

Structure of the Book of Psalms

The standard Hebrew text divides the Psalms into five “books,” perhaps in imitation of the five books of the Pentateuch.

Book 1	Psalms 1–41	<p>Psalms 1–2 provide an introduction to the Psalms as a whole. Except for Psalms 10 and 33, the remaining psalms of Book 1 are psalms of David.</p> <p>Most of them are prayers of distress. Others are statements of confidence in the God who alone can save (e.g., 9; 11; 16; 18), striking the note that concludes the book (40–41). Reflections on ethics and worship are found in Psalms 1; 14–15; 19; 24; and 26.</p>
Book 2	Psalms 42–72	<p>Book 2 introduces the first group of psalms by the “sons of Korah” (42; 44–49; 50). There are also more psalms of David (51–65; 68–69), including most of the “historical” psalms (51–52; 54; 56–57; 59–60; 63).</p> <p>Once again, lament and distress dominate these prayers, which now also include a communal voice (e.g., 44; compare 67; 68). The lone psalm attributed to Solomon concludes Book 2 with a look at God’s ideal for Israel’s kings—ultimately pointing to Christ as the final great King of God’s people.</p>
Book 3	Psalms 73–89	<p>The tone darkens further in Book 3. The opening Psalm 73 starkly questions the justice of God before seeing light in God’s presence. That light has almost escaped the psalmist in Psalm 88, the bleakest of all psalms.</p> <p>Book 2 ended with the high point of royal aspirations; Book 3 concludes in Psalm 89 with these expectations badly threatened. Sharp rays of hope occasionally pierce the darkness (e.g., 75; 85; 87). The brief third book contains most of the psalms of Asaph (73–83), as well as another set of Korah psalms (84–85; 87–88).</p>
Book 4	Psalms 90–106	<p>Psalm 90 opens the fourth book of the psalms. It may be seen as the first response to the problems raised by Book 3. Psalm 90, attributed to Moses, reminds the worshiper that God was active on Israel’s behalf long before David. This theme is taken up in Psalms 103–106, which summarize God’s dealings with his people before any kings reigned. In between there is a group of psalms (93–100) characterized by the refrain “The LORD reigns.” This truth refutes the doubts of Psalm 89.</p>
Book 5	Psalms 107–150	<p>The structure of Book 5 reflects the closing petition of Book 4 in 106:47. It declares that God does answer prayer (107) and concludes with five Hallelujah psalms (146–150). In between there are several psalms affirming the validity of the promises to David (110; 132; 144), two collections of Davidic psalms (108–110; 138–145); the longest psalm, celebrating the value of God’s law (119); and 15 psalms of ascent for use by pilgrims to Jerusalem (120–134).</p>