψάλματος (<i>selah</i> + <i>Higgaion</i> ^U)	psalm	"		for the chief musician, set to <i>Muthlabbern</i> ^K , Psalm of David
9:20	διάψαλμα ^A	psalm	David		
20:3	"	psalm	David	royal	for the chief musician, Psalm of David
21:2	"	psalm	David		for the chief musician,

					Psalm of David
24:6	"	psalm	David		Psalm of David
10	(omit) ^A				
32:4	διάψαλμα	<i>maschil</i> ^D	David	ind. praise	David
5	"				
7	"				
	["		[David]		[David]
	34:10 =				
	33:11]				
39:5	διάψαλμα	psalm	David	ind. lament	Psalm of David, for the chief musician, for <i>Jeduthum</i> ^L
11	"				
44:8	"	<i>maschil</i>	sons of Korah?	nat. lament	for the chief musician
46:3	"	song ^E	sons of Korah?		set to <i>Alamoth</i> ^M , song
7	"		sons of Korah		song
11	(omit) ^A				
47:4	διάψαλμα	psalm	sons of Korah?	enthronement	for the chief musician, psalm
48:8	"	song, psalm	sons of Korah?		song, psalm
49:13	διάψαλμα	psalm	sons of Korah?		for the chief musician, psalm
15	"				
50:6	"	psalm	Asaph		Asaph, psalm
	["	["]	["]		["]
	50:15 =				
	49:15]				
52:3	διάψαλμα	<i>maschil</i>	David		for the chief musician, Psalm of David
5	"				
54:3	"	<i>maschil</i>	David	ind. lament	for the chief musician, on stringed instruments ^J , David

55:7 19 ^H	" "	<i>maschil</i>	David	ind. lament	David, for the chief musician, on stringed instruments ^J
57:3 ^H 6	" "	<i>michtam</i> ^E	David	ind. lament	chief musician, (set to) <i>Altashheth</i> ^N , David
59:5 13	" "	<i>michtam</i> ^E	David	ind. lament	for the chief musician; David
60:4	"	<i>michtam</i> ^E	David		for the chief musician, set to <i>Shushan Eduth</i> ^O
61:4	"		David	ind. lament	for the chief musician, on stringed instruments ^J , David
62:4 8	" "	psalm	David		for the chief musician, after the manner of <i>Jeduthun</i> ^P , Psalm of David
66:4 7 15	" " "	song; psalm		ind. praise	for the chief musician, song, psalm
67:1 4	" "	song; psalm			for the chief musician, on stringed instruments ^J , song, psalm
68:7 [68:13 = 67:14] 19 32	" " " " "	song; psalm	David	thanksgiving	for the chief musician, David, song, psalm
75:3	"	song, psalm	Asaph		for the chief musician, set to <i>Altasheth</i> ^N , Asaph, song, psalm
76:3 9	" "	song, psalm	Asaph	ind. lament	for the chief musician, on stringed instruments ^J , Asaph, song, psalm

77:3	"	psalm	Asaph		for the chief musician,
9	"				after the manner of
15	"				<i>Jeduthun</i> ^P ,
					Asaph, psalm
	["	[psalm]	[Asaph]	nat. lament	for the chief musician,
	80:7 =				set to <i>Shoshannim</i> ^Q
	79:8]				
81:7	"		Asaph		for the chief musician,
					set to <i>Gittith</i> ^R , Asaph
82:2	"	psalm	Asaph		Asaph, psalm
83:8	"	song, psalm	Asaph	nat. lament	Asaph, song, psalm
84:4	"	psalm	sons of	song of Zion	for the chief musician,
			Korah?		set to <i>Gittith</i> ^R , psalm
8	"				
85:2	"	psalm	sons of		chief musician, psalm
			Korah?		
87:3	"	psalm	sons of		psalm
6	"		Korah?		
88:7	"	song, psalm, <i>maschil</i>	sons of Korah? Heman the Ezrahite	ind. lament	for the chief musician,
					set to <i>Mahalath Leannoth</i> ^S ,
					Heman, song, psalm
10	(omit) ^A				
89:4	"	<i>maschil</i>	Etham the Ezrahite	royal	Etham the Ezrahite
37	"				
45	"				
48	"				
	["	[psalm]	[David]		[Psalm of David]
	94:15 =				
	93:15]				
140:3	"	psalm	David	ind. lament	for the chief musician,
					Psalm of David
5	"				
8	"				

143:6	"	psalm	David	ind. lament	Psalms of David
Habakkuk					
3:3 ^H	"	prayer ^G	Habakkuk		set to <i>Shiggionoth</i> ^T ,
9 ^H	"				for the chief musician,
13	"				on my stringed instruments ^J

Sigla: A = at the end of the psalm	L = לידותון [לידיתון]
B = מְזֹמֶר	M = עַל־עֲלָמוֹת ("set to the virgins")
C = שְׁגִיּוֹן	N = אַל־תִּשְׁחָת ("destroy not")
D = מְשָׁכִיל	O = עַל־שִׁשְׁן אֲדוֹת ("set to lily of testimony")
E = שִׁיר	P = ידוֹתוֹן [עַל־יְדִיתוֹן]
F = מִקְתָּם	Q = אַל־שִׁשְׁנִית
G = תִּפְלָה	R = עַל־הַגִּתִּית
H = in the middle of a verse	S = עַל־מְחֻלַּת לְעֻנוֹת ("set to dancings [?] with shoutings")
I = לְמִנְצָה	T = עַל־שְׁגִינֹת
J = בְּנִגִּינוֹת	U = הִגִּיּוֹן
K = עַל־מוֹת לְבֶן ("set to death of the son")	

V. Alternatives for explaining its usages

A. *Selah* is a word in the meaning of the psalm itself. Aquila so understood it in his Greek translation of the Old Testament and rendered it "always." Jerome in his Latin vulgate followed Aquila, translating it "always" (*semper*).

B. *Selah* is a word of direction for the performance of the psalm.

VI. Against *selah* meaning "ever" or "always," as part of the psalm itself

A. At least one passage would seem to be self-contradictory if this were the meaning of *selah*: Psalm 7:5 says, "*Yea, let him tread my life down to earth, and lay my glory in the dust (always)*"; whereas 7:6 calls for Yahveh to lift himself up against David's enemies and deliver him.

B. Some passages already contain the element of eternity:

1. Psalm 44:8: "*And we will give thanks to your name forever (always).*"
2. Psalm 48:8: "*God will establish it forever (always).*"
3. Psalm 55:19: "*God will hear and answer them, even he that abides of old (always).*"
4. Psalm 89:4: "*I will establish your seed forever, and build up your throne to all generations (always).*"

C. The action in some passages is punctiliar rather than linear. It is an action or event

that occurs once instead of continually or many times.

1. Psalm **49:15**: “*But God will redeem my hand from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me (always).*”
2. Psalm **52:5**: “*He will take you up, and pluck you out of your tent, and root you out of the land of the living (always).*”
3. Psalm **57:6**: “*They have dug a pit before me; they have fallen into the midst thereof themselves (always).*”
4. Psalm **81:7**: “*I tested you at the waters of Meribah (always).*”
5. Psalm **87:6**: “*Yahveh will count when he adds up the peoples; this one was born there (always).*”
6. Habakkuk **3:3**: “*God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran (always).*”

D. There is no known Hebrew root in (ה) +ל+ם with the meaning “always.”

E. The LXX puts the translation of הלם on a separate line (unless this is simply an editorial device of Ralphy).

F. The sense is always complete without it; it stands apart syntactically.

VII. In favor of *selah* meaning “life up,” relating to the orchestral performance of the psalm (rather than to the reader or audience)

A. The LXX’s word ψάλλω, “to pluck,” fits with “lifting up”—as in a musical interlude.

B. It usually stands in the middle of the psalm.

1. All references but five

a. 69 of the 73 usages in the Hebrew text

b. The LXX adds 5, always in the middle of the psalm: **34:10** (= **33:11**); **50:15** (= **49:15**); **68:13** (= **67:14**); **80:7** (= **79:8**); **94:15** (= **93:15**). It omits those at the end of the psalms (and **88:10**).

2. Those at the end of the psalms (**3:8**; **9:20**; **24:10**; **46:11**) may be like fanfare postludes.

C. It frequently stands at the major breaks in the text.

1. passages where natural breaks occur:

a. Psalm **3:2**, **4**, **8** forms the outline most expositors offer.

3:1-2: quotation about the psalmist

3:3-4: answer to the psalmist

3:5-8: praise by the psalmist

b. Psalm **7:5** (following Leupold’s outline)

7:1-2: a plea for help
 7:3-5: a protestation of innocence
 7:6-7: a plea for vindication
 7:8-10: a plea for a just verdict
 7:11-13: a prediction of overthrow
 7:14-16: the unhappy end of evil men
 7:17: a resolve to praise God

c. Psalm 24:6, 10

24:1-6: declaration
 24:7-10: commandment

d. Psalm 32:4, 5, 7 (See Wolf's outline)

32:1-2: proclamation
 32:3-5: narration (3-4, recounting; 5b, recounting deliverance)
 32:6-7: acknowledgement
 32:8-11: instruction

e. Psalm 34:10 (LXX only)

Psalm 34:1-10: praise God for help
 Psalm 34:11-22: instruction

f. Psalm 44:8

44:1-8: address and introductory petition
 44:9-16: lament proper
 44:17-22: confession of trust
 44:23-26: petition and motivation

g. Psalm 46:3, 7

46:1-3: the scene of danger
 46:4-7: the scene of peace
 46:8-11: an invitation to come

h. Psalm 47:4

47:1-4: a call to the nations to praise God
 47:5-8: a call to Israel to praise God
 47:9: submission of the Gentiles

i. Psalm 48:8

48:1-3: the indwelling of the Lord
 48:4-8: an instance of God's protecting Zion

48:9-11: exhortation to praise God
48:12-14: the glories of Zion transmitted to posterity

j. Psalm **49:15** (verse 13 seems unnatural)

49:1-4: a solemn introduction
49:5-12: wealth unable to buy off death
49:13-15: contrast of those who do or do not trust in wealth
49:16-20: wealthy unable to take wealth with them

k. Psalm **50:6** (LXX adds **50:15**)

50:1-6: God's appearance for judgment
50:7-15: rebuke for formalistic worship
50:16-21: rebuke for the wicked in Israel
50:22-23: closing admonition

l. Psalm **52:5** (verse 3 seems unnatural)

52:1-5: the denunciation of Saul
52:6-9: the fortunate lot of the righteous

m. Psalm **54:3**

54:1-3: a prayer for deliverance
54:4-7: confident assurance of a help

n. Psalm **59:13**

59:1-5: prayer for deliverance
59:6-10: confidence in God
59:11-13: imprecatory prayer
59:14-17: further confidence amid danger

o. Psalm **62:4, 8**

62:1-4: resignation toward God
62:5-8: invitation to resignation
62:9-12: futility of all help but God's

p. Psalm **66:4, 7** (verse 15 does not seem to be a natural break)

66:1-4: universal praise of God
66:5-7: mighty works
66:8-12: special deliverance
66:13-20: response of an individual helped in distress

q. Psalm **76:3, 9**

76:1-3: description of recent deliverance
 76:4-6: God's glory has been exalted
 76:7-9: men stand in awe of God's judgment
 76:10-12: God's praise established in every way

r. Psalm 77:15 (verses 3 and 9 are not major divisions)

77:1-10: the psalmist's perplexity about God
 77:11-15: recollection of God's work in the past
 77:16-19: passage through the Red Sea
 77:20: conclusion

s. Psalm 83:8

83:1-8: danger
 83:9-18: prayer for retribution

t. Psalm 84:4 (verse 8 not a definite break)

84:1-4: blessing of having access to the house of God
 84:5-7: blessing of fellowship with God daily
 84:8-9: prayer for blessing on the king
 84:10-12:

u. Psalm 87:3, 6

87:1-3: praise of Zion
 87:4-6: Zion's ancient enemies among her citizens
 87:7: the spirit animating Zion's festive gatherings

v. Psalm 89:4, 37, 45 (verse 48 not a major division)

89:1-4: address
 89:5-37: confession of trust
 89:38-45: lament proper
 89:46-52: petition and motivation

w. Psalm 140:5, 8 (verse 3 not a definite break)

140:1-5: prayer for personal deliverance
 140:6-8: confidence in prayer
 140:9-11: prayer for enemies' overthrow
 140:12-13: assurance for deliverance

2. Listing of passages where unnatural breaks occur

a. breaks in the middle of a verse: Psalm 55:19; 57:3; Habakkuk 3:3, 9

b. others: Psalm 4:2, 4; 9:16; 21:2; 49:13; 52:3; 57:6; 60:4; 61:4; 67:1, 4; 68:7 (LXX adds 13), 19, 32; 75:3; 77:3, 9; 81:7; 82:2; 85:2; 89:48; 140:3

3. Summary

- a. 37 occurrences at major divisions of the outline
- b. 4 occurrences in unnatural breaks
- c. 23 occurrences where there are no major divisions

D. It occasionally stands with recurring elements for emphasis

1. Psalm 39:5, 11: appears *after* “*Surely every man (at his best estate) is altogether vanity*”: it makes *breath* (vanity) a key word.

2. Psalm 66:4, 7, 15: precedes (4, 15) the commands to come and hear; the other (7) precedes another major imperative.

3. Psalm 46:7, 11: follows the expression *the God of Jacob is our refuge*.

E. It does not appear frequently per psalm.

- 1. It appears only once in 15 psalms.
- 2. It appears twice in 15 psalms.
- 3. It appears three times in 7 psalms and in Habakkuk 3.
- 4. It appears four times in only one Hebrew text (*i.e.*, Psalm 89: add Psalm 32 and Psalm 68 in LXX).
- 5. It never occurs in successive verses.

F. *Selah* appears in 7 psalms whose headings mention an instrument.

1. Psalms that mention instruments in the title and use *selah* in the body: 4², 54, 55², 76², Habakkuk 3³.

2. The two exceptions are Psalm 5 and Psalm 6.

3. That phenomenon involves 13 of the 74 occurrences of *selah*.

G. *Selah* appears in 37 of the 96 psalms composed by known instrumentalists (in 17 of the 24 written by other than David; perhaps the difference is due to the fact that David flourished before the temple worship was fully established with its set patters of accompaniment).

1. In 20 of the 72 Davidic psalms (according to the Hebrew text)

a. In Psalm 3³, 4², 7, 9², 20, 21, 24², 32³, 39², 52², 54, 55², 57², 59², 60, 61, 62², 68², 140³, 143.

b. Not in Psalm 5, 6, 8, 11-19, 22-23, 25-31, 34-38, 40-41, 51, 53, 56, 58, 63-65, 69-70, 86, 101, 103, 108-110, 122, 124, 131, 133, 138-139, 141-142, 144-145.

2. In the one psalm of Heman the Ezrahite, Psalm 88. Heman is mentioned elsewhere in 1 Kings 4:31; 1 Chronicles 6:33; 15:17, 19; 16:41, 42; 25:1, 4², 5², 6; 2

Chronicles 5:12; 29:14; 35:15. He sang before the tabernacle (2 Chronicles 6:32-33); he was one of the three first-level musicians at the time of David (1 Chronicles 15:17); he was a player of brass cymbals (1 Chronicles 15:19), of trumpets (1 Chronicles 16:42), harps, and psalteries (1 Chronicles 25:1), and horn (1 Chronicles 25:5).

3. In one psalm of Ethan the Ezrahite, Psalm 89. Ethan, Heman, and Asaph appear together in 1 Kings 15:19; 1 Chronicles 6:22, 39, 44.

4. In 7 of the 12 psalms of Asaph (in Psalm 50, 75, 76², 81, 82, 83; but not in Psalm 73, 74, 78, 79, 80).

5. In 9 of the 11 psalms by the sons of Korah. The sons of Korah were Levites according to 2 Chronicles 20:19, who praised God during the reign of Jehosaphat. The succeeding contexts in verses 20-22 recount Jehosaphat's appointing certain ones to sing to the Lord and go out before the army in "holy array." "Holy array" best fits the sons of Korah mentioned previously. If so, then they were also musicians; because, upon their return from the successful campaign, the text says, "*They came to Jerusalem with psalteries and harps and trumpets to the house of Yahveh*" (20:28). Heman was a musician who composed Psalm 88, which is also attributed to the sons of Korah. Heman was a Levite and probably the specific "son of Korah" who composed Psalm 88. Thus the sons of Korah were probably instrumentalists as well as singers

6. In Psalm 44, 46³, 47, 48, 49², 84², 85, 87², and 88²; but not in Psalm 42, 45.

H. *Selah* appears in 7 of the 15 psalms that say "set to _____."

1. In 1 psalm "set to *Methlabben*" (Psalm 9);
 In 3 of the 4 psalms "set to *Altashheth*" (Psalm 57, 59, 75; but not in Psalm 58);
 In the 1 psalm "set to *Mahalath Leannoth*" (Psalm 88);
 In the 1 psalm "set to *Shushan Eduth*" (Psalm 60);
 In the 1 psalm "set to *Alamoth*" (Psalm 46).
2. Not in the 1 psalm "set to *Mahalath*" (Psalm 53);
 Not in 2 psalms "set to the *Sheminith*" (Psalm 6, 12);
 Not in the 1 psalm "set to *Aijeleth Hash-Shachar*" (Psalm 22);
 Not in the 3 psalms "set to *Shoshannim*" (Psalm 45, 69, 80);
 Not in the 1 psalm "set to *Jonath Elem Rehokim*" (Psalm 56).

I. *Selah* occurs in 20 of the 57 psalms called מְזִמֹּר (root זָמַר, "to touch, to strike, to play an instrument").

1. in Psalm 3, 4, 9, 20-21, 24, 39, 47-50, 62, 82-85, 87-88, 140;
2. not in Psalm 5-6, 8, 12-13, 15, 19, 22-23, 29-31, 38, 40-41, 63-68, 73, 75-77, 79-80, 92, 98, 101-102, 108-110, 139, 141

J. A summary of observations

1. Although *selah* does not always appear in psalms whose titles have some sort of musical element, it never appears in a psalm that lacks some sort of musical element.

2. It never appears in a psalm that has no title: **1, 2, 10, 33, 43, 71, 72, 90, 91, 93, 97, 99, 104, 105-107, 111-119, 135-137, 146-150.**

3. It does not appear in the songs of ascents—even though David’s name is attached to **122, 124, 131, and 133**—presumably because the worshipers used them along the way on the pilgrimages to Jerusalem rather than in the temple. Music would be more difficult to supply while traveling.

4. *Selah* appears in 6 of the 17 psalms that mention a musical instrument:

harp (כִּנּוֹר, Psalm **33:2; 43:4; 49:4; 57:8; 71:22; 81:2; 92:3; 98:5; 108:2; 137:2; 147:7; 149:3; 150:3**);

instrument (כְּלִי, Psalm **71:22**);

organ (עוגב, Psalm **150:40**);

ten-stringed instrument (עֶשְׂרִי, Psalm **33:2; 92:3**);

timbrel (תֶּבֶל, Psalm **81:2; 149:3; 150:4**);

timbrel (תֶּבֶל, Psalm **68:25**);

trumpet (הַצִּצְרֵה, Psalm **98:6**);

trumpet (שׁוֹפָר, Psalm **47:5; 81:3; 98:6; 150:3**);

cymbal (מְצִלְתִּים, Psalm **150:5**);

viol (גִּבְלוֹ, Psalm **33:2; 57:8; 71:22; 81:2; 92:3; 108:9; 144:9; 150:3**).

So, *selah* appears with instrument indications in Psalm **47, 49, 57, 68, 81, 87**; but not in Psalm **33, 43, 71, 92, 98, 108, 137, 144, 147, 149, 150.**