

A THEOLOGICAL AND LITERARY FRAMEWORK OF THE PSALMS: EXPLORING ITS UNIFIED STRUCTURE

Sioe Lie, Bobby Kurnia Putrawan, Sutrisno
Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Moriah, Tangerang, Indonesia
Email: sioelie@gmail.com

Submitted: 21 July 2024 Revision: 29 October 2024 Accepted: 17 November 2024

Abstract

Interpreters often view the book of Psalms as a collection of liturgical songs used in temple worship. While this perspective is not incorrect, it has led to a tendency to interpret each psalm in isolation, without considering its relationship to other psalms in the book. This research introduces a broader perspective, suggesting that the book of Psalms is not merely a compilation of individual songs but rather an intentionally arranged collection with a unified structural pattern culminating in Psalm 150. In this sense, Psalms 1 to 150 can be seen as a series of milestones leading to this peak. To fully grasp the message of a particular psalm, it is necessary not only to interpret it individually but also to examine its placement within the overall structure of the book and its function within the larger sequence arranged by the editor.

Keywords: stucture of Psalms; exegesis of Psalms; doxology in Psalms.



Didache: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristen by <https://jurnal.moriah.ac.id/index.php/didache/>
is licensed under a Lisensi Creative Commons Atribusi-BerbagiSerupa 4.0 Internasional

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Psalms is a collection of hymns central to early Jewish worship and tradition. Its name, "Psalms," originates from the Greek term βίβλος ψαλμῶν (*biblos psalmon*), found in the New Testament (Acts 1:20). This term is derived from the Greek word ψαλτήριον (*psaltērion*), referring to an ancient stringed instrument (Rösel, 2018:10). Similarly, the Indo-Arabic term "mazmur" is linked to the Hebrew word mizmor, which also refers to a stringed instrument and later came to mean "song of praise." In Hebrew tradition, the collection is commonly called סֵפֶר תְּהִלִּים (*sefer tehillîm*), meaning "book of praises," highlighting its function as a compilation of songs glorifying God.

Comprising 150 songs, the Psalms extend beyond this book to include other biblical songs like Exodus 15, Deuteronomy 32–33, and 1 Samuel 2. These texts collectively demonstrate a rich tradition of poetic and musical expression within ancient Jewish culture.

From a literary perspective, the Psalms are classified under prayer literature, encompassing hymns, laments, and thanksgiving songs (Bernhardt, 2015; Grohmann & Siquans, 2017; Seybold, 2005). This dual identity as both song and prayer reflects its use in both personal devotion and communal worship. Augustine, a significant early Christian theologian, even referred to the Psalms as "the prayer of Christ," emphasizing their enduring spiritual significance.¹

In terms of its literary form (Formgeschichte) and its place in the cultural life of the early Jewish period (Sitz im Leben), the book of Psalms is also referred to as a book of prayer, in addition to being classified as song literature or songs and hymns of thanksgiving (Bernhardt, 2015; Grohmann & Siquans, 2017; Seybold, 2005). Even a church father, Augustine, called the Book of Psalms the prayer of Christ. The questions that will be answered in this introductory section to the book of Psalms are about the function of the book of Psalms in the lives of the people of the Old Testament and how people today can live the book of Psalms in their lives today.

In other words, this introduction invites reflection on the dual functions of the Psalms: as historical artifacts of Old Testament worship and as guides for contemporary faith practices. Their themes of praise, lament, and thanksgiving offer timeless insights into human-divine relationships. By studying their structure and content, modern readers can uncover lessons about prayer, worship, and perseverance in faith. Questions addressed in this study include the role of Psalms in shaping the spirituality of ancient communities and their relevance for believers today. Ultimately, the Psalms serve as a bridge connecting ancient traditions with modern expressions of faith.

RESULT

David and His Prayers as a Paradigm in the Book of Psalms

David was the king of Israel who reigned for 40 years, from 1000 to 961 BC (he reigned in Hebron for 7 years and then in Jerusalem for 33 years) (Fischer, 2023). In addition to the Chronicle tradition, the name "David" is also important in the Deuteronomistic tradition. In the Deuteronomistic records, especially in the book of 2 Samuel, David is held up as a "good king", so that in the book of Kings David becomes the prototype of a "good king". In his article, Joseph says that of the more than 40 kings who reigned in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah,

¹ See (Grünbeck, 2015:214). In this regard Augustine said: *Psalmus vox totius Christi capitis et corporis* ("The Psalms are the voice of the whole head and body of Christ"). According to Augustine, if Christ prays, He uses the singing of the Psalms as His prayer.

only three were called "the one like David", which is a paradigm for characterising a king as a good king (Joseph, 2015). Moreover, in the eyes of the editors of the Book of Chronicles, David's position was even more honourable. In the genealogy of kings, only the list of kings from David's dynasty is recorded. The list of kings of Israel (the northern kingdom) is not recorded. It can therefore be said that the name of David occupies a very important and privileged place in the great tradition of the Old Testament canon, namely in the Deuteronomistic Chronicles and the Chronicles.

Recent Psalm studies have examined the Psalms not as stand-alone songs, but as a "psalmic continuum" (Ho, 2019). Therefore, when studying one song in the book of Psalms, it should be studied in relation to the other songs in that section. The Book of Psalms consists of five volumes, namely 1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106 and 107-150. Below is a chart of the structure of the five volumes of Psalms by Gillingham (S. Gillingham, 2015):

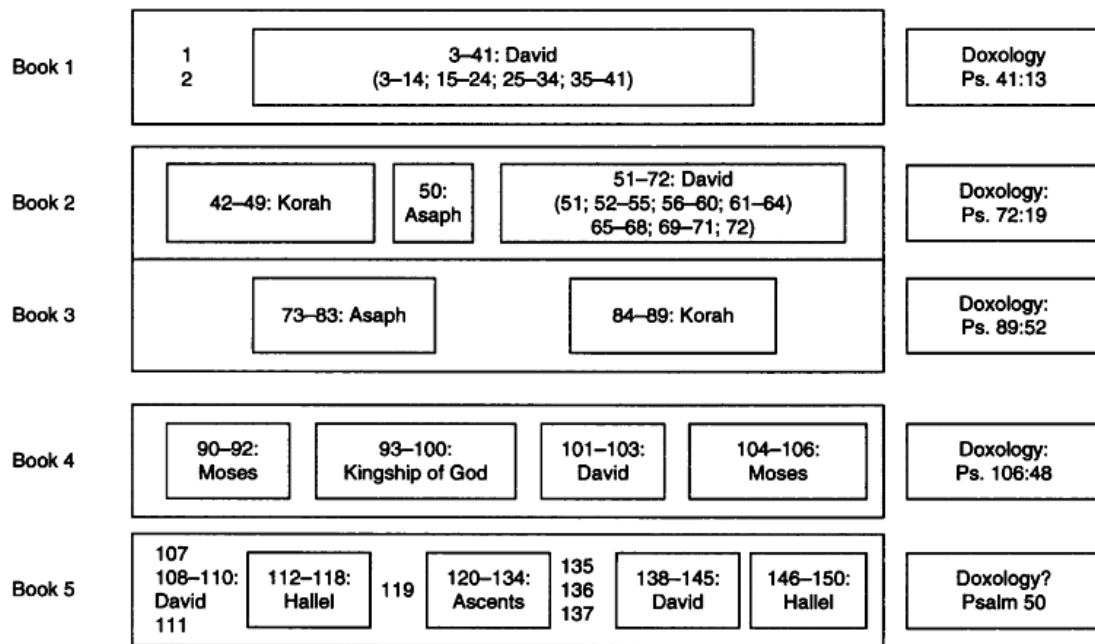


Figure 1. A chart of the structure of the five volumes of Psalms.

From the above chart we can see that each volume has a doxology at the end. Volume 1 has a doxology at 41:14, volume 2 at 72:19, volume 3 at 89:53, volume 4 at 106:48, and volume 5 at chapter 150 (Clifford, 2005; S. Gillingham, 2015). This doxology for volume 5 is also the doxology for the whole book.

In Jewish tradition, the five books of Psalms are related to the five books of the Torah of Moses. The five books of Moses or the Pentateuch are called the Torah of Moses, while the five volumes of Psalms are called the Torah of David (S. Gillingham, 2015). The Torah of David is understood to be an account of the making and renewal of the covenant with David.

Thus, it can be said that King David, in the form of the Psalms, becomes a paradigm of prayer, that is, a paradigm of intimate communication with God (S. Gillingham, 2015; S. E. Gillingham, 2002; Gillingham, 2002).

The Second Temple As a Representation of the House of Prayer

In Matthew 21:13, Matthew quotes Jesus as saying: “My house will be called a house of prayer”. In the life of the people around the time of the Second Temple, the Temple was a gathering place for Jews to pray or commune with God. Therefore, the epithet “house of prayer” is very much associated with the Temple as a place of prayer for the Jewish public or community (Reif, 2015).

In the ceremonies of the Second Temple, which were understood as prayers to God, the main literature that was intensively used in these ceremonies was the Book of Psalms (Boeckler, 2015). Thus, the Book of Psalms had a place of life in the Second Temple (Clifford, 2005). It contains the sung prayers of the people. The literary form of these prayers is chant or song.

The Doxology of Each Volume and Its Place In the Life of the Second Temple Period

Doxology of the Book of Psalms: Book 1 (3-41)

In particular, all the Psalms in Volume 1 (with the exception of 1 and 2 as the introduction to the Book of Psalms) are dedicated to David as “Psalms of David”, “From David”, “Prayers of David”, etc. This indicates that David is the paradigm of prayer. This indicates that David is the paradigm of prayer. Volume 1 contains David’s prayers in the form of hymns, songs of lament, as David’s communication with his God.

This book of Psalms, Volume 1, can be divided into four unified sections, namely, 3-14; 15-24; 25-34 and 35-41.

- i. The first section: In Psalms 3-14 the figure of David is given a very important role, for all the psalms in this section are described as psalms dedicated to David.² In other words, these psalms are called “the psalms of David”. Psalms 3-14 are similar in character, containing prayers of supplication to God, but each psalm concludes with a confident assurance that God will help His people.

² (Clifford, 2005; Witt, 2021)The researcher refers to "dedicated", because the term "of David" here does not speak of David's *authorship* status, but rather a matter of genre or literary form (the genre of these psalms is the song of David. See Clifford's opinion.

- ii. The second part: Structurally, Sumpter sees the second part as having a coherent or chiasmic-centric structure (Sumpter, 2013).

A Psalm 15 (Introduction to the liturgy)

B Psalm 16 (Song of Faith)

C Psalm 17 (Prayer for help)

D Psalm 18 (Royal Psalms)

E Psalm 19 (Creation/Torah Psalm)

D' Psalm 20-21 (Royal Psalms)

C' Psalm 22 (Prayer for help)

B' Psalm 23 (Song of Faith)

A' Psalm 24 (Introduction to the liturgy)

The centrepiece of this second section is Psalm 19. Cooley calls Psalm 19 “a Sabbath song”. (Cooley, 2014). The psalm is a form of Second Temple period cosmography associated with Genesis 1 that focuses on the Sabbath as a day of rest. (Cooley, 2014).

- iii. The third part: The themes of Psalms 25-34 have a unity, which is the psalmist’s praise of gratitude when God helps him in life’s difficulties.
- iv. The fourth part: Psalms 35-41 also have the background of the psalmist’s life of suffering, so he prays to God. In the prayers he sang, the psalmist had faith that God would help him to be delivered from suffering.

The first book of Psalms, which contains prayers in times of suffering, closes with a doxology found in Psalm 41:14 (Waltner, 2006:213). This doxology serves as an expression of thanksgiving, for in all suffering God plays an important role in the life of the psalmist. The doxology reads as follows:

Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting!
Amen, yes, amen.

בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
מִהָעוֹלָם וְעַד הָעוֹלָם
אָמֵן וְאָמֵן:

This doxology is a song in three lines. The first line praises Yahweh, the God of Israel. For Yahweh was the psalmist’s helper in his life, when he was suffering. “Praise the Lord” is the psalmist’s invitation to his listeners, as the last word in the closing of Volume 1 (Waltner, 2006). The second line contains the phrase “from everlasting to everlasting”. This phrase is an invitation to the listener that Yahweh is worthy of praise forever, not limited by time. The

doxology ends with a statement of faith: “Amen weamen” or “Amen and amen”. The repetition is both a sign and an affirmation. The congregation affirms God's continuing help for His people and affirms thanksgiving for all that the Lord has done for His people (Waltner, 2006).

Doxology of the Book of Psalms: Book 2 (42-72)

This second book of Psalms consists of three parts, namely the Psalms of the Children of Korah (42-49), the Psalms of Asaph (50) and the Psalms of David (51-72). Specifically, the structure of the Psalms of David in 51-72 can be divided into the following sections 51; 52-55; 56-60; 61-64; 65-68; 69-71; 72.

- i. The first and second parts of Book Two are the psalms of the children of Korah and Asaph. Buss observes that these psalms characterise a form of “Levitico-deuteronomic tradition” (Buss, 1963). Deuteronomic theology is characterised by a theology of judgment between the wicked and the righteous.
- ii. The third section is the Psalms of David. Goulder calls Psalms 51-72 “the prayers of David” (Goulder, 1990). Goulder states that these psalms are sung prayers. The psalms begin with the psalmist's prayer of supplication, which then ends with an expression of faith in a helping God.

Psalms Book 2 then ends with a doxology in Psalm 72:19, which reads:

Blessed be his glorious name.

Forever and ever, and may his glory fill the whole earth.

Amen, yes, amen. (TB-LAI)

וְכָרְנָה שֵׁם כְּבוֹדוֹ

לְעוֹלָם וְיִמְלֹא כְבוֹדוֹ אֶת-כָּל הָאָרֶץ

אָמֵן וְאָמֵן:

The doxology of Psalm 72:19 has the same structure as the doxology of 41:14 mentioned above, consisting of three lines. The first line is an invitation to praise the name of the Lord. The second line is about the never-ending praise that is eternal. The third line is a statement of faith: “Amen weamen” or “Amen and Amen”, in which the congregation affirms the Lord's constant help to His people and gives thanks for all that the Lord has done for His people.

Doxology of the Book of Psalms: Book 3 (73-89)

The structure of Psalms Volume 3 can be divided into two parts, 73-83 (the Psalms of Asaph) and 84-89 (the Psalms of Korah). The disorientation of exile and its aftermath challenges the attempts of the psalmists in Volume 3 to find hope in traditional elements of faith (Wallace, 2011).

The first part of Book 3 consists of the psalms known as the Psalms of the Children of Asaph (73-83). In particular, chapters 73-78 form a unified structure.³ Boadt calls it “Psalms 73-78 as a series” (Boadt, 2004). It is called a “series” because the individual psalms are related to each other and form a kind of continuous series of psalms. Smith says that Psalms 73-78 are literary units deliberately composed and organised to help the exilic and post-exilic communities to faithfully accompany and navigate the conflicts of faith and undirected experience triggered by the ‘seeming absence of God’ in the destruction of the temple (Smith, 2021). In a situation where God seems to be hiding, the people are invited to continue singing songs of prayer, full of faith that God will help his people. The other songs of Asaph, apart from Psalms 73-78, although not included in this unit, still have the same character of prayer through song in the midst of the suffering experienced by the people after the exile.

The second part of book 3 consists of the psalms known as the psalms of the children of Korah (84-89). The songs of the Psalms of Korah are an ironic expression of a grieving Israel that wanted to reorient its theology with reference to the Temple, the land of Canaan and the Davidic covenant. But these traditional elements were no longer able to offer hope (Wallace, 2011). This irony is expressed in these songs, so that the psalmist urges the people to place their hope in God alone.

Psalms Book 3 then ends with a doxology in Psalm 89:53, which reads

Blessed be the Lord forever and ever!

Amen, yes, amen.

בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם

אָמֵן וְאָמֵן:

The doxology of Psalm 89:53 has a two-line structure, which is different from the three-line doxologies of 41:14 and 72:19 mentioned above. However, the content of these three doxologies is the same, containing three points: the invitation to praise the name of the Lord; the never-ending praise that is eternal; and the confession of faith: “Amen weamen” or “Amen and Amen”, in which the congregation testifies to the Lord who continues to help His people, and affirms thanksgiving for all that the Lord has done for His people.

Doxology of the Book of Psalms: Book 4 (90-106)

The structure of Psalm 4 can be divided into four sections, namely, 90-92 (God as Refuge), 93-100 (God’s Cosmic Order), 101-103 (God’s Grace in Suffering), and 104-106

³ Initially, scholars argued that there is no unity between psalms 73-78. However, scholars today see psalms 73-78 as a unity.

(God as Creator and Forgiver) (S. Gillingham, 2015). The custodians of these Psalms are the Jewish community living in the post-exilic period.

- i. The first part, Psalms 90-92, could be called “God as Refuge”. Although they lived in a homeland, life in that homeland was uncertain. Threats from foreign nations and from the people of Israel who were not exiles and who had mixed with the Canaanites were ever-present in their lives. It is for this reason that the Psalmist invites God’s people to pray to him in the Psalms. God is believed by the people to be a “place of refuge”.
- ii. The second section, Psalms 93-100, is entitled “God’s Cosmic Rules”. This section deals with cosmology as understood by the people at that time. God is the Cosmic Ruler, so He is the ruler of this universe. The psalmist therefore urged the people not to be afraid of the situation when they were surrounded by the wicked who were hostile to them. In the midst of this post-exilic situation, the people are invited to pray always to the Lord God, the Cosmic Owner.
- iii. The third section, Psalms 101-103, is entitled “God’s Grace in Suffering”. The songs in this section speak of God’s grace in the suffering of the people. The psalmist invites the people to pray to God in song. The people are invited to believe that there is God’s grace behind the suffering, even though it seems that God is “hiding” in this situation.
- iv. The fourth section, Psalms 104-106, is entitled “God as Creator and Forgiver”. The three songs in this section talk about how God, the Creator of the universe, is forgiving. In the situation when they had just returned from exile, they were invited to reflect on the past situation when God forgave His people when they asked Him for forgiveness. Then they were punished by God in exile for the sins of the people. When they returned to their homeland, the action they had to take was to ask for forgiveness for the sins of their ancestors. This prayer for forgiveness of sins is sung on the basis that God, the Creator of the universe, is the All-Forgiving Ruler.

Psalm Book 4 then ends with a doxology in Psalm 106:48, which reads
Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting,
and let the people say: Amen.
Hallelujah!

בְּרוּךְ-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

מִן-הָעוֹלָם וְעַד הָעוֹלָם

וְאָמַר כָּל-הָעָם אָמֵן

הַלְלֵה-יְהוָה:

The doxology of Psalm 106:48 has a four-line structure, unlike the doxologies of 41:14 and 72:19, which have three lines, and 89:53, which has two lines. However, the content of these four doxologies is the same, containing the same three points: the invitation to praise the name of the Lord; the eternal praise; and the confession of faith: “Amen and Amen” or “Amen”, in which the congregation affirms the Lord’s constant help to His people and expresses thanksgiving for all that the Lord has done for His people. However, this doxology has the additional hymn “Hallelujah!”, which is emphasised in the doxology of Book 5.

Doxology of the Book of Psalms: Book 5 (107-150)

Psalms Book 5 consists of songs of thanksgiving for God’s unfailing love for His people. From the above structure we can see that the Hallel Psalms are an important theme in Book 5. Even the doxology that concludes Volume 5 is a Hallel psalm.

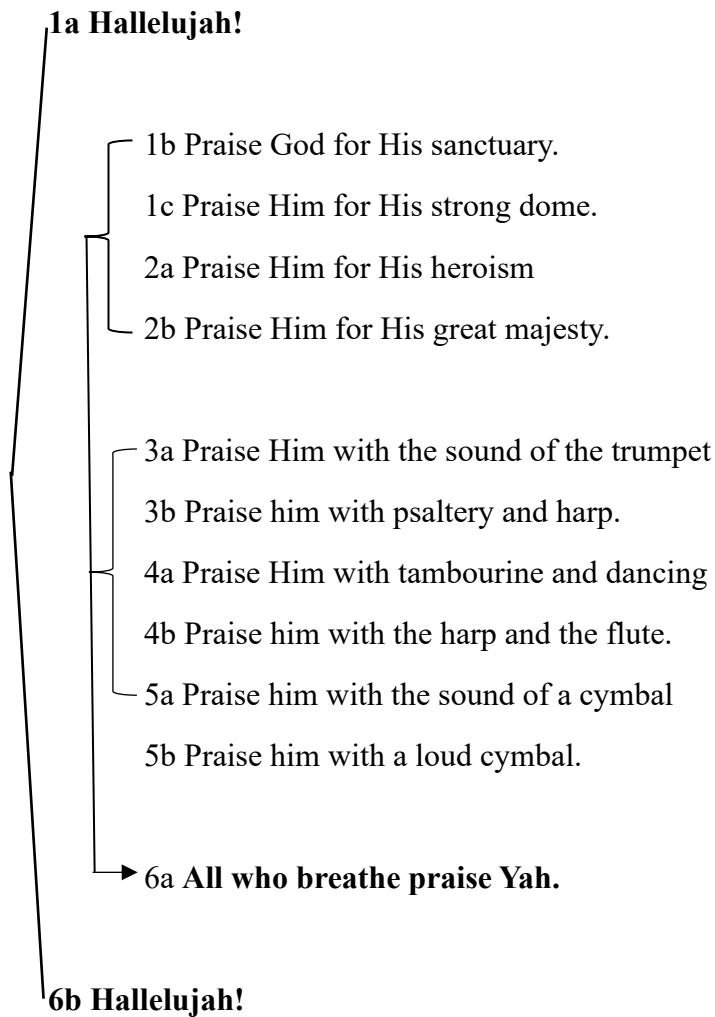
Psalm 150 as a whole is the doxology of Volume 5 as well as the doxology of the entire book of Psalms.

הללו יה
הללו-אל בקדשון
הללוהו ברקיע עזו:
הללוהו בגבורתיו
הללוהו כרב גדלו:
הללוהו בתקע שופר
הללוהו בגבל וכנור:
הללוהו בתוף ומחול
הללוהו במנים ועוגב:
הללוהו בצלצלי-שמע
הללוהו בצלצלי תרועה:
כל הנשמה תהלל יְהוָה
הללו-יה:

- 1a Hallelujah!
- 1b Praise God for His sanctuary.
- 1c Praise Him for His strong dome.
- 2a Praise Him for His heroism
- 2b Praise Him for His great majesty.
- 3a Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet
- 3b Praise him with psaltery and harp.

4a Praise Him with tambourine and dancing
 4b Praise him with the harp and the flute.
 5a Praise him with the sound of a cymbal
 5b Praise him with a loud cymbal.
 6a All who breathe praise Yah.
 6b Hallelujah!

Looking at the structure above, we can see the symmetrical arrangement as follows:



Meynet calls this Psalm 150 “the great doxology” (Meynet, 2022:693-8). The opening and closing “Hallelujah” is the centrepiece of the entire doxology, “Praise the Lord”. In verses 1b-2b the psalmist lists the reasons why the people praise the Lord and the objects of the people’s praise. Verses 3a-5b list the musical instruments used, which include melodic, rhythmic and percussive elements that are combined to form a harmony that is sung along with the people’s dance. The phrase “all who have breath praise the Lord” refers to all who should be involved in praising the Lord (Meynet, 2022:675-92).

DISCUSSION

Structure of the Book of Psalms Based on the Five Doctrines

Based on the results of the above description, the overall structure of the Book of Psalms can be described as follows:

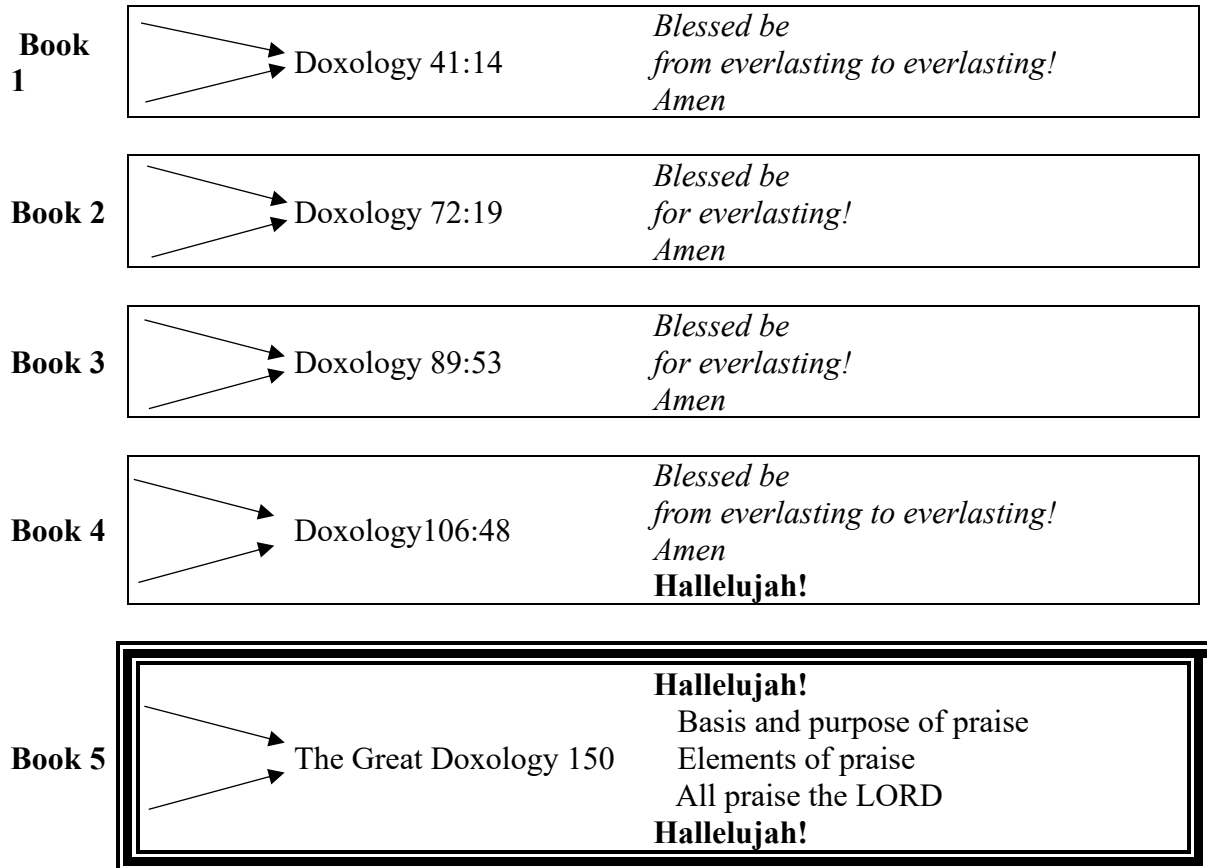


Figure 2. Overall structure of the Book of Psalms.

The prayers offered in the form of songs end each volume with an invitation to praise God. In fact, all the prayers from chapters 1-150 end with an opus magnum in the Book of Psalms, the masterpiece Psalm 150, with a word that sums it all up: "Hallelujah!"

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as previously stated in the introduction, the Psalms are typically regarded as a collection of liturgical songs utilized in the context of temple worship. This perspective is undoubtedly valid. However, this approach results in the interpretation of the Psalms as isolated entities, without consideration of their interrelationships with other songs within the same collection. This research offers a new perspective on the book of Psalms, suggesting that it is not merely a collection of songs, but rather a unified structure with a peak in Psalm 150. It can therefore be stated that the series of psalms from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150 represents a series of milestones leading to its peak. In order to gain an understanding of the message conveyed by

a particular psalm, it is necessary to interpret it not only in isolation, but also in the context of the structure of the entire book of Psalms and its function within the larger framework of the editor's arrangement.

REFERENCES

- Bernhardt, K.-H. (2015). *Das Problem Der Alt-orientalischen Königsideologie Im Alten Testament Unter Besonderer Berücksichtigung Der Geschichte Der Psalmenexegese Dargestellt und Kritisch Gewürdigt*. Brill.
- Boadt, L. (2004). The Use of "Panels" in the Structure of Psalms 73-78. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 66(4), 533–550.
- Boeckler, A. M. (2015). THE LITURGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF PSALMS IN JUDAISM: Demonstrated with Samples from Psalms 90-106, with a Special Focus on Psalm 92, Mizmor shir leYom haShabbat. *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, 48(2), 70–82.
- Buss, M. J. (1963). The Psalms of Asaph and Korah. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 82(4), 382–392.
- Clifford, R. J. (2005). The Psalms. *Dialogue*, 38(2), 39–52.
- Fischer, A. A. (2023). David (AT). In *Das wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon*. Deutsche Bibel Gesellschaft Academic.
- Gillingham, S. (2015). Psalms 90-106: Book Four and the Covenant with David. *European Judaism*, 48(2), 83–101.
- Gillingham, S. E. (2002). *The Image, the Depths and the Surface: Pendekatan Multivalen untuk Studi Alkitab* (JSOT.S 354). Sheffield Academic Press.
- Gillingham, S. U. E. (2002). From Liturgy to Prophecy: The Use of Psalmody in Second Temple Judaism. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 64(3), 470–489.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43727462>
- Goulder, M. (1990). *The Prayers of David (Psalms 51-72): Studies in the Psalter II* (JSOTSup 10). Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press.
- Grohmann, M., & Siquans, A. (2017). Literarische Transformationen sexueller Gewalt in der Hebräischen Bibel. *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation*, 5(2).
- Grünbeck, E. (2015). *Christologische Schriftargumentation und Bildersprache. Zum Konflikt zwischen Metapherninterpretation und dogmatischen Schriftbeweistraditionen in der Patristischen Auslegung Des 44. (45.) Psalms*. Brill.

- Ho, P. C. W. (2019). The Macrostructural Logic of the Alphabetic Poems in the Psalter. *Vetus Testamentum*, 69(4/5), 594–616.
- Joseph, A. J. (2015). Who Is like David? Was David like David?: Good Kings in the Book of Kings. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 77(1), 20–41.
- Meynet, R. (2022). *The Psalter. Book Five (Ps 107-150)* (Rhetorica). Peeters Publishers.
- Reif, S. C. (2015). The Place of Prayer in Early Judaism. In S. C. Reif & R. Egger-Wenzel (Eds.), *Ancient Jewish Prayers and Emotions: Emotions associated with Jewish prayer in and around the Second Temple period* (pp. 1–18). DeGruyter.
- Rösel, M. (2018). *Bibelkunde des Alten Testaments. Die kanonischen und apokryphen Schriften*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Seybold, K. D. (2005). Zur Geschichte des Vierten Davidpsalter (PSS 138-145). In P. W. Flint & P. D. Miller Jr. (Eds.), *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*. Brill.
- Smith, S. J. (2021). The Shape and Message of Psalms 73–78. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 82(1), 18–37.
- Sumpter, P. (2013). The Coherence of Psalms 15-24. *Biblica*, 94(2), 186–209.
- Wallace, R. E. (2011). The Narrative Effect of Psalms 84-89. *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, 11, 2–15.
- Waltner, J. H. (2006). *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Psalms*. Herald Press.
- Witt, A. C. (2021). The Figure of David and a Canonical Approach to Psalms 3–14. In *A Voice Without End: The Role of David in Psalms 3–14* (Journal of, pp. 1–28). Penn State University Press.