

Psalms 90-91

Psalms 90-91, Intro to Book 4

Overview

We now move from Book 3 to Book 4. Figure 1 (chart) recalls the distinctive characteristics we have seen already that set this book apart: a short book, mostly anonymous in authorship, with few laments and many hymns, and a renewed emphasis on the covenant name יהוה.

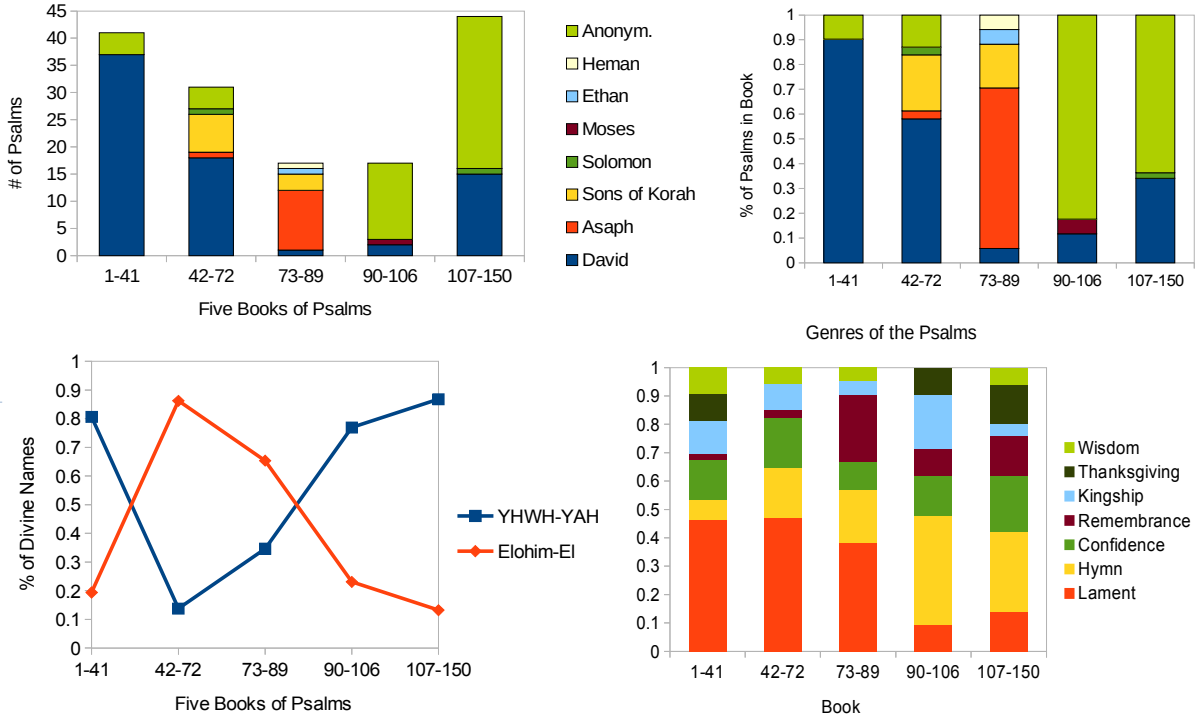


Figure 1: Characteristics of the Five Books of Psalms

Book 3 ended with the apparent dissolution of the Davidic dynasty. Book 4 describes a people without a temple.¹ It is the only book with no dedications to the chief musician and no Selahs, both marks of use in the temple (Figure 2, chart). Israel is in exile.²

In spite of this desolate condition, she is joyful. Figure 3 (chart) shows the Hebrew verb “be glad” שמח (Strong 8055) and the noun “gladness” שמחה (Strong 8057).

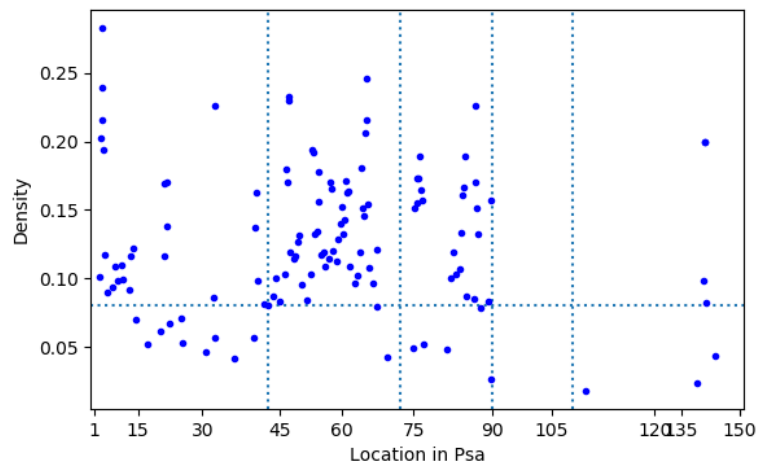


Figure 2: “To the Chief Musician” or “Selah” in Psalms

- 1 This is an observation about the current form of the Psalter as organized by the post-exilic editor. Some of the individual psalms do refer to the temple as though it were standing, or Zion as though it were still accessible: 92:13; 93:5; 96:8; 99:9; 100:4. Those by Moses and David were certainly written before the captivity.
- 2 Delitzsch compares the book to the fourth book of the Pentateuch, ספר מדבר.

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The only higher peak is in Psalm 35, where David laments the rejoicing of his enemies over him. This combination of deprivation and rejoicing anticipates Philippians (Figure 4), written by Paul from a Roman prison, which repeatedly describes his joy in the Lord.

How can one rejoice in the midst of disaster? Israel's faith has **matured**. Book 3 mourns the devastation of the capital city Jerusalem, and the apparent end of God's messianic promises to David. A central insight in Book 4 is that God himself reigns, from a heavenly throne, even if his earthly kingdom is disrupted.

Psa 103:19 The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all.

This book is one of the peaks of the theme of the Lord himself (not just the Messiah) as king (Figure 5, chart).

Book 4 is particularly appropriate to the current situation of believers. Our Savior came promising that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

He offered the sacrifice that redeems the citizens of the kingdom, and promised to come one day to set up his kingdom on earth. But in the present day, the world is still under Satan's command, and the Lord's true disciples are reviled and rejected. Our encouragement, like that of the Jews in Babylon, must be that the Lord rules in heaven.

Book 4 is widely seen as an answer to the dilemma of Book 3, and of 88-89 in particular. The strict pairing of *הסד* and *אמונה* appears in the Bible only in Ps 88:11; 89:1, 2, 24, 33, 49; 92:2; 98:3; and 100:5.³ Psalm 103 is the first Psalm after 89 to combine the themes of God's *הסד* and "forever," and 106:1 introduces the theme that punctuates Book 5, "His mercy *הסד* endureth forever." In particular, as we go through these psalms, we see how each of them responds to one or more of the final questions of 89:46-49.⁴

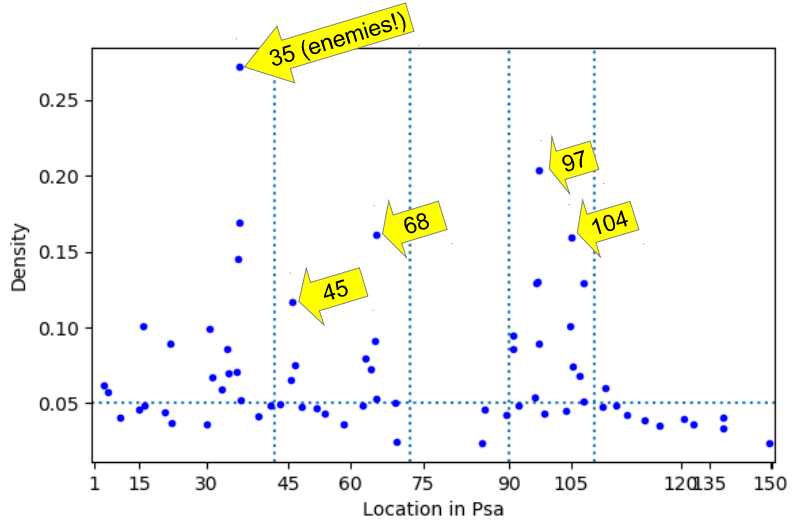


Figure 3: שמח and שמחה in Psalms

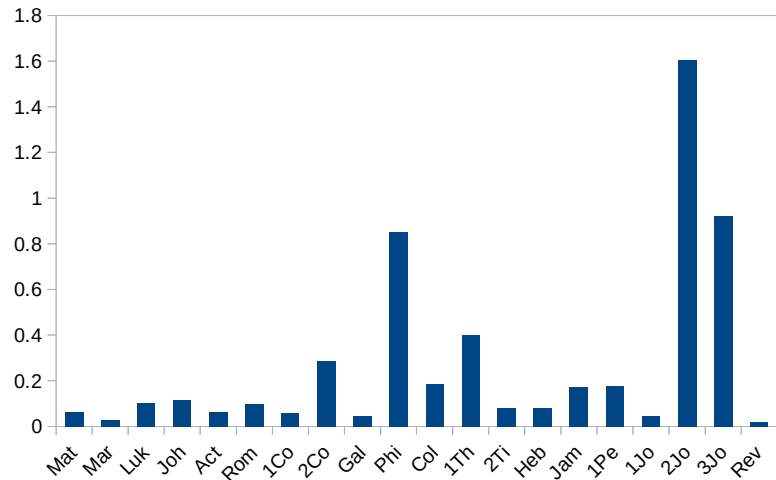


Figure 4: Joy χαρα or rejoice χαίρω in the NT. Seven books have no instances and are omitted from the plot.

3 Gosse, ZAW 122. Bd., S. 185-198 (2010)

4 VanGemeren offers specific suggestions for this alignment.

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Based on authorship and key words, we can discern four sections in Book 4 (Fig. chart):

- 90-91 begin with the oldest Psalm, by Moses. Both describe God as the dwelling place (90:1; 91:9) of his people, who are in exile from their homeland.
- 92-100 are distinguished by the repetition of the phrase “The LORD reigns” in 93-99. Though 92 and 100 do not contain this phrase, they are both hymns, the only ones in the group with functional headings (“for the Sabbath day,” “praise”), and (along with 98:3) are the only pairings of $\sqrt{\text{חָסַד}}$ and $\sqrt{\text{אֱמֶן}}$ in Book 4.
- 101-103, by David, anticipate a restoration of the messianic kingship on the throne on Zion.
- 104-106 are the first of three groups of Hallelujah Psalms, asserting that contrary to appearances and the negative verdict of Psalms 88 and 89, God’s mercy does endure forever.

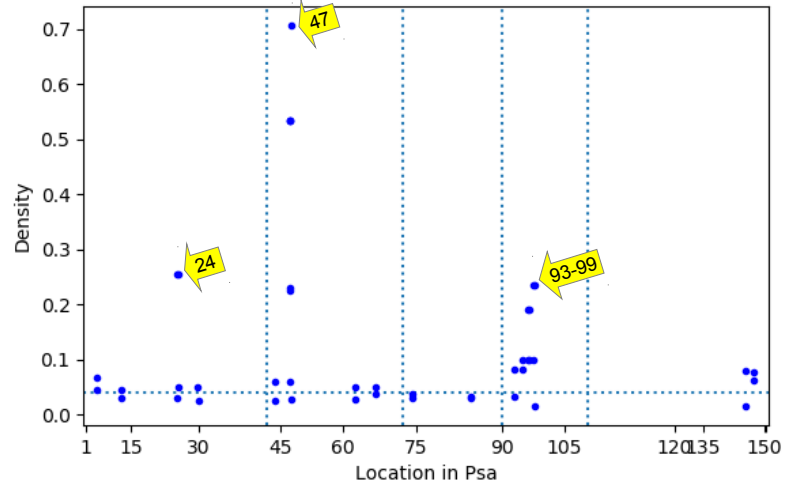


Figure 5: יהוה אלהים or יהוה אלהים with $\sqrt{\text{מלך}}$

Psalms 90-106, Maturation
 90-91, God as Habitation
 92-100, The LORD reigns now
 101-103, David will reign
 104-106, Hallelujah

Figure 6: Sections of Book 4

Psalm 90, An Eternal Dwelling for a Short-Lived People

1 A Prayer of Moses the man of God.--This is the oldest Psalm in the Psalter. We know of Moses’ poetic gifts from Deuteronomy 32 and 33. It probably was written toward the end of Moses’ life,⁵ when the death of the first generation in the wilderness and Moses’ own approaching death were occupying his thoughts.

After an introduction emphasizing the Lord’s eternity (Figure 7, chart), two paragraphs of the Psalm begin with “return” $\sqrt{\text{שׁוּב}}$ (Strong 7725). This verb marked the refrain of Psalm 80, in the same two senses that we saw there: Man’s return to God (v. 3), and God’s return to his people (v. 13). The first of these paragraphs laments the shortness of life, recalling Heman’s question in Psalm 88, and 89:47-48, “Remember how short my time is.” The second contains seven petitions. Between the two, vv. 7-12 explain the problem: God’s anger against their sin.

Psalm 90, An Eternal Dwelling for a Short-Lived People
 1-2, The Eternal Lord
 3-6, **Return** us to yourself: short life
 7-12, God’s wrath against sin
 13-17, **Return** to us: enduring works

Figure 7: Structure of Psalm 90

The opening verses emphasize the eternity of God as their sovereign master (יהוה אדוני vs. יהוה).

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.--Only in the Psalms is “dwelling place” ($\sqrt{\text{מֵעוֹן}}$ Strong 4583) applied to God’s people. Elsewhere the word refers to God’s dwelling

5 Thus Alexander

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place, whether the earthly sanctuary (1 Sam 2:29, 32; 2 Chr 36:15; Ps 26:8), or more commonly, heaven. But from the time he met God at the burning bush, Moses never knew a settled earthly dwelling. His took refuge in God, and a people in exile would do well to follow his example.

2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.--The mountains and earth seem solid and enduring, but they are transitory compared with God's eternity.

The next paragraph contrasts the shortness of human life with the Lord's eternity, and calls on them to return to the Lord.

3 Thou turnest man to destruction [אֶבֶר that which is crushed; dust];--An allusion to the fall: "turn" is the verb used in Gen 3:19 for returning to the ground, and "destruction" is a rare word for crushing that can easily be understood as a synonym for the more common עֶפֶר "dust."

Gen 3:19 In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou **return** unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for **dust** thou art, and unto **dust** shalt thou **return**.

and sayest, Return, ye children of men.--Here is the reason for the decree of death in Genesis 3: to turn people back to God. The verb recalls⁶ the first three refrains of Psalm 80, the plea for God's strength on Messiah at the heart of Book 3,

Psa 80:19 **Turn us again**, O LORD God of hosts, cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved.

4 For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night. 5 Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up. 6 In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth.--These verses expand on the theme of divinely-ordained limitation to life, the burden of Heman in Psalm 88, and Ethan in Ps 89:47-48.

Now Moses explains the reason for the limitation of life, which is God's judgment on sin. First he states the limitation:

7 For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled. 8 Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance. 9 For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told. 10 The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

Next, he demonstrates the appropriate response to it.

11 Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath. 12 So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.--By contemplating the end of life, we can live wisely during it.

13 Return, O LORD,--The second "return" is by God, again following Psalm 80,

Psa 80:14 Return, we beseech thee, O God of hosts:

From this perspective of faith, he now asks seven questions that culminate in a plea that God would reverse the transitory nature of life.

6 In fact, it is likely that the writer of Psalm 80 draws the paired use of שׁוּב from this Psalm, which must have been preserved among the poems of Israel.

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how long?--Another echo of Psalm 80,

Psa 80:4 O LORD God of hosts, how long wilt thou be angry against the prayer of thy people?

Now that they have turned to him, he should cease from his wrath.

and let it repent thee concerning thy servants.--God as subject of both “(re)turn” שׁוּב and “repent” נָחַם appears elsewhere only in Moses’ intercession with the Lord,

Exo 32:12 **Turn** from thy fierce wrath, and **repent** of this evil against thy people.

14 O satisfy us early [in the morning] with thy mercy תִּסְבֵּר; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.--Next, he prays that they might joyfully experience God’s loyal love, which was revealed in Ex 34:6.

15 Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil.--He prays that this joy would extend as long as their time of suffering.

16 Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children.--Next, he asks for a vision of God’s work and glory (compare his request leading up to the revelation of Exodus 34, “Shew me thy glory” (Ex 33:18).

17 And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us:--Here is surely an audacious request: from beholding God’s glory, he desires that God’s glory would rest on him! This is an anticipation of Paul’s teaching,

2Co 3:18 But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.--The God who brought forth the mountains and created the earth and the world (v. 2) is surely able to establish us. כּוֹן Strong 3669 means to be firm, stable. From preoccupation with the shortness of life, Moses has ascended to the vision of doing something with eternal impact.

Psalm 91, The Blessings of Dwelling in God

This Psalm continues (vv. 1, 9) the theme of God as the dwelling place of his exiled saints, and describes the blessing that results. It is organized as a conversation,⁷ in which we can discern four characters (Figure 8, chart).⁸ One, a believer, speaks in the first person. He resembles David in Book 1 (e.g., Psalms 20, 21), and may represent the Messianic king

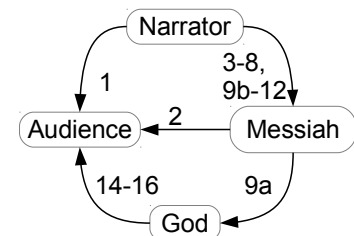


Figure 8: Discourse Structure of Psalm 91

1 He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide

under the shadow of the Almighty.--The narrator speaks to those who hear the Psalm. At first, the verse appears to be a tautology. But the two halves make complementary points. The “secret place סֵתֶר (Strong 5643) of the Most High” is his presence:

Psa 31:20 Thou shalt hide them in **the secret of thy presence** from the pride of man:

7 Goetsch, Concordia Journal, July 1983

8 The Psalms Targum sees the Psalm as a conversation between David and Solomon. v. 2 is David’s testimony (cf. 18:2), followed by exhortation to Solomon in 3-8. Solomon responds in 9, and the “Lord of the world” responds in 10ff. But Solomon does not satisfy the resolve of v. 9. Perhaps it is better to hear Messiah’s voice in 2 and 9.

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The first half thus describes the king's faith in drawing near to God, something that is fully possible for us only through the work of the Lord Jesus (Hebrews). The second half invokes "the Almighty," אֱלֹהֵי, translated by LXX παντοκράτωρ in Job, and shows the Lord's response to those who draw near to him: he brings them under his powerful wings (v. 4) and protects them.

2 I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.--

Here is the attitude of 1a: the king tells the audience of his trust in God. The expressions remind us of Ps 18:2, David's description of the refuge that God was for him in the years that he was fleeing Saul in the wilderness. Like the Exodus wanderings, this period is an excellent inspiration for Israel in exile (and for believers in this present evil age).

3 Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence.

4 He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.--Now, developing 1b, the narrator assures the king of God's care (as in Psalm 20). The verses multiply descriptions of the threat (a hunter, and a plague), and of his protection (the wings of the mother bird from the hunter; shield and buckler to guard against military foes).

5 Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; 6 Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday. 7 A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. 8 Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked.--The one who trusts in the Lord is invincible.

~~**9 Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation;**~~ **Surely thou, LORD, art my refuge.--**Now the king ("my") speaks again, this time not about the Lord, but to the Lord. Again, he chooses to take refuge in him. And again the narrator encourages him:

Thou hast made the most high thy dwelling place. 10 There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. 11 For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. 12 They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.--Satan quoted vv. 11-12 during the Lord's temptation in the wilderness, encouraging him to claim his Messianic throne by a leap from the temple pinnacle. A Messianic interpretation strengthens Satan's argument. But the following verse shows that he may not have wanted to call attention to this Psalm:

13 Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet.--The individual in question will carry out the commission of Gen 3:15 of bruising the head of the serpent, something that our Lord did in his work on the cross.

Now a new voice enters. The king has addressed God directly, and God responds with a promise of his protection:

14 Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name. 15 He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him. 16 With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him my salvation.--"Long life" is the final answer to the fear of death in Psalms 88, 89, and 90.

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Notes

Joy in MT and LXX

	αγαλλιαω	ευφραινω	ευφροσυνη	χαιρω	επιχαιρω	χαρα
שמח		141	2	15	9	
שמחה		7	65			6
ששון		1	8			4
שש	4	8		4		
רנן	24	12				1
גיל	27	3	1	8	1	1

Translations of שדי

	παντοκρατωρ	θεος ⁹	κυριος
שדי	15	11	10
צבא	119		
יהוה			6131
אדון, אדוני			534
אל, אלהים		2357	

None of the LXX translations is dedicated to שדי, and none is particularly dominant. Outside of Job, only θεος is used. The translators appear to be as confused about it as modern translators. We need an inductive study based on usage.

9 This is the constant translation outside of Job. Only Job uses κυριος and παντοκρατωρ, and he never uses θεος.