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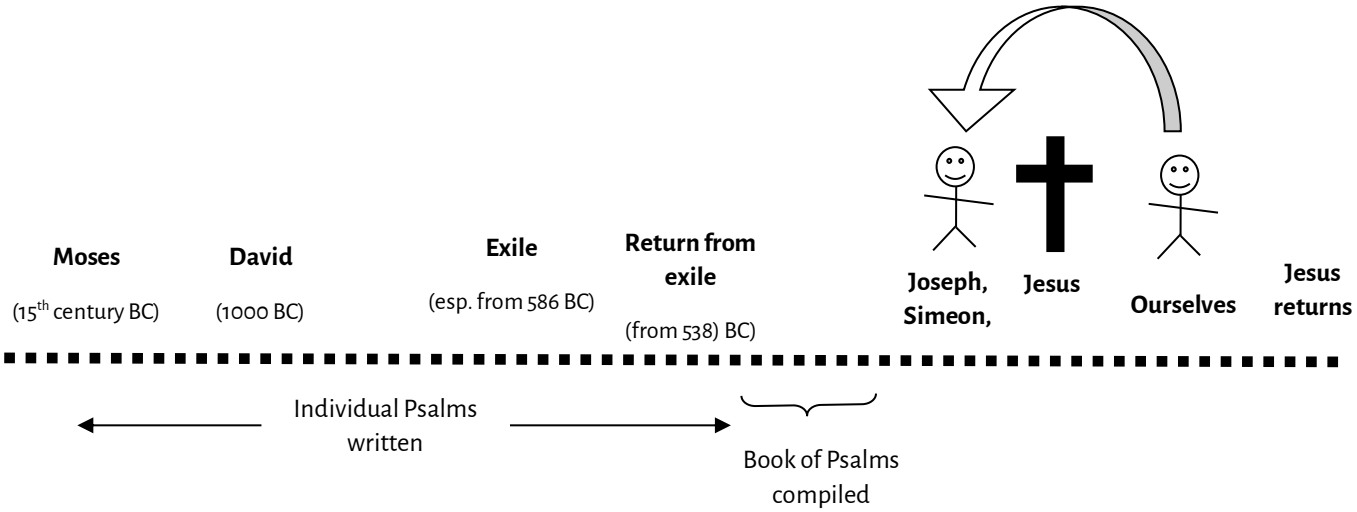
Overview of the book of Psalms—understanding psalter shape

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS



2. EXERCISES AND HIERARCHY[1] RELATING TO KEY INDICATORS OF PSALTER SHAPE/SHAPING

Compare Psalm 40:13-17 with Psalm 70.
What is striking regarding (a) content and (b) placement within the book of Psalms?

Compare and contrast the flourish of praise (or "doxology") at the end of Book 1 with the flourish of praise at the end of Book 2. Ps 41:13 and Ps 72:18-19.

And now: what about the end of Book 3?

What clear links do you discern between Psalms 134, 135 and 136? Start by comparing Psalms 134 and 135, then compare Psalms 135 and 136.

[1] The hierarchy proper applies to the first fifteen indicators; thereafter I simply follow psalter order.

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Given Ps 72:20, how should we understand the title of Psalm 86?

1. Ps. 72:20 (explanatory note)
2. Ps. 89:53 (closing doxology necessarily more tied to Book 3 than to the psalm)
3. The five-book division
4. Pss 146-150 ('Final *Hallel*')
5. Pss 120-134 (Songs of Ascents)
6. Chain linking ('concatenation') across Psalms 134, 135 and 136
7. Pss 105-106 ('twins')
8. Pss 103-107
9. Pss 96-99
10. Pss 93-100
11. Pss 25; 34 (acrostics whose irregularities are similar)
12. Pss 111-112 ('twin' acrostics)
13. Pss 9-10; 32-33
14. Entire first book explicitly Davidic (once links in 13 assumed)
15. Pss 1-2 as introduction
16. Pss 42-43; 70-71 (which links imply an absence of 'orphan[2] psalms' in Book 2)
17. Predominance of the historical David in Book 2
18. Book 1 republications in Book 2: Pss 14 and 53; Pss 40:14-18 and 70
19. Extremities of Book 3: the theme of crisis
    - Turnaround in Ps. 73 mirrored by turnaround in Ps. 89
    - Complementary perspectives of psalms adjacent to extremities (74 and 88)
    - The role of the Babylonian exile in giving rise to the crisis
20. The same anguished questioning in the middle of Book 3
21. The rhetorical effect of the end of Ps. 89
22. The change of tone in the last two books
23. Book 4 as 'Moses book'
24. The sin-wrath-intercession frame of Book 4, and the links between Pss 90 and 103
25. The structure of Book 5 (several groupings)
26. Composite psalms in Book 5 (notably 108, 144)
27. The conclusion of Ps. 144 (double 'Amen', cf. Pss 1–2)

[2] = without a title.

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3. BIG PICTURE OF THE PSALTER

Introduction (Pss 1–2): "Happy are those who reckon with the truth of Psalm 2!"

The perspective of Psalm 1: **How to be blessed/wise**		The perspective of Psalm 2: **How to be blessed/wise**
Meditate on the LORD's instruction		Serve the LORD, kiss the Son, take refuge in the Son
↓		↓
Avoid the way of perishing	=	Avoid the way of perishing

The perspective of Psalm 1: **How to be blessed/wise**		The perspective of Psalm 2: **How to be blessed/wise**
Meditate on the LORD's instruction	→	YHWH's Son is supreme – the owner and judge of the nations
		↓
↓		Serve the LORD, kiss the Son, take refuge in the Son
		↓
Avoid the way of perishing	=	Avoid the way of perishing

Book 1 (Pss 3–41): "David is a **reverse** type of the king!"

Pss 3–14: the problem of enemies
Pss 15–24: the exemplary and victorious king
Pss 25–34: the king pardoned and delivered
Pss 35–41: the problems of enemies, sin and sickness

Pss 3–14	ENEMIES		
Pss 25–34	ENEMIES	SIN	
Pss 35–41	ENEMIES	SIN	SICKNESS

Start of book (Ps 3): ……

End of book (Ps 41): ……

- Sufferings ⇉ victory
- Sufferings ⇆ sin

Book 2 (Pss 42–72): “Bring on Solomon!”

Recapitulation of Book 1?

BUT

(1) Wider gap between David and Ps 2

(2) Eyes now on Solomon

(3) ……

Book 3 (Pss 73–89): “Exile means crisis!”

Crisis (individual and national—exile)

Frame of book

More of that anguished pleading

Pss 76:7; 77:7–9; 79:5; 80:4; 85:5–6

Clues as to why the exile has occurred

Pss 78:5–10; 81:8–16

Some shafts of light

Temple (Ps 84), land (Ps 85), king (Ps 86), city (Ps 87)

Book 4 (Pss 90–106): “Meditate on the Law of Moses!” (or: ‘Get your biblical theology sorted out!’)

Sin-wrath problem of Genesis 3… and of Exodus 32

Ps 89:47–49 cf. Ps 90; Ps 90:13 cf. Ps 89:47,50–52
Ps 90:2 cf. Gen 2:4; Ps 90:3 cf. Gen 3:19; Ps 90:8 cf. Gen 3:9–10,17; Ps 90:8–9 cf. Gen 3:19,22,24-25; Ps 90:10b cf. Gen 3:16–19
Ps 90:13 and Ps 106:23 cf. Ex 32:12–13 (golden calf)

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Mediation that appeals to ……

Covenant faithfulness of Ps 90:14 cf. Gn 12ff; also Pss 105–106)

Prayer at the end uttered by …… (Ps 106:47)

Question 1: but isn't the exile the last straw?

Lev 26:42–45, Deut 4:25-31, Deut 30:1–10

Question 2: but what about the covenant with David?

Question 3: but is God really powerful enough?

Pss 93–100

Question 4: but don't we need a solution to the problem of sin?

Ps 101 blameless king
Ps 102 afflicted one
Ps 103 answer to Ps 90 prayer

Book 5 (Pss 107–144/145[3]): "His covenant loyalty endures for ever!"

107	108–110	111–118	119	120–136[4]	(137)[5] 138–144	145	146–150
P1	DAVID	P2 → ***P1***		ASCENTS→ ***P1***	DAVID	[6]	P2

Praise the LORD!
(**Praise the name of the LORD!**)[7] [P2]

'Oh give thanks to the LORD,
for he is good,
for his covenant commitment endures for ever.' [P1: refrain]

[3] This psalm is transitional between Book 5 and the group of psalms that form the conclusion to the psalter.
[4] To see why Psalms 135–136 have been tacked on to the Songs of Ascents, compare 134:1 with 135:1–2 and 135:8–12 with 136:10-22.
[5] Psalm 137 is transitional: it is not a psalm of David, but it serves as a fitting opening to this David sequence.
[6] Ps 145 is also a psalm of David, concluding the preceding group and introducing the flourish of praise with which the Psalter closes. Remarkably, it is the only psalm which is designated as (literally) 'praise'…and yet the traditional title of the whole psalter in Hebrew is 'Book of Praises'. What do you make of this discrepancy?
[7] For this part, see Pss 113:1; 135:1; 148:5, 13.

Ps 106:47 prayer answered in Ps 107:1–3
Glorious motifs for return from exile

Ps 110: supreme king and permanent mediator

Ps 118: rejected stone (→ key foundation stone), comes in name of the LORD

Ps 132: 'horn' for David

Ps 144: servant David who wins blessings for the people; no further exile

'David': recapitulation

Ps 119 (plus 'Ascents'): persecution, but sufficient sustenance

Waiting for the glorious, righteous Davidic king-priest-servant…

CONCLUSION (PSS 145/146–150): "PRAISE THE LORD"!
Ps 148:14!

FURTHER RESOURCES

- 'Psalms', in *NIV Proclamation Bible. Correctly Handling the Word of Truth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2013), 577–579.
- 'The Psalter as a Book', in Andrew G. Shead, ed., *Stirred by a Noble Theme. The Book of Psalms in the Life of the Church* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), 23-45.
- https://www.st-helens.org.uk/resources/series/5132/ (Overview of Psalter in several talks)
- And you might find this interesting: « Psalms », video produced by the Bible Project, https://thebibleproject.com/explore/psalms/ (accessed 25 January 2018).