

Introduction to Book 4 (Psalms 90-106)

The 150 psalms are divided into five collections or *books* of psalms. The divisions between the first three books make sense based on authorship and content. In fact, there is evidence that each of the psalms in the first three books is arranged in a chiasmic structure (this is clear in Book 1, less so in Books 2 and 3). However, the division between Books 4 and 5 seems rather arbitrary. The division between Psalms 106 and 107 actually seems to break up the chiasm of Psalms 101-110. The fact that Books 4 and 5 were divided at all is strong evidence that the compiler wanted a five-fold division of the Psalms. The reason is most likely that he wanted it to correspond to the *Torah*, the first five books of what Christians call the Old Testament.

Characteristics of Book 4

The authorship of the psalms in Book 4 is largely unknown. The first, Psalm 90, is attributed to Moses, and Psalms 101 and 103 are ascribed to David. The remaining psalms are not connected with a single author and most were likely used in corporate worship. One of the terms for these unattributed psalms is “orphan” psalms.

It is fitting that Book 4 begins with a psalm of Moses, the only one attributed to him in the entire Psalter. Psalm 89 laments the fact that the Davidic line of kings has apparently been cut off by the exile. In response, Book 4 begins with a psalm of Moses. In effect, the compiler is reminding the people of Israel that God’s relationship with them pre-dates David by a very long time. God’s people had a relationship with him long before David, and they will continue to do so even though it seems like David’s line is cut off. In fact, Moses declares:

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.
Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world
from everlasting to everlasting you are God. (Psalm 90:1,2)*

In other words, before time and space began, God has always been “our dwelling place”. Even though the temple has been destroyed by the Babylonians, God himself has always been the true dwelling place of his people. Moses pre-dated the Temple and this was his understanding of God’s presence. And so even though they are in exile, God’s people can never be abandoned. God has always been with them and always will be with them. He was with them before Moses existed, and he will be with them after David and his descendants are long gone.

Following this declaration of God’s timeless reign in Psalm 90, the next ten psalms (91-100) form a series of psalms that could be summed up with the theme: The LORD reigns! One after another, the worshiper finds songs that express joy over the Lord’s righteous rule.

The remaining six psalms of Book 4 actually fit better in relationship to the first four psalms of Book 5 (107-110), so they will be dealt with in more detail in the *Introduction to Book 5*. However, the following serves as a brief outline of the remaining psalms of Book 4:

- 101** Royal (Davidic, for Solomon's coronation?)
- 102** Individual Lament (titled, "a prayer of an afflicted man")
- 103** Hymn on Love of God (Davidic)
- 104** Hymn on the Works of God
- 105** Historical – God's faithfulness
- 106** Historical – man's (Israel's) unfaithfulness

Matt Stafford
stafford.matt@occ.edu