

PSALMS

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PSALTER

THE FIVE BOOKS

“As Moses gave five books of laws to Israel, so David gave five Books of Psalms to Israel, the Book of Psalms entitled Blessed is the man (Ps. 1:1), the Book entitled For the leader: Maschil (Ps. 41:1), the Book, A Psalm of Asaph (Ps. 73:1), the Book, A Prayer of Moses (Ps. 90:1), and the Book, Let the redeemed of the Lord say (Ps. 107:2). Finally, as Moses blessed Israel with the words Blessed art thou, O Israel (Deut. 33:29), so David blessed Israel with the words Blessed is the man.” — Midrash Tehillim

Basic Structure: Five Books. To reflect the Torah, the book of Psalms is divided into five books as the “Torah of David.”

- Book 1: 1–41
- Book 2: 42–72
- Book 3: 73–89
- Book 4: 90–106
- Book 5: 107–150

The Doxologies. There are doxologies at the end of each book.

- Book 1 Doxology: 41:13
- Book 2 Doxology: 72:18–19
- Book 3 Doxology: 89:52
- Book 4 Doxology: 106:48
- Book 5 Doxology: 150:6

Content Trends. There is a general movement from lamentation to hymns.

- Book 1: 59% Laments; 20% Hymns
- Book 2: 65% Laments; 19% Hymns
- Book 3: 47% Laments; 35% Hymns
- Book 4: 24% Laments; 29% Hymns
- Book 5: 23% Laments; 52% Hymns

Superscription Trends. The number of psalms with superscriptions is significantly higher in the first three books than in the last two books.

- Book 1: 95% have superscriptions

- Book 2: 97% have superscriptions
- Book 3: 100% have superscriptions
- Book 4: 35% have superscriptions
- Book 5: 59% have superscriptions

Davidic Trends. Psalms attributed to David are much greater in number in Books 1, 2, and 5 than in Books 3–4.

- Book 1: 95% attributed to David
- Book 2: 58% attributed to David
- Book 3: 6% attributed to David
- Book 4: 12% attributed to David
- Book 5: 32% attributed to David

Historical Correlations. What is the shape of the book of Psalms? It is five books that narrate the history of ancient Israel, the very history recorded in the books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and a number of the prophets. Books One and Two (Psalms 1–72) chronicle the reigns of Kings David and Solomon; Book Three (Psalms 73–89) tells of the dark days of the divided kingdoms and their eventual destructions; Book Four (Psalms 90–106) recalls the years of the Babylonian exile during which the community of faith had to rethink their identity as the people of God; and Book Five (Psalms 107–150) celebrates the community of faith’s restoration to the land and the sovereignty of God over them.¹

- Book 1: Reign of King David
- Book 2: Reign of Solomon
- Book 3: The Divided Monarchy and Fall of the Kingdoms
- Book 4: Exile
- Book 5: Return to Jerusalem

THE DAVIDIC COLLECTION

Psalms 3–41; 51–72; 108–110; 138–145. The vast majority of David’s psalms are in books 1 and 2 as these books correspond to the time of the Davidic reign in David and Solomon in Jerusalem. David is the model of the righteous one of Psalm 1 and the chosen one of Psalm 2. David leads in instructing God’s people in how to pray during times of distress and victory. David’s voice moves to the background in Books 3–4 as the focus of these books are: (1) the

¹ Nancy deClaisse–Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, ed. E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 38.

fall of Jerusalem and exile (Book 3), and (2) the reign of God (Book 4). When David's voice is heard in these books it is at pivot points where David, once again, leads God's people in worship of Yahweh as the sovereign King.

THE KORAHITE COLLECTIONS

42–49; 84–85; 87–88. The first of the three Korahite collections (42–49) make up the first eight psalms of Book 2 as book two transitions into the temple period after the reign of David. This is appropriate as the Korahites are temple singers. The second (84–85) and third (87–88) parts to the three-part collection are located in Book 3 which corresponds to the period of the divided monarchy and the destruction of the Temple. Psalm 88 is particularly dire as it is the penultimate psalm of book 3 which is the lowest point of the psalter. That the temple singers are associated with this psalm demonstrates the discouragement and confusion that comes with the loss of the Temple. Psalms 84–85 are Zion/Temple songs that speak of the blessings that come with dwelling in the presence and glory of God in Zion. Interwoven in Psalm 85 is a strand of plea to be restored to the temple.

THE ELOHISTIC COLLECTION

"Book Two of the Psalter consists of Psalms 42–72. Psalm 42 marks the beginning of what is commonly known as the Elohistic Psalter (Psalms 42–83), so named because of its somewhat distinct use of the divine name. In the Hebrew Psalter, the name most frequently used for God is the tetragrammaton YHWH (translated in English Bibles as "Lord"). But in Psalms 42–83, the name used most frequently is Elohim (ELOHIM, translated in English Bibles as "God"). The difference in the preferred name for God in these psalms suggests that the Elohistic Psalter was a discrete collection of psalms that was incorporated into the Hebrew Psalter. One of the major questions in psalm study today concerns the origins and transmission of the Elohistic Psalter. Textual evidence indicates a sharing of material between the psalms included in the Elohistic Psalter and psalms found elsewhere in the Psalter.

THE ASAPHITE COLLECTION

50; 73–83. The Asaphite collection falls in Book three as we hear—like with the Korahite collection—the voice of the temple singers. Half (six) of the Asaph psalms are lamentation, three are wisdom (50, 73, and 78), one is thanksgiving (75), and two are praise (76 and 81).

ENTHRONEMENT PSALMS

93; 95–99. This collection sings of the enthronement of Yahweh as opposed to the Davidic king. This collection falls in Book 4 as it reminds the people in exile that while there is no sitting king due to the fall of Jerusalem, God still reigns.

HALLELUJAH PSALMS

111–118; 146–150. The Hallelujah psalms are so-called because of the repetition of the imperative "hallelujah" meaning "praise Yah."

PILGRIMAGE FESTIVAL PSALMS

- **Passover / Pesaq / Egyptian Hallel:** Psalms 113–118. This collection recounts themes related to Israel's deliverance from Egyptian slavery.
- **Pentecost / Sukkot:** Psalm 119. Psalm 119, whose central focus is special revelation in the form of the written Word of God, is the Pentecost psalm as Pentecost celebrates the giving of the Law at Sinai.
- **Feast of Tabernacles / Shavuot:** Psalms 120–134. This is a collection of fifteen psalms. The number fifteen is likely derived from the fifteen steps leading up to Solomon's temple. The imagery here is that worshippers would sing the Songs of Ascent while ascending the Temple steps to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

PSALMS OF THE JEWISH LITURGY

Daily Psalms

- Psalm 30 (Dedication of the Temple)
- Daily Hallel: Psalms 146–150

Weekly Readings

- Sunday: 1–29
- Monday: 30–50
- Tuesday: 51–72
- Wednesday: 73–89 (Book 3)
- Thursday: 90–106 (Book 4)
- Friday: 107–119
- Shabbat: 120–150

Jewish Holidays

- Passover: Psalms 113–118 (Egyptian Hallel); Psalms 146–150 (Little Hallel)
- Pentecost: Psalm 119; Psalms 146–150 (Little Hallel)
- Feast of Tabernacles: Psalms 120–134 (Songs of Ascent); Psalms 146–150 (Little Hallel)
- Rosh Kodesh (New Month): Psalm 104
- Hanukkah (Feast of Lights): Psalm 29; Psalm 30; Psalms 95–99
- Sabbath Psalms: Psalm 19; Psalms 33–34; Psalms 90–92; Psalms 135–136: After Meals: Psalm 126