

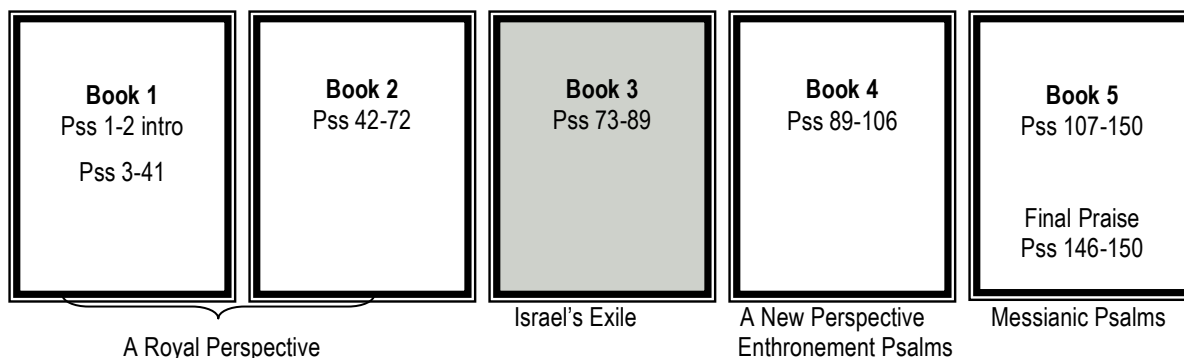
The Shape of the Psalter

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The Psalter began with songs by individuals, composed under unique historical circumstances. These poems were then used in the liturgical life of worshiping Israel and were later gathered into earlier collections. Ps 72:20, “This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse,” is “the egg shell” of an earlier collection. The notice in 2 Chron 29:30 suggests that two collections, “the words of David” (cf. Ps 3–41, except 33) and “the words of Asaph” (50, 73–83), existed in Hezekiah’s time. **Psalms** by the sons of Korah (42–49, 84–88 [not 86]) probably constituted another collection.

The so-called “Elohistic Psalter” (42–83), probably an earlier edition, is now divided between Books II and III, whose seam is found between Ps 72 and 73. This collection is marked by a striking statistical contrast between use of the divine names, יהוה and אֱלֹהִים. Whereas in 1–41 and 84–150, יהוה occurs 584x and אֱלֹהִים 94x, in 42–83 יהוה occurs 45x and אֱלֹהִים 210x. Moreover, in the rest of the Psalter יהוה occurs mostly in verse a and אֱלֹהִים in b, but in 42–83 the situation is reversed. Finally, in synoptic **psalms** the names are reversed (cf. 14:2, 4, 7 with 53:3, 5, 7; 40:14a, 17 with 70:2a, 5). No consensus has been reached to explain the existence of the Elohistic Psalter.

The 150 psalms we now have in hand—though Ps 9–10 and 42–43 are original integrities that were later divided for liturgical reasons into two—are divided into five books. These books are marked off by doxologies consisting of priestly benedictions, “Praise be to the LORD,” and the congregation’s responses, “Amen,” at the end of Ps 41, 72, 89, 106. The books are also marked off by a change of authors at the seams.



Jewish tradition explained this second “Pentateuch” as a conscious echo of the first. A midrash from the Talmudic period on Ps 1 states: “As Moses gave five books of laws to Israel, so David gave five books of Psalms to Israel” (Braude 1:5). This is certainly appropriate. Moses instituted Israel’s liturgical elements: its sacred objects, festivals, objects, personnel, and activities. David, Israel’s Mozart, transformed the Mosaic liturgy into opera by putting it on the stage of the temple and by accompanying it with the music and the libretto of his psalms.

This final editing significantly affects both the Psalter’s interpretation and theology. Most agree that Ps 1–2 are its introduction and 146–150 its climactic finale of praise. According to Childs (*IOTS*, 513) Ps 1 transforms the Psalter’s content from living petition and praise in the temple liturgy to a book of reflection and meditation: “Certainly in its final stage of

³⁰ Bruce Waltke, “Psalms: Theology of,” in Willem VanGemeren ed., *NIDOTTE* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1996), 4:1100-1115.

development Ps 1 has assumed a highly significant function as a preface to the psalms which are to be read, studied, and meditated upon.”

The second psalm introduces the principal subject, the king, in prayer. At the king’s coronation he recites a poetic variation of the decree of the Davidic covenant (cf. 2 Sam 7:14): “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession” (Ps 2:8). In the rest of the Psalter the reader hears the petitions and praises of David’s heir. “The anointed one” plays a prominent role not only in this introduction but also at the Psalter’s seams, Ps 72 and 89.

Books I through III are clearly royal. Wilson (208) says: “The presence in 72:20 of the psalmist announcing the conclusion of “the prayers of David, son of Jesse” suggests Books One and Two may have combined to form an earlier collection introduced and concluded by ‘Royal’ psalms, a collection which because of its high Davidic content (60 of 70 psalms) might well justify the description ‘prayers of David.’” Within these books he notes a progression of thought. Psalm 2 introduces the idea of the Davidic covenant, Psalms 3 and 41 speaks of the king’s assurance of the Lord’s protection and security in the face of his enemies, and Psalm 72 contains multiple petitions for the king’s son: May he rule justly; may his domain be secure from his enemies; may he live long and be blessed. “So the covenant which Yahweh made with David (Ps 2) and in whose promises David rested secure (Ps 41) is now passed on to his descendants in this series of petitions in behalf of the king’s son” (Ps 72) (211).

With **Book III and its concluding hymn, Ps 89, a new perspective is achieved.** This is the dark book of the Psalter. The covenant is viewed as established in the dim past, and more importantly, it is considered as broken: “At the conclusion of the third book, immediately preceding the break observed separating the earlier and later books, the impression left is one of a covenant remembered, but a covenant *failed*. The Davidic covenant introduced in Psalm 2 has come to nothing and the combination of three books concludes with the anguished cry of the Davidic descendants” (Wilson, 213). But there is hope!

With **Book IV yet another perspective is achieved.** Without a king Israel falls back upon its heritage. They look back to Moses, who is now mentioned 7x (90:1; 99:6; 103:7; 105:26; 106:16, 23, 32), whereas heretofore he was mentioned only once (77:21), and whose only song in the Psalter introduces Book IV. Moreover, Israel now looks back to their eternal King, the Lord: “O God, our help in ages past, our hope in years to come” (cf. 90:1–2). In Ps 93–99 one finds the so-called **Enthronement Psalms**: The Lord is king! He has been Israel’s refuge in the past, long before monarchy existed; he will continue to be Israel’s refuge now that monarchy is gone; and blessed are they that trust in him.

Book V is clearly linked with Book IV. Ps 106:47 **concludes Book IV** with the prayer:

“Save us, O LORD our God,
and gather us from the nations.” (Ps 106:47)

Book V begins by viewing this act of gathering as an established fact:

“He gathered (us) from the lands.” (Ps 107:3)

The troubles of the Exile have been overcome. Two groups of Davidic collections are found in this book, 108–110; 138–145. The redactor intends to set up **David as a model** in response to the concerns of the psalms that precede them:

Thus, in Ps 108–110, David emerges as the “wise man” (107:43) who “gives heed” to the cautions of 107:39–42 and relies wholly on the steadfast love of Yahweh. His willingness to sing the praise of Yahweh “among the nations” (108:3) becomes a paradigm of action to be followed, whether by those yet in exile or among those vulnerable returnees surrounded by their foes. David knows that only reliance on Yahweh is effective . . . (108:12). . . . In like fashion to the first group of Davidic pss, David serves as an example in Ps 138–144 following the plaintive cry of the exiles expressed in the words of Ps 137 which immediately precedes.” (Wilson, 221)

Moreover, there is a prominent **messianic hope** in some of these Davidic psalms. In Ps 110:1a David, using distinctively prophetic language, “the LORD says (יְהוָה אָמַר),” foresees a king greater than himself, “The LORD says to my Lord,” as Jesus pressed home the argument (Matt 22:41–46). This king will be a warrior king-priest after the order of Melchizedek. With himself at God’s right hand (Ps 110:1b) and God at his right hand (v. 5) he and his army will crush rebellious kings and rule the earth (vv. 6–7). In Ps 118 Israel shouts in praise to the king whom the builders rejected, but whom Yahweh made the capstone (vv. 22–23), “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD” (v. 26).

Messianism originated not in the intertestamental period of later Judaism but in the kingly ideal of ancient Israel, as expressed in the royal psalms. This royal ideal was not due to the *Hofstil* of the ANE, as Gunkel claimed, but to Israel’s genuine hope applied to reigning kings (cf. Mowinckel, 1956, 98). When the Psalter was finally edited, the royal psalms, and that is most of them, became full blown messianic psalms. Representing the king visually and ideally to the people, they were always pregnant with messianic expectation, but after the Exile, when Israel was left without a king, they also had in hand this collection of royal psalms, robes waiting for a king worthy to wear them. A Messianic hue tints the entirety of the edited Psalter we have in hand.

