

Structure of Psalms

Short Bibliography

I have compiled this outline of Psalms guided by five reference books, listed below.

NIV Study Bible. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. iOS edition (Tecarta, Inc. 4.1).

Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002. (Abbreviated below as ‘How to Read’)

Kidner, Derek. *Psalms 1—72.* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Vol. 15. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008. (Abbreviated below as ‘Kidner’)

Kidner, Derek. *Psalms 73—150.* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Vol. 16. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008. (Abbreviated below as ‘Kidner’)

Longman, Tremper III, and Peter Enns. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008. (Abbreviated below as ‘DOTWPW’)

Disclaimer

*Any attempt to identify the structure of Psalms involves guesswork. We have very few **facts** about the history of its compilation. We do not know **who** arranged the psalms in their current form, much less their purposes for this particular arrangement. We can only look for clues and make tentative, provisional proposals.*

Book 1

Psalms 1–2 Introduction to the Psalter

These two psalms have no titles and are framed by similar phrases (“blessed is the one...” 1:1; “blessed are all...” 2:12). Besides serving as an introduction to the entire collection, Psalm 1 introduces the theme of Book 1 and Psalm 2 introduces the theme of Book 2.

Psalms 3–14

Psalms 3–7 Five Laments

Psalm 8 The Human Condition (humanity’s high dignity)

Psalms 9–13 Five Laments

Psalm 14 The Human Condition (humanity’s deep disgrace) (*repeated in Psalm 53*)

Psalms 15–24 Access to the Temple

Psalm 15 Who has access to the temple? (15:1)

- Psalm 16 Trust in God / Joy in his presence
- Psalm 17 Plea for deliverance
- Psalm 18 Prayer and praise for the king's deliverance
- Psalm 19 Glory of God revealed in creation and His law
- Psalms 20–21 Prayer and praise for the king's deliverance
- Psalm 22 Plea for deliverance
- Psalm 23 Trust in God / Joy in his presence
- Psalm 24 Who has access to the temple? (24:3)
- Psalms 25–33** Pleas for mercy and trust in God's unfailing love
- Psalm 25 Prayer for God's deliverance (acrostic)
- Psalm 26 Prayer of a blameless person
- Psalm 27 Appeal to God regarding false accusers
- Psalm 28 Prayer of one going "down to the pit"
- Psalm 29 God's power seen in a thunderstorm
- Psalm 30 Praise from one spared from going "down to the pit"
- Psalm 31 Appeal to God regarding false accusers
- Psalm 32 Blessedness of those forgiven
- Psalm 33 Praise for God's deliverance (acrostic)
- Psalms 34–37**
- Psalm 34 Instruction in Godly Wisdom
- Psalm 35 Appeal against the Wicked
- Psalm 36 Appeal against the Wicked
- Psalm 37 Instruction in Godly Wisdom
- Psalms 38–41** Four Laments: Prayer and Confession of Sins

Book 2

In Book II, "Elohim largely replaces the name Yahweh." The Book ends with the postscript of Psalm 72:20 — "This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse", even though there are an additional eighteen psalms by David after this, and a dozen by other authors in the first two Books. [Kidner, 18]

"Psalms are brought together here from various sources: the Sons of Korah, who were temple musicians (42 – 49); Asaph, the founder of another temple group (50); David

(51 – 65; 68 – 70); Solomon (72). There are also three anonymous psalms: 66, 67, 71.”
[Kidner, 182]

Psalms 42–45 Three prayers and a royal psalm “in perfect balance with the ending of Book II”

Psalms 42–43 Prayer for deliverance from enemies

Psalm 44 Communal prayer after defeat

Psalm 45 A royal wedding

Psalms 46–48

Psalm 46 Security in Zion

Psalm 47 Yahweh’s Worldwide Reign

Psalm 48 Security in Zion

Psalms 49–53

Psalm 49 Folly of Trusting in Wealth

Psalm 50 God Calls His People to Account

Psalm 51 An Individual Brought to Account

Psalm 52 Folly of Trusting in Wealth

Psalm 53 Folly of the Wicked (Compare with Psalm 14)

Psalms 54–60 *This is the central cluster of Book II*

Psalm 54 Individual Prayer for Deliverance

Psalm 55 Prayer for Help against Conspiracy

Psalm 56 Confidence that God Will Deliver from the Wicked

Psalm 57 God Is Exalted by His Saving Acts (*central Psalm of Book II*)

Psalm 58 Confidence that God Will Judge the Wicked

Psalm 59 Prayer for Help against Conspiracy

Psalm 60 Communal Prayer for Deliverance

Psalms 61–64 Four psalms expressing confidence in God’s deliverance

Psalms 65–68

Psalm 65 Praise for God’s Care of Creation

Psalm 66 Praise for God’s Saving Acts

Psalm 67 Praise for God’s Care of Creation

Psalm 68 Praise for God’s Saving Acts

Psalms 69–72

- Psalms 69–72
 - Psalms 69–70
 - Psalms 69 Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies
 - Psalms 70 Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies (*repeats Psalm 40:13–17 with some revision*)
 - Psalms 71–72
 - Psalms 71 Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies
 - Psalms 72 Royal Psalm for Blessings on the King (*with Psalm 2 an inclusion for Books I & II*)

Book 3

Book III consists of three groupings of psalms, having an overall symmetrical pattern (six psalms [73–78], five psalms [79–83], six psalms [84–89]) and at its center (Psalm 81) an urgent exhortation to fundamental covenant loyalty to The Lord. [NIV Study Bible]

Psalms 73–78

- Psalms 73–78
 - Psalms 73–74
 - Psalms 73 Wisdom from an individual’s life
 - Psalms 74 Individual’s prayer when rejected (invokes God’s saving in the Exodus)
 - Psalms 75–76
 - Psalms 75 Assurance that God judges the wicked
 - Psalms 76 Assurance that God judges the wicked
 - Psalms 77–78
 - Psalms 77 Community’s prayer when rejected (invokes God’s saving in the Exodus)
 - Psalms 78 Wisdom from the community’s life

Psalms 79–83

- Psalms 79–83
 - Psalms 79–81
 - Psalms 79 Community prayer against enemy invasion
 - Psalms 80 Prayer to restore Israel
 - Psalms 81 Admonition to covenant loyalty (*center of medley and book*)
 - Psalms 82–83
 - Psalms 82 Prayer to judge the earth
 - Psalms 83 Community prayer against enemy invasion

Psalms 84–89

- Psalms 84–89
 - Psalms 84–85
 - Psalms 84 Yearning for fellowship with God (introduces the following five psalms)
 - Psalms 85 Communal cry of distress
 - Psalms 86–88
 - Psalms 86 Individual cry of distress
 - Psalms 87 God’s special love for Zion
 - Psalms 88 Individual cry of distress
 - Psalms 89
 - Psalms 89 Communal cry of distress

“The two final prayers (Ps 88; 89) both end unrelieved by the usual expression of confidence that God will hear and act” [NIV Study Bible]

Book 4

Book III may stand as the editorial center of the entire corpus. Royal psalms in the first half of the Psalter (1–89) appear to rehearse the story of the Davidic monarchy. Psalms 90–106 reorient the theological message of the Psalter. The first of the group, Psalm 90, lists Moses in the superscription, a time in Israel’s history when the nation was led by only one king, Yahweh. Of the seventeen psalms in this collection, six are enthronement psalms (93; 95–99). The final two are historical psalms, recounting the faithfulness of Yahweh in the deliverance of his people out of Egypt. These psalms are meant to counter the crisis of exile, reasserting belief in the reign of Yahweh, even with the apparent absence of a human king. [DOTWPW, 590]

Psalms 90–100 The LORD Reigns!

Psalms 90–91

Psalm 90 Point: We are consumed by God’s anger
Psalm 91 Counterpoint: Those who take refuge in the Lord are safe

Psalms 92–94

Psalm 92 The Lord will repay the wicked
 Psalm 93 The Lord reigns
Psalm 95 The Lord will repay the wicked

Psalms 95–99

Psalm 95 Do not harden your hearts
Psalm 96 The Lord will judge the world
Psalm 97 The Lord is good to Israel
Psalm 98 The Lord will judge the world
Psalm 99 The Lord is good to Israel

Psalm 100 The Lord is God; the Lord is good

Psalms 101–110

The traditional division between Books IV and V at Ps 107 was probably done by a later compiler, breaking up the collection consisting of Ps 101 – 110. [NIV Study Bible]

- Psalm 101 A king's vow to God
- Psalm 102 Prayer of an individual in distress
- Psalm 103 Praise for the Lord's great love
- Psalm 104 God's wonderful acts in creation
- Psalm 105 History of Israel's redemption
- Psalm 106 History of Israel's rebellion
- Psalm 107 God's wonderful deeds for people
- Psalm 108 Praise for the Lord's great love
- Psalm 109 Prayer of an individual in distress
- Psalm 110 God's vow to a king

Book 5

Apart from the doxology at the end of Psalm 106 there is little if anything to mark off this final book from its predecessor. Within it, however, there are certain obvious groupings: two collections of Davidic psalms (108—110; 138—145); the fifteen Songs of Ascents (120—134) . . . Jewish tradition also groups together Psalms 113—118, known as the 'Egyptian Hallel', for use at the Passover. [Kidner 417]

Psalms 107—110 *See last grouping in Book 4.*

Psalms 111—119 *The 'Egyptian Hallel' is enclosed within alphabetic acrostics. Each half line of Psalms 111 and 112 begin with a different letter of the alphabet. In Psalm 119, the alphabet advances through its twenty-two sections, with each of the eight lines in a section beginning with the same letter.*

Psalm 111 Praise for God's great deeds

Psalm 112 Praise for God's good blessings

Psalms 113—118 *The 'Egyptian Hallel.' At Passover, Psalms 113 and 114 were sung before the meal (before the second cup was passed) and Psalms 115—118 after the meal (when the fourth cup had been filled). [NIV Study Bible]*

Psalm 113 Praise of the exalted Lord's care for the lowly

Psalm 114 A hymnic celebration of the exodus

Psalm 115 Yahweh contrasted with idols

Psalm 116 Praise for deliverance from death

Psalm 117 Praise for his love and faithfulness

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| | Psalm 118 | Thanksgiving for deliverance from enemies |
| | Psalm 119 | Praise for God's instruction (Torah) |
| Psalms 120–137 | <i>This grouping includes the 'Songs of Ascent' (120–134) and the traditional Jewish grouping, the 'Great Hallel' (120–136), and ends with lament that worship in Zion is no longer possible.</i> | |
| Psalms 120–134 | Songs of Ascent, to be sung by those making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the three annual feasts | |
| Psalms 135–137 | | |
| | Psalm 135 | A salvation-history psalm of praise |
| | Psalm 136 | A salvation-history liturgy of praise |
| | <i>Psalms 135 and 136, as different as they are, both assume the pilgrims' arrival at Yahweh's sanctuary for worship. . . The final one (137) bemoans the reality of the exile when pilgrimage was not possible. [How to Read, 142]</i> | |
| | Psalm 137 | Lament that worship in Zion is no longer possible |
| Psalms 138–145 | A final collection of Davidic psalms | |
| | Psalm 138 | Praise for God's saving help |
| | Psalm 139 | Praise for God's wonderful knowledge |
| | Psalm 140 | Prayer for deliverance from enemies |
| | Psalm 141 | Prayer for deliverance from enemies |
| | Psalm 142 | Prayer for deliverance from enemies |
| | Psalm 143 | Prayer for deliverance from enemies |
| | Psalm 144 | Prayer for deliverance from enemies |
| | Psalm 145 | Praise for God's goodness (an alphabetic acrostic) |
| Psalms 146–150 | Conclusion to the Psalter | |
| | Psalm 146 | Praise for God's care for the helpless |
| | Psalm 147 | Praise for God's care for creation (and especially his people) |
| | Psalm 148 | Call for heaven and earth to praise Yahweh |
| | Psalm 149 | Call for his people to praise Yahweh |
| | Psalm 150 | Climactic call for all to praise Yahweh |