

The Collection of Psalms Notes by Howard Wallace

Below I have some notes on the collection of psalms in the book as a whole.

1. The Book of Psalms is really an anthology of hymns and prayers. The whole collection is divided into five books each of which is concluded by a doxology.

Book	Psalms	Doxology	Notes
I	1-41	41:13	
II	42-72	72:18-19	Ps 72:20 marks end of the prayers of David.
III	73-89	89:52	
IV	90-106	106:48 (b)	
V	107-150	150	

Some scholars have argued that this five-fold structure is meant as a parallel to the Pentateuch. This suggestion is very old and can be traced at least to the Midrash on the Psalms where it says ‘...as Moses gave five books of laws to Israel, so David gave five Books of Psalms to Israel ...’ [W.G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale University, 1954) I.5]. However, other than the number of books there is little to support the suggestion. Psalm 1 (or both Psalms 1 and 2) has been seen as an introduction to the whole Psalter. We will return to this below. Psalm 150 has long been seen as a concluding doxology to the collection, although now some suggest the small collection of ‘hallelujah’ psalms (Pss 146-150), functions in this role.

2. The final ordering and contents of the Book of Psalms seems to have been widely accepted from about the mid first century CE. Many Qumran manuscripts (Dead Sea Scrolls) witness to this. In these manuscripts we get a good deal of conflict in terms of the order of psalms and in terms of what psalms are to be included, but according to G. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, if the psalms manuscripts are ordered according to age then we see a gradual conformity toward the present canonical order and content taking place between the second century BCE and the end of the first century CE.

The canonical psalms do not exhaust all the hymns and prayers we have in the Bible. See the list of OT passages referred to as the ‘odes’ below. Nor do the canonical psalms comprise all those available to Jewish worshippers at the turn of the eras. The Qumran collections include some psalms which do not appear anywhere in the canon. The LXX version of the Book of Psalms ends with Psalm 151, which is also found at Qumran, and then adds a collection of ‘odes’ at the end. This includes many hymns and prayers from elsewhere in the OT (Exod 15:1-19; Deut 32:1-43; 1 Sam 2:1-10; Hab 3:2-19; Isa 26:9-20; Jon 2:3-10; Dan 3:26-45, 52-88; Isa 5:1-9; 38:10-20) as well as the Magnificat and Song of Zechariah (Luke 1:46-55, 68-79) and the Song of Simeon (Luke 2:29-32). The last additions clearly show Christian influence on the

LXX collection of psalms. Still other collections of non-biblical psalm like material include the *Hodayot*, and the *Psalms of Solomon*.

Thus the canonical psalms were just part of a much larger and probably fluid collection of hymns and prayers which were used in Jewish and Christian worship.

3. The fluidity of the larger collection of psalms and the complex nature of the growth of the canonical Book of Psalm is even evident within the canonical collection itself where we have a host of smaller 'collections'. Some of these are marked by means of a superscription to the psalm (e.g. *A Psalm of David*). These include major sub-collections such as:

- (i) Psalms of David in three major groups (Pss 3-41; Pss 51-72; and Pss 86 + 138-145) as well as individual Davidic psalms (Pss 101, 103, 108-110, 122, 124 and 131).
- (ii) Psalms of the Korahites (Pss 42-49, 84-88 [minus 86])
- (iii) Psalms of the Asaphites (Pss 73-83 + 50)

The Korahites and Asaphites are groups of priestly singers or musical guilds (see 1 Chr 16:4-7; 2 Chr 20:19). The collections might have originated at sanctuaries other than Jerusalem where these guilds were employed. The Korahites were at Dan before Jerusalem.

- (iv) Psalms of Pilgrimage or 'Songs of Ascent' (Pss 120-134)

Still other sub-collections are not clearly marked at all, but nevertheless belong together by virtue of their subject matter or other characteristics. These include:

- (v) Psalms of YHWH's Kingship (Pss 93-99)
- (vi) Hallelujah Psalms (Pss 104-106, 111-113, 115-117, 135, 146-150) which often begin and end with the word *halleluyah* 'praise the Lord'.

The above psalms are mostly collected into at least small groups. Some other psalms have Hebrew words in their superscriptions, which, although in some cases can be clearly translated, are not always clear in what they refer to. These include:

- (vii) *miktam* (6 Pss); *tepillah* ('prayer' 5 Pss); *maskil* (13 Pss); *tehillah* ('praise' Ps 145); *mizmor* ('psalm' 57 Pss); *shir* ('song' 30 Pss).

Scholars have also noted other indicators of 'collections' within the whole.

Pss 1-41 is sometimes called the 'Yahwistic Psalms' because of the predominance of the use of *YHWH* or Yahweh as the divine name in these psalms. This grouping constitutes Book I.

Pss 42-83 is often called the 'Elohistic' Psalter because the divine name 'elohim 'God' is used 5 times as often as *YHWH*. This collection crosses the boundary between Books II and III.

4. Like Ezekiel's chariot with its wheels within wheels (Ezekiel 1), the Book of Psalms is really collections of psalms within collections of psalms. This points to a) a long complex history of the development of the collection, which we do not fully understand as yet, and b) the vitality and continued renewal of the Old Testament faith.

Some further points of interest:

Go to the Book of Psalms in your Bible and check out some of the collections above.

- In addition note the superscriptions on many psalms. In English Bibles these are often printed in small italics at the start of the psalm and are not included in the verse numbering of the psalm. In the Hebrew Bible (MT) they constitute part or all of verse 1 of the psalm. They vary from the simple, e.g. Ps 15, '*A Psalm of David*', to ones involving musical directions, e.g. Ps 6, '*To the leader: with stringed instruments; according to The Sheminith. A Psalm of David*', to ones which recall some incident in the life of David, e.g. Ps 3, '*A Psalm of David, when he fled from his son Absalom*'.
- Note that the major collections (David, Korah and Asaph) do not usually cross the boundaries between books. The exception is the 'Elohistic' Psalter (Books II-III).
- The smaller groups (vii above) seem to be used to soften the transition between other groups or collections, especially in Books IV-V.
- Look at the doxologies listed in the first table and note the pattern in them.
- What repetition do you note in the following psalms: Pss 14 and 53; Pss 40 and 70; Pss 108, 57 and 60? Also compare Ps 18 and 2 Sam 22.
- Some scholars have argued that Pss 19; 27; 40 and 66 should be seen as two psalms each. Do you see why they might think this?
- Others have argued that Pss 9 + 10 and 42 + 43 should each be considered a single psalm, as they are in the LXX. Do you see the reason for their thinking?

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