

ARRANGEMENT OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Overview

- I. The Place of the Book of Psalms in the Bible
- II. The Five Divisions of the Book of Psalms
- III. Characteristics of Each Division
- IV. Growth of the Psalter

I. The Place of the Book of Psalms in the Bible

A. The Hebrew Old Testament

1. *Torah* (Law)
2. *Nevi'im* (Prophets)
3. *Ketuvim* (Writings)
 - a. The Hebrew title of the book is *Tehillim* = “Praises” from the verb *hālāl*, “to praise.”
 - b. *Psalmos* is a Greek translation of the Hebrew *mizmôr*, which derives from *zāmār*, “to sing with a stringed instrument.”
 - c. Our English words “psalm” and “psalter” derive from the Greek.

B. The English Old Testament

1. Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy)
2. History (Joshua through Esther)
3. Poetry & Wisdom (Job through Song of Songs)
 - a. Job
 - b. **Psalms**
 - c. Proverbs
 - d. Ecclesiastes
 - e. Song of Songs
4. The Major & Minor Prophets (Isaiah through Malachi)

II. The Five Divisions of the Book of Psalms

A. The book of Psalms comprises five “books” or divisions:

- | | |
|-----------|----------------|
| Book I: | Psalms 1-41 |
| Book II: | Psalms 42-72 |
| Book III: | Psalms 73-89 |
| Book IV: | Psalms 90-106 |
| Book V: | Psalms 107-150 |

B. The reason for the five divisions is not clear. Jewish tradition says it mirrors the Pentateuch. Others suggest a chronological explanation. Others see five successive stages in the growth of the collection.

C. Each section concludes with a doxology (cf. 1 Chron 16:8-36).

1. **Psalm 41:13**

“Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.”

2. **Psalm 72:18-19**

“Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen.”

3. **Psalm 89:52**

“Praise be to the LORD forever! Amen and Amen.”

4. **Psalm 106:48**

“Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, ‘Amen!’ Praise the LORD.”

5. **Psalm 150:6** [or possibly Psalm 145:1-150:6]

“Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.”

III. Characteristics of Each Division

While the reason for the five divisions is not clear, each book has distinctive features.

A. Book I (Psalms 1-41)

A collection of **41** psalms with the following features:

1. Virtually all attributed to David in titles (except Pss 1, 2, 10, 33)
2. “Yahweh” used almost exclusively (272x; “Elohim” used 15x)

B. Book II (Psalms 42-72)

A collection of **31** psalms with the following features:

1. Most attributed to David (Pss 51-65, 68-70)
2. Some attributed to (or “for”?) the sons of Korah, and Asaph (Pss 42-50)
3. “Elohim” used predominantly (164x; “Yahweh” used 30x)
4. The recurrence of two psalms from Book I in Book II suggests that these two books were originally separate collections:

- a. Psalm 14 = Psalm 53 (except the latter uses “Elohim”)
 - b. Psalm 40:13-17 = Psalm 70:1-5 (except the latter uses “Elohim”)
5. This preference for one or the other of the divine names could be explained by either:
- a. The chronological development of the divisions mirrors the increasing avoidance of the sacred name of God, the Tetragrammaton (YHWH).
 - b. They represent two originally separate songbooks, preserving the distinctive features of both.
6. Books I and II were apparently combined to form an early collection whose editorial conclusion is presented in Psalm 72:20.
- a. “This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse.”
 - b. This verse might suggest that the editor(s) understood *all* of Psalms 1-72 to have been composed by David.
 - c. If so, the titles “by the sons of Korah” or “by Asaph” might be translated “for the sons of Korah” and “for Asaph.”

C. Book III (Psalms 73-89)

A short collection of 17 psalms by (or “for”):

- 1. Asaph (Pss 73-83)
- 2. The sons of Korah (Pss 84-85, 87-88)
- 3. Ethan (Ps 89)

D. Book IV (Psalms 90-106)

Another short collection of 17 psalms with the following features:

- 1. Mostly untitled
- 2. Predominantly psalms of praise to Yahweh as king and deliverer
- 3. “Yahweh” used exclusively

E. Book V (Psalms 107-150)

A collection of 44 psalms with the following features:

- 1. Mostly anonymous, except for 15 attributed to David
- 2. Mostly arranged into groups:
 - a. Psalms 108-110, 138-145: Davidic psalms
 - b. Psalms 113-118: the Hallel Psalms (traditionally sung on Passover night)

- c. Psalms 120-134: the “Songs of Ascent” (pilgrimage psalms, most of which mention Jerusalem)
- d. Psalms 146-150: the Hallelujah Psalms (each of which begins and ends with “Hallelujah”)

IV. Growth of the Psalter

- A. The process whereby the psalms were collected is shrouded in mystery. These five divisions may represent five stages of growth over time. Even so, Psalms 1-2 are viewed by many as a **prologue** to the whole collection, and Psalms 145-150 as a **doxological grand finale**.
- B. The evidence from LXX (151 psalms), Qumran, the Psalms of Solomon in the Pseudepigraphic Writings, and fragments of psalms in other early manuscripts indicate that the shape of the Psalter was still somewhat fluid in the final centuries before the New Testament era.