

## Learning to Love the Psalms (III) — BROADER STRUCTURES IN THE PSALTER

### How Were the Psalms Brought Together?

When all is said and done, the Psalter is quite a varied book! We move from the highest joy to the deepest grief, from incredibly short poems (Psalm 117) to extremely long ones (Psalm 119). According to the tradition of titles, we have a poem as early as Moses (Psalm 90). We also have psalms which reflect the return from the exile:

When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion,  
we are like men who dreamed.  
Our mouths were filled with laughter,  
our tongues with songs of joy. (Psalm 126:1-2).

From the time of Moses to the postexilic period covers a time span of approximately one thousand years! No overall structure can be easily discerned, but we can recognize some important **groupings and movements** within the book of Psalms.

### A. The Five Books

**Book One 1—41**

**Book Two 42—72**

**Book Three 73—89**

**Book Four 90—106**

**Book Five 107—150**

Why into five Books? Five books were intentionally created to parallel the five books of Moses as a **serious corrective to personalized, subjective reading of the psalms.**

● ***Each of these books of the Psalter is concerned with both the individual follower of God and with the whole people of God.***

Books 1 and 3 simply begin with an individual psalm and then a corporate psalm

Book 2 the first two psalms (42 and 43) are individual and the third is corporate

Books 4 and 5 begin with a corporate psalm and then an individual psalm

● ***Each book of the Psalter ends with praise.*** In Hebrew the name of the Psalter is the Book of Praises.

Book One: “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen.” (Ps. 41:13)

Book Two: “Blessed be his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory! Amen and Amen.” (Ps. 72:18-19)

Book Three: “Blessed be the LORD forever! Amen and Amen.” (Ps. 89:52)

Book Four: “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say, ‘Amen!’ Praise the LORD” (Ps. 106:48)

Book Five: “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD! (Ps. 150:6)

● **Each of the five books of the Psalter shows a preference for a particular version of the divine name.**

For instance, in Book I, God is addressed as Yahweh, God’s personal name to Israel, 272 times. Within the same book, he is addressed as Elohim, a more generic term for God, only 15 times. The proportion between the uses of these two names is reversed in Book II. The following chart shows the use of the divine throughout the five books of the Psalms.

	<b>Yahweh</b>	<b>Elohim</b>
Book I	272	15
Book II	74	207
Book III	13	36
Books IV and V	339	7

**Grouping by Reference in Titles to Specific Individuals**



Book I, Pss. 3–41 (–10, 33); Book II, Pss. 51–71 (–66, 67, 71); Book V, Pss. 108–110, and 138–145.

Only a very few psalms attributed to David appear outside these collections, which include Psalm 86 (Book III), 101 and 103 (Book IV), 122, 124, 131, and 133 (Book V).

**Further groupings**

- Book II opens with a collection attributed to the “Sons of Korah” (Pss. 42–49; cf. also Pss. 84–88 in Book III)
- Book II concludes with a psalm attributed to Solomon (Psalm 72).
- Book III opens with several psalms attributed to Asaph (Psalms 73–83).
- Book IV opens with a psalm attributed to Moses (Psalm 90).
- **Psalm 127** is attributed to Solomon, and functions as the middle psalm of the fifteen Psalms of Ascents (Psalms 120–134)

**Other groupings:** Psalms 113–118 (Egyptian Hallel)  
 Psalms 120–134 (Psalms of Ascents)  
 Psalms 146–150 (*Hallelu-YAH* psalms)

**B. Movements**

In Hebrew, the book of Psalms is entitled *tehillim*, which (when translated) means “songs of praise.”

As we look at the psalms, though, the laments substantially outnumber the songs of praise. In what sense then is this book characterized as *tehillim*. A decided shift takes place as we move from the beginning of the book to its end (in Psalms 1- 89, lament/praise ≈ 2/1; in Psalms 90-150, lament/praise ≈ 3/7). The last seven psalms are not only all hymns of praise but, for the most part, concentrate on calling the whole world to praise God (Psalm 150:2) In a real sense, the book of Psalms moves us from mourning to joy (Psalm 126:5) and from suffering to glory.

Book One has many psalms that speak of distress on the part of king and his people yet manifest confidence and praise even in the face of distress.

Book Two links that confidence particularly to God's king, who upholds God's ways and God's people, God's city. The second book reminds us of the transfer of rule from David to Solomon, and it marks the high point in Israel's history.

Book Three, however, is dominated by a crisis in the kingship of Israel, a kingship that seems to have failed.

Book Four presents comfort for king and people in the God who created the world and who made a covenant with Israel at Sinai. In the fourth book, a people who have returned to their land but who no longer have an earthly king remind themselves (and us) that even during the pilgrimage under Moses, long before there was a King David, God was already their King and will always be their King.

Book Five then lifts the praise of king and people to new heights. The fifth book returns to the promises made to David and refocuses the hopes that "a horn of David" will emerge, a "new song" of deliverance will break out, and all of creation will praise the Lord!!!

Book I	Psalms 1–41	Confrontation Confidence	The King's	in God's Care
Book II	Psalms 42–72	Conflict Great commitment	The King's	to God's Kingdom
Book III	Psalms 73–89	CRISIS	The King's	over God's Promises
Book IV	Psalms 90–106	Comfort	The King's	in God's Faithfulness
Book V	Psalms 107–150	celebration	The King's	of God's Salvation

Anatoly Shcharansky

"In a lonely cell in Chistopol prison, locked alone with the Psalms of David, Anatoly found expression for his innermost feelings in the outpourings of the King of Israel thousands of years ago"

What does this give me? "Gradually, my feeling of great loss and sorrow changes to one of bright hopes."

Psalm 89:52 בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם אָמֵן | וְאָמֵן:

Psalm 106:48 בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן־הַעוֹלָם | וְעַד הַעוֹלָם וְאָמֵן כָּל־הַעַם אָמֵן הַלְלוּ־יָהּ: