Structure of Psalms

Short Bibliography
I have compiled this outline of Psalms guided by five reference books, listed below.

NIV Study Bible. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. iOS edition (Tecarta, Inc. 4.1).


Disclaimer
Any attempt to identify the structure of Psalms involves guesswork. We have very few facts about the history of its compilation. We do not know who arranged the psalms in their current form, much less their purposes for this particular arrangement. We can only look for clues and make tentative, provisional proposals.

Book 1

Psalms 1–2 Introduction to the Psalter

These two psalms have no titles and are framed by similar phrases (“blessed is the one...” 1:1; “blessed are all...” 2:12). Besides serving as an introduction to the entire collection, Psalm 1 introduces the theme of Book 1 and Psalm 2 introduces the theme of Book 2.

Psalms 3–14

Psalms 3–7 Five Laments
Psalm 8 The Human Condition (humanity’s high dignity)
Psalms 9–13 Five Laments
Psalm 14 The Human Condition (humanity’s deep disgrace) (repeated in Psalm 53)

Psalms 15–24 Access to the Temple
Psalm 15 Who has access to the temple? (15:1)
Psalm 16 Trust in God / Joy in his presence
Psalm 17 Plea for deliverance
Psalm 18 Prayer and praise for the king’s deliverance
Psalm 19 Glory of God revealed in creation and His law
Psalms 20–21 Prayer and praise for the king’s deliverance
Psalm 22 Plea for deliverance
Psalm 23 Trust in God / Joy in his presence
Psalm 24 Who has access to the temple? (24:3)

Psalms 25–33 Pleas for mercy and trust in God’s unfailing love
Psalm 25 Prayer for God’s deliverance (acrostic)
Psalm 26 Prayer of a blameless person
Psalm 27 Appeal to God regarding false accusers
Psalm 28 Prayer of one going “down to the pit”
Psalm 29 God’s power seen in a thunderstorm
Psalm 30 Praise from one spared from going “down to the pit”
Psalm 31 Appeal to God regarding false accusers
Psalm 32 Blessedness of those forgiven
Psalm 33 Praise for God’s deliverance (acrostic)

Psalms 34–37
Psalm 34 Instruction in Godly Wisdom
Psalm 35 Appeal against the Wicked
Psalm 36 Appeal against the Wicked
Psalm 37 Instruction in Godly Wisdom

Psalms 38–41 Four Laments: Prayer and Confession of Sins

Book 2

In Book II, “Elohim largely replaces the name Yahweh.” The Book ends with the postscript of Psalm 72:20 — “This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse”, even though there are an additional eighteen psalms by David after this, and a dozen by other authors in the first two Books. [Kidner, 18]

“Psalms are brought together here from various sources: the Sons of Korah, who were temple musicians (42 – 49); Asaph, the founder of another temple group (50); David
(51 – 65; 68 – 70); Solomon (72). There are also three anonymous psalms: 66, 67, 71.” [Kidner, 182]

**Psalms 42–45**  Three prayers and a royal psalm “in perfect balance with the ending of Book II”
- Psalms 42–43  Prayer for deliverance from enemies
- Psalm 44  Communal prayer after defeat
- Psalm 45  A royal wedding

**Psalms 46–48**
- Psalm 46  Security in Zion
- Psalm 47  Yahweh’s Worldwide Reign
- Psalm 48  Security in Zion

**Psalms 49–53**
- Psalm 49  Folly of Trusting in Wealth
- Psalm 50  God Calls His People to Account
- Psalm 51  An Individual Brought to Account
- Psalm 52  Folly of Trusting in Wealth
- Psalm 53  Folly of the Wicked (Compare with Psalm 14)

**Psalms 54–60**  *This is the central cluster of Book II*
- Psalm 54  Individual Prayer for Deliverance
- Psalm 55  Prayer for Help against Conspiracy
- Psalm 56  Confidence that God Will Deliver from the Wicked
- Psalm 57  God Is Exalted by His Saving Acts *(central Psalm of Book II)*
- Psalm 58  Confidence that God Will Judge the Wicked
- Psalm 59  Prayer for Help against Conspiracy
- Psalm 60  Communal Prayer for Deliverance

**Psalms 61–64**  Four psalms expressing confidence in God’s deliverance

**Psalms 65–68**
- Psalm 65  Praise for God’s Care of Creation
- Psalm 66  Praise for God’s Saving Acts
- Psalm 67  Praise for God’s Care of Creation
- Psalm 68  Praise for God’s Saving Acts
Psalms 69–72

Psalm 69  Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies
Psalm 70  Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies *(repeats Psalm 40:13–17 with some revision)*
Psalm 71  Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies
Psalm 72  Royal Psalm for Blessings on the King *(with Psalm 2 an inclusion for Books I & II)*

**Book 3**

*Book III consists of three groupings of psalms, having an overall symmetrical pattern (six psalms [73–78], five psalms [79–83], six psalms [84–89]) and at its center (Psalm 81) an urgent exhortation to fundamental covenant loyalty to The Lord.* [NIV Study Bible]

Psalms 73–78

Psalm 73  Wisdom from an individual’s life
Psalm 74  Individual’s prayer when rejected (invokes God’s saving in the Exodus)
Psalm 75  Assurance that God judges the wicked
Psalm 76  Assurance that God judges the wicked
Psalm 77  Community’s prayer when rejected (invokes God’s saving in the Exodus)
Psalm 78  Wisdom from the community’s life

Psalms 79–83

Psalm 79  Community prayer against enemy invasion
Psalm 80  Prayer to restore Israel
Psalm 81  Admonition to covenant loyalty *(center of medley and book)*
Psalm 82  Prayer to judge the earth
Psalm 83  Community prayer against enemy invasion

Psalms 84–89

Psalm 84  Yearning for fellowship with God (introduces the following five psalms)
Psalm 85  Communal cry of distress
Psalm 86  Individual cry of distress
Psalm 87  God’s special love for Zion
Psalm 88  Individual cry of distress
Psalm 89  Communal cry of distress
“The two final prayers (Ps 88; 89) both end unrelieved by the usual expression of confidence that God will hear and act” [NIV Study Bible]

**Book 4**

Book III may stand as the editorial center of the entire corpus. Royal psalms in the first half of the Psalter (1–89) appear to rehearse the story of the Davidic monarchy. Psalms 90–106 reorient the theological message of the Psalter. The first of the group, Psalm 90, lists Moses in the superscription, a time in Israel’s history when the nation was led by only one king, Yahweh. Of the seventeen psalms in this collection, six are enthronement psalms (93; 95–99). The final two are historical psalms, recounting the faithfulness of Yahweh in the deliverance of his people out of Egypt. These psalms are meant to counter the crisis of exile, reasserting belief in the reign of Yahweh, even with the apparent absence of a human king. [DOTWPW, 590]

**Psalms 90–100   The LORD Reigns!**

**Psalms 90–91**

Psalm 90  Point: We are consumed by God’s anger  
Psalm 91  Counterpoint: Those who take refuge in the Lord are safe

**Psalms 92–94**

Psalm 92  The Lord will repay the wicked  
Psalm 93  The Lord reigns  
Psalm 95  The Lord will repay the wicked

**Psalms 95–99**

Psalm 95  Do not harden your hearts  
Psalm 96  The Lord will judge the world  
Psalm 97  The Lord is good to Israel  
Psalm 98  The Lord will judge the world  
Psalm 99  The Lord is good to Israel

**Psalm 100**  The Lord is God; the Lord is good

**Psalms 101–110**

The traditional division between Books IV and V at Ps 107 was probably done by a later compiler, breaking up the collection consisting of Ps 101–110. [NIV Study Bible]
Psalm 101    A king’s vow to God
Psalm 102    Prayer of an individual in distress
Psalm 103    Praise for the Lord’s great love
Psalm 104    God’s wonderful acts in creation
Psalm 105    History of Israel’s redemption
Psalm 106    History of Israel’s rebellion
Psalm 107    God’s wonderful deeds for people
Psalm 108    Praise for the Lord’s great love
Psalm 109    Prayer of an individual in distress
Psalm 110    God’s vow to a king

Book 5

Apart from the doxology at the end of Psalm 106 there is little if anything to mark off this final book from its predecessor. Within it, however, there are certain obvious groupings: two collections of Davidic psalms (108—110; 138—145); the fifteen Songs of Ascents (120—134) . . . Jewish tradition also groups together Psalms 113—118, known as the ‘Egyptian Hallel’, for use at the Passover. [Kidner 417]

Psalms 107–110    See last grouping in Book 4.
Psalms 111–119    The ‘Egyptian Hallel’ is enclosed within alphabetic acrostics. Each half line of Psalms 111 and 112 begin with a different letter of the alphabet. In Psalm 119, the alphabet advances through its twenty-two sections, with each of the eight lines in a section beginning with the same letter.

Psalm 111    Praise for God’s great deeds
Psalm 112    Praise for God’s good blessings

Psalms 113–118    The ‘Egyptian Hallel.’ At Passover, Psalms 113 and 114 were sung before the meal (before the second cup was passed) and Psalms 115–118 after the meal (when the fourth cup had been filled). [NIV Study Bible]

Psalm 113    Praise of the exalted Lord’s care for the lowly
Psalm 114    A hymnic celebration of the exodus
Psalm 115    Yahweh contrasted with idols
Psalm 116    Praise for deliverance from death
Psalm 117    Praise for his love and faithfulness
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psalm 118</th>
<th>Thanksgiving for deliverance from enemies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psalm 119</td>
<td>Praise for God’s instruction (Torah)</td>
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**Psalms 120–137**  
*This grouping includes the ‘Songs of Ascent’ (120–134) and the traditional Jewish grouping, the ‘Great Hallel’ (120–136), and ends with lament that worship in Zion is no longer possible.*

**Psalms 120–134**  
Songs of Ascent, to be sung by those making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the three annual feasts

**Psalms 135–137**

- Psalm 135  
  A salvation-history psalm of praise
- Psalm 136  
  A salvation-history liturgy of praise
  
  *Psalms 135 and 136, as different as they are, both assume the pilgrims’ arrival at Yahweh’s sanctuary for worship…The final one (137) bemoans the reality of the exile when pilgrimage was not possible. [How to Read, 142]*

- Psalm 137  
  Lament that worship in Zion is no longer possible

**Psalms 138–145**  
A final collection of Davidic psalms

- Psalm 138  
  Praise for God’s saving help
- Psalm 139  
  Praise for God’s wonderful knowledge
  
  - Psalm 140  
    Prayer for deliverance from enemies
  - Psalm 141  
    Prayer for deliverance from enemies
  - Psalm 142  
    Prayer for deliverance from enemies
  - Psalm 143  
    Prayer for deliverance from enemies
  - Psalm 144  
    Prayer for deliverance from enemies
- Psalm 145  
  Praise for God’s goodness (an alphabetic acrostic)

**Psalms 146–150**  
Conclusion to the Psalter

- Psalm 146  
  Praise for God’s care for the helpless
- Psalm 147  
  Praise for God’s care for creation (and especially his people)
- Psalm 148  
  Call for heaven and earth to praise Yahweh
- Psalm 149  
  Call for his people to praise Yahweh
- Psalm 150  
  Climactic call for all to praise Yahweh