

Review of Book 1

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Over the last six months, we have found numerous clues to the overall organization of Psalms 1-41 (Figure 1, chart):

- two blocks dealing with God’s care for the weak (Psalms 3-14, 34-41), both roughly chiastic;
- two more describing his royal dwellingplace (Psalms 15-24, 26-32), again chiastic (15-24 strongly so);
- the only hymns in Book 1, praising God at the center of the first three blocks and introducing the fourth;¹
- an overall chiastic organization:
 - an inclusio between 1-2 and 41;
 - chiastic alignment of the weakness and dwellingplace groups;
 - Psalm 25 isolated at the center of the structure.

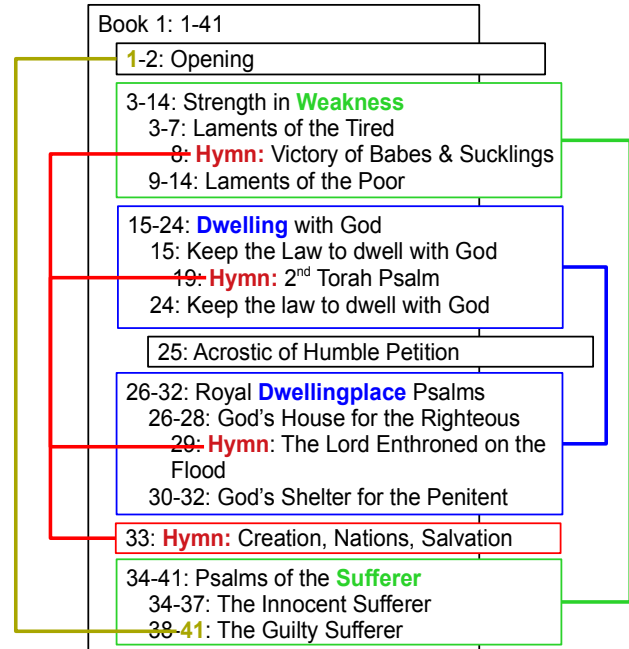


Figure 1: Structure of Book 1 (revised)

In our review, we’ll work from the outside toward the center.

Psalms 1-2, 41

Two themes dominate the rest of the first book:

- Psalm 1, the Ideal: God demands obedience to his law, which will bring blessing;
- Psalm 2, the Reality: People rebel against God’s anointed king who enforces this law, but forgiveness is available (“kiss the Son”). Rejection of God’s anointed (David) amounts to rejection of God (“against the Lord, and against his anointed”).

The inclusio between Psalms 1 and 41 highlights this tension. The two have similar structure, and both emphasize blessing on the righteous and judgment for the ungodly. But in Psalm 41, David acknowledges that he himself is a sinner. Thus Psalm 41 combines Psalms 1 and 2: God demands and rewards righteousness, but is accessible to the penitent who will “kiss the son.”

God’s Care for the Weak

The first and last large blocks describe God’s care for the weak and suffering. This weakness and suffering come from the wicked, who are the enemies of God’s people. After four references to these people in Psalm 1, these terms concentrate in these sections: Figure 2 (chart) shows the distribution of the terms “wicked” (רשע Strong 7563) and “enemy” (אֵיב Strong 341).

1 Earlier, I overlooked the hymnic nature of Psalm 29, and considered 33 as supporting both of the last two groups. But the concentration of words for trust in Psalm 33 closely couples it with Psalm 34, and its emphasis on trusting in God for deliverance is a fitting introduction to the laments of 34-41.

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Psalms 3-14

This first cluster consists of laments grouped around a hymn of praise (Figure 3, chart). The central hymn (Psalm 8) is introduced at the end of Psalm 7, and concluded at the start of Psalm 9, with a declaration of David's intent to praise the Lord. This hymn praises God for exalting humble man, and recalls the victory of youthful David over Goliath. The laments on either side share numerous common features, including the cry to the Lord to arise. Psalm 9-10, taken as a whole is the first of four acrostics in Book 1, and focuses on the paradox of why a powerful God allows wickedness and suffering.

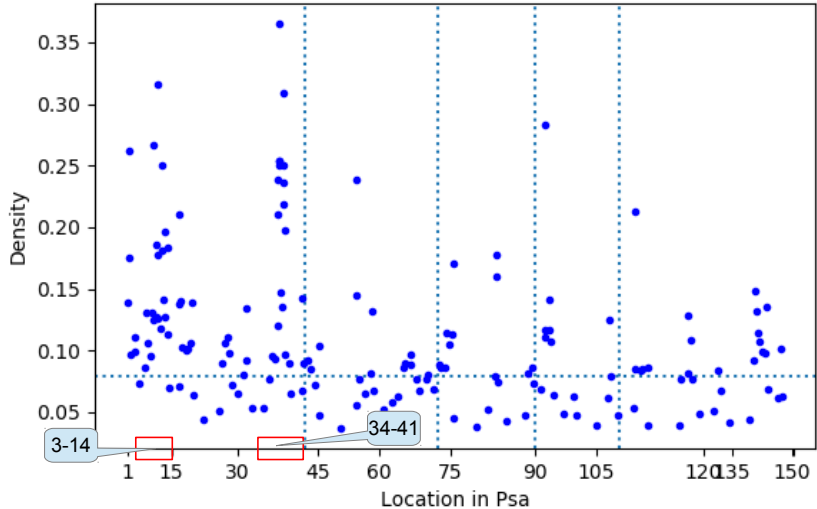


Figure 2: רָשָׁע and אֵיב in Psalms.

Psalm 33

Psalm 33 (Figure 4, chart) is the last of four hymns in Book 1. Vv. 1-3 invite the righteous to praise the Lord. The basis for this praise in vv. 4-19 recalls the three previous hymns. Finally, vv. 20-22 offer the praise, with a cluster of words describing trust in God (extending back to v. 18) that anticipates a similar concentration in Psalm 34. Each of the other hymns comes at the center of one of the first three groups, so it is natural to see Psalm 33 as the introduction to 34-41, encouraging the sufferer to trust in God.

Psalms 34-41

The final group of Psalms brings us back to the theme of weakness that we saw in Psalms 3-14. In the first four Psalms, David speaks in the innocence of his youth, but in 38-41, after the affair with Bathsheba, he is acutely aware of his sin, and mentions it in each of the last four Psalms.

Each panel of this group has an inclusio relating our ethical behavior with our wellbeing (Table 1, chart). In the first panel, Psalms 34 and 37 are both acrostics, and the only two Psalms of the

Psalms 3-14: God Delivers the Weak

3-7: Laments

Distinctive theme: **sleep** (3:5; 4:4, 8; 5:3; 6:6)

Paired terms and themes:

- God's **temple** (היכל, Strong 1964), 5:7
- **God** brings suffering, Ps 6
- Wicked words (5:5, 9) and verbal remedies (5:3, 11)
- "Arise, O LORD" קום יהוה 3:7; 7:6

7:17 I will praise the LORD according to his righteousness: and will **sing praise to the name of the LORD most high.**

8: Hymn—Victory over Goliath

1 O LORD our Lord, **how excellent is thy name** in all the earth!...

4 **What is man, that thou art mindful of him? ...**

9 O LORD our Lord, **how excellent is thy name** in all the earth!

9-14: Laments

9:2 I will be glad and rejoice in thee:

I will **sing praise to thy name, O thou most High.**

Distinctive theme: the **poor** (עני, Strong 6041), 9:12, 13, 18; 10:2, 9, 12; 12:6; 14:6

Paired terms and themes:

- God's **temple**, 11:4
- **God** brings suffering, Ps 13
- Wicked words (12:2-5) and verbal remedies (12:6)
- "Arise, O LORD" קום יהוה 9:19; 10:12

Figure 3: Overview of Psalms 3-14

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eight that are not laments. Both promise life and prosperity to those who obey the Lord, while threatening the wicked with being cut off. In the second panel, both Psalms 38 and 41 depict David suffering sickness because of his sin. We will see this distinction between the innocent younger David and the penitent older David again in the second group of Royal Dwellingplace Psalms.

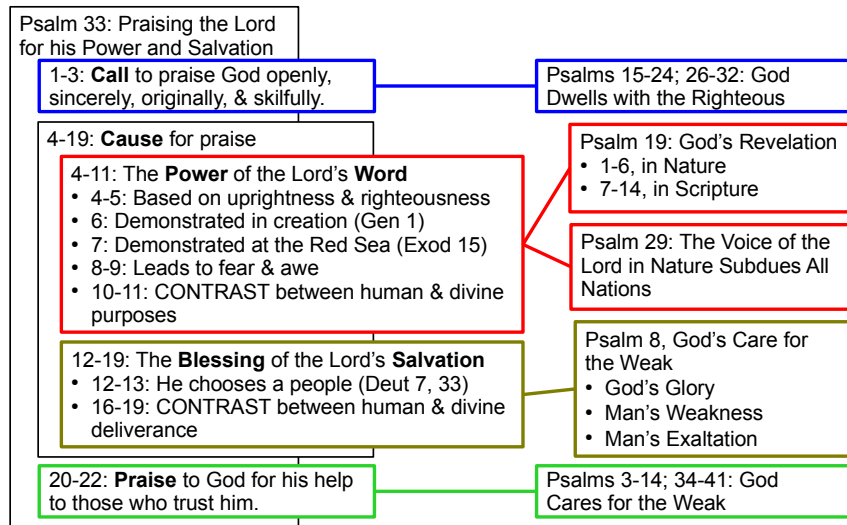


Figure 4: Structure of Psalm 33 (Revised)

The other two Psalms in each panel correspond chiasmally.

Psalms 35 and 40 both focus on David's role as king. The first contrasts his royal responsibility to bring God's judgment on covenant-breakers with his personal compassion on his enemies. The second contrasts two different phase of his reign—his virtuous youth and his humbled maturity.

In Psalms 36 and 39, David is preoccupied with the wicked. In the first, he reflects on their character and contrasts it with the attributes of God, while in the second, he realizes the frailty and transitoriness of life not only for himself as a result of his sin, but for all men.

	The Innocent Sufferer	The Guilty Sufferer
Ethics and Wellbeing	34 (Acrostic), Thanksgiving: Those who Depart from Evil and Seek Good will find Long Life	41, David's Sin brings Sickness
Contrasting Trials of the King	35, David the King vs. David the Individual	40, David's Virtuous Youth and Humbled Maturity
The Nature of Man	36, The Character of the Wicked	39, The Frailty of All Men
Ethics and Wellbeing	37 (Acrostic), Wisdom: Those who Trust and Obey will Inherit the Earth	38, David's Sin brings Sickness

Table 1: The Structure of Psalms 34-41

God's Royal Dwellingplace

The extremes of Book 1 emphasize our weakness before the wicked and our need to trust in God's deliverance. The next two clusters shift our focus from the needs of those being delivered to the power of the mighty deliverer in his royal dwellingplace. Recall the emphasis of Psalm 2 on Zion. God in heaven delivers David, and David as the anointed king, God's representative, must deliver his people.

Psalms 15-24

This group (Figure 5, chart) is a detailed chiasm. It begins and ends with the qualifications to dwell with God, as in Psalm 1, developed

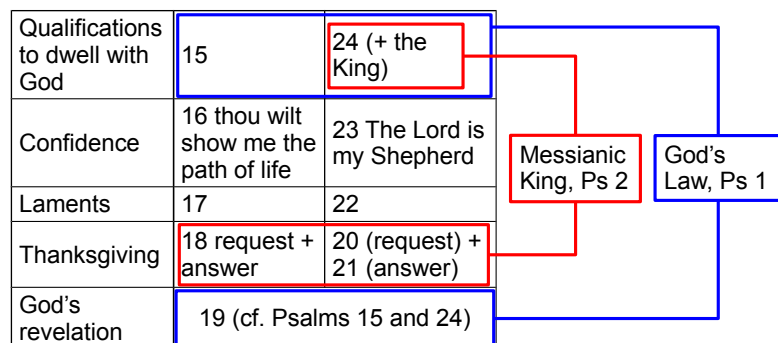


Figure 5: Overview of Psalms 15-24

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in the central hymn (19) praising God for his revelation. Only the end reveals one who satisfies these requirements, the anointed king of Psalm 2. Each panel also contains laments against the wicked (including the Messianic Psalm 22), confidence in the Lord's care, and two thanksgiving compositions (18, and 20-21) reporting the king's request for God's help and the Lord's answer.

Psalms 26-32

The second group of Royal Dwellingplace Psalms, like the second group of Psalms about God's deliverance of the weak, contrasts David's integrity in the first half with his sin in the second half. The center of this group is yet another hymn, exhorting the heavenly council to praise the Lord, who cannot be contained in an earthly temple, but who shows his power over all nations in the thunderstorm.

29, Kingship Psalm
The LORD is enthroned over all

Psalms 26-28, Lament Righteous David seeks God's physical house Congregation is a passive audience	Psalms 30-32, Lament & Thanks Penitent David seeks God himself as a refuge He exhorts congregation to praise
David's integrity	David's sin
Opposition from the wicked	Opposition from God
Deliverance by punishing the wicked	Deliverance by restoration to fellowship
Physical house	God as the house of refuge (31:2, 20; 32:7)
David praises God before the people, 26:7, 12; 27:6; & prays for them, 28:9. Only one exhortation, singular (27:14)	David calls on the congregation (plural) to worship and praise (30:4; 31:23, 24; 32:11)
No type labels in the headings	Type labels: מזמור, שיר, משכיל.

Figure 6: Overview of Psalms 26-32

Repeated Themes

So the main body of Book 1 consists of the four major groups of Psalms—the outer two emphasizing God's deliverance of the weak and suffering, the central two focusing on his dwellingplace. These groups repeat several common themes. To summarize them, let's identify the main characters that interact, and list the interactions among them (Figure 7, chart).

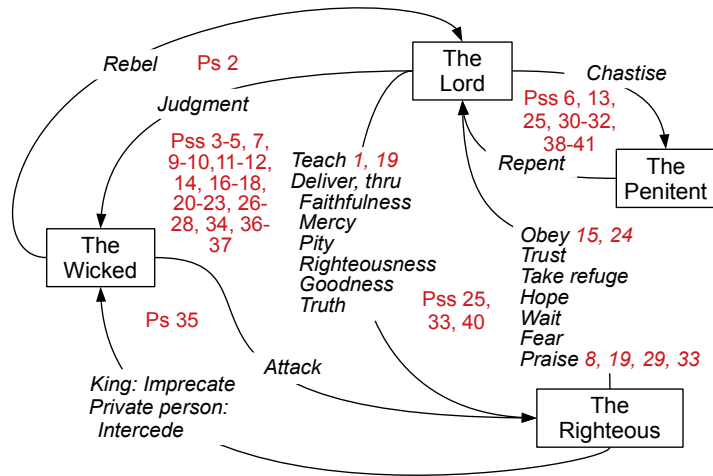


Figure 7: Actors and Interactions in Psalms 1-41

From the very first, we meet the Lord and two groups of people, the righteous (Psalm 1) and the wicked (Psalm 2).

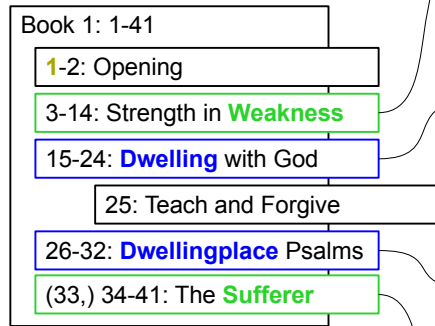
These form a network of interactions, which we can illustrate with a few example Psalms:

- God has revealed his will to his creatures (1, 19)
- The wicked rebel against God's law, and he judges them (2).
- The wicked attack the righteous, who respond in two ways (Psalm 35). The anointed king, as God's representative, prays for God's judgment, while as a private person he prays for them.
- The Lord delivers the righteous from the attacks of the wicked (the main body of laments and thanksgiving psalms), based on his attributes.

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- The righteous trust in the Lord (clusters of these words appear in 25, 33, 34, and 40), obey him (15, 24), and praise him (the four hymns in 8, 19, 29, and 33).
- The line between the righteous and the wicked is blurred when the righteous sin, and the Lord chastises them (notably the blocs of 30-32 and 38-41). But when they repent, they once again enjoy his favor.

We find this last point throughout Book 1, growing more and more prominent as we proceed. Figure 8 (chart) summarizes references to David's sin in the large blocks; we'll talk about Psalm 25 shortly. By distributing these references, the editor emphasizes to us that in spite of God's abundant



Psa 6:1 O LORD, rebuke me not in **thine anger**, neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure.
 Psa 13:1 How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?
 Psa 19:12-13, Who can understand his errors? **cleanse thou me from secret faults**. 13 Keep back thy servant also from **presumptuous sins**;
 30:5,6, For **his anger** endureth but a moment; ... 6 And in my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved.
 31:10 my strength faileth because of **mine iniquity**, and my bones are consumed.
 32:5 I acknowledged **my sin** unto thee, and **mine iniquity** have I not hid. I said, I will confess **my transgressions** unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.
 38:3-5 **my sin ... mine iniquities ... my foolishness**
 39:8 Deliver me from all **my transgressions**
 40:12 **mine iniquities** have taken hold upon me
 41:4 I **have sinned against thee**

Figure 8: The Penitent Saint in Psalms 1-41

revelation to us (Psalms 1, 19) and his holy demands (Psalms 2, 15, 24, and others), he condescends to the weakness of his people. As David learned from the wise woman of Tekoa,

2Sa 14:14 For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again; neither doth God ~~respect any person~~ take away life: yet doth he devise means, that his banished be not expelled from him.

Psalm 25

Coming at the very center of the chiasm, this Psalm (Figure 9, chart) summarizes most of the major themes of Book 1.

It opens and closes like a lament, with very similar verses describing David's trust in the Lord in conflict with the wicked (Table 2, chart). These paragraphs attest these features:

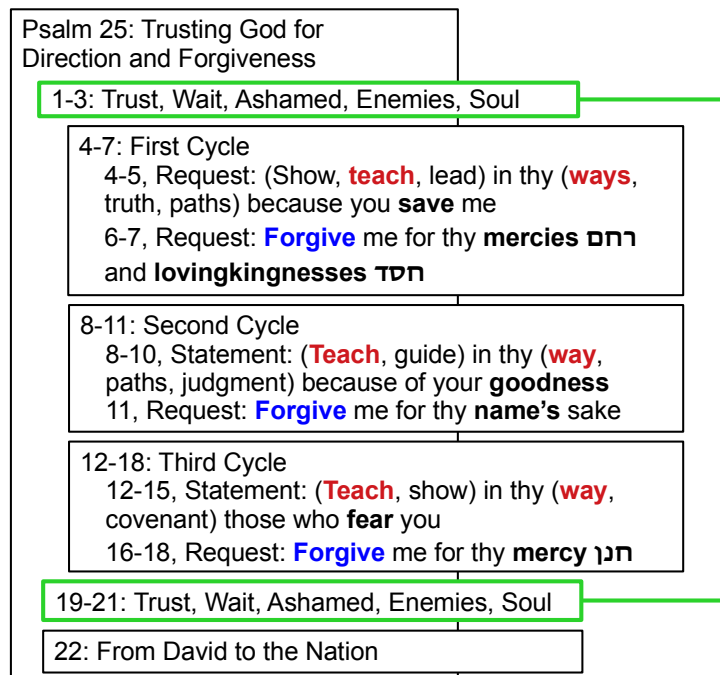


Figure 9: Structure of Psalm 25

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- Rebellion of the wicked against God’s anointed
- Deliverance based on God’s attributes.
- Trust in the Lord

The central section is organized into three cycles (Table 3, chart). Each begins with a desire for the Lord’s instruction and a description of the required attitude, and ends with an appeal to God’s attributes to deliver, not from the enemy, but from sin. He

starts with “the sins of my youth,” the “secret faults” of 19:12, such as we noticed in his deceitful behavior in Psalm 34, then moves on to his “great iniquity,” the “presumptuous sin” of 19:13, with Bathsheba and Uriah, and finally to “all my sins.” This section attests these features:

- God’s revelation and intent to obey
- Trust in the Lord
- Sin and repentance

Psalm 25 is the fourth acrostic in Book 1. The others are 9-10 (describing the depredations of the wicked), 34, and 37 (both describing God’s blessing on the righteous). The acrostic nature of Psalm 25 draws our attention to the remarkable paradox that if God’s people sin, they can be restored to him when they repent and trust in him.

The remarkable thing about Psalm 25 is that it is missing one thing that all four major blocks contain. Psalms 8, 19, 29, and 33 are all hymns of praise to God. We’ve seen Psalms of thanksgiving in Book 1 (18, 21, 30, 32, 34), and many laments promise praise (5:11; 7:17; 9:1-2; 13:5-6; 14:7; 22:22-31; 26:12; 35:18, 27-28), but not Psalm 25.

Perhaps the editor wants us to recognize that the book isn’t finished, and won’t be until we reach the great Hallelujas of Books 4 and 5.

1 Unto thee, O LORD, do I lift up my **soul**. 2 O my God, **I trust** בטה (Strong 982) **in thee**:
let me not be ashamed, let not mine **enemies** triumph over me.
 3 Yea, let none that **wait** קוה (Strong 6960) **on thee** be **ashamed**:
 let them be **ashamed** which **transgress** [betray me] בגד without cause.

19 Consider mine **enemies**; for they are many; and they hate me with **cruel hatred**.
 20 O keep my **soul**, and deliver me:
let me not be ashamed; **for I put my trust** חסה (Strong 2620) **in thee**.
 21 Let integrity and uprightness preserve me; for I **wait** קוה (Strong 6960) **on thee**.

Table 2: Opening and Closing of Psalm 25

	4-7	8-11	12-18
Human Response to Divine Revelation	4 Shew me thy ways ... teach me thy paths. 5 Lead me in thy truth ... on thee do I wait קוה all the day	8 therefore will he teach sinners in the way. 9 The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way	12 What man is he that feareth the Lord ? Him shall he teach in the way ... 14 The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him
Divine Motive to forgive Human Sin	6 thy loving-kindnesses ... thy mercy חסד 7 Remember not the sins of my youth	8 Good and upright is the Lord 11 For thy name's sake , O Lord, pardon mine iniquity , for it is great	16 have mercy חנן upon me ... 18 ... forgive all my sins

Table 3: The Three Panels of 25:4-18