

What Does "Selah" Mean?



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Selah (סלה), the obscure word found among the [Hebrew Psalms](#) and in Habakkuk 3, has been the puzzle of ordinary readers and the despair of scholars. Oftentimes ascribed a musical status (e.g., a pause in the text like a rest on sheet music), there is much more to this word than meets the eye. And even though several propositions have been made over the last 100 years, scholars have relegated *Selah* to musical status. Some commonly accepted views have been: 1) a pause in the text; 2) a synonym of נצח (*netsach*) or עולם ('*olam*) -- Hebrew words that denote “forever,” or 3) a derivative of the root סלל (*salal*) meaning to “raise voices in praise” or “make instruments louder.”

Since the late 19th century, *Selah* had become the focus of a handful of publications exploring its meaning and function in the Psalms. While a considerable amount of effort was put into examining its placement, it wasn't until the [unearthing of the Dead Sea Scrolls](#) that would prove a useful clue in understanding its use in the Second Temple period. In the newly released book, [Reassessing Selah](#), an important clue has been discovered. While the term could have been used as a pause in the text, it seems to highlight the thematic threads that run throughout the Hebrew Psalms.

Themes such as sin, judgment, and salvation permeate Hebrew poetry and *Selah* marks important transitions in that thematic cycle; transitions that highlight the very [nature and character of God!](#) Psalm 32:7 provides a good example: "You are my hiding place; You will guard me from trouble; You will surround me with cries of deliverance. Selah (סלה)." Psalm 32's overall message is one of human transgression followed by divine deliverance, and *Selah* highlights those critical junctures for the psalmist and reader alike.