

PSALMS

Volume 1

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INTRODUCTION

Does any literature in the world compare with the book of Psalms? The Greeks have Homer, the Romans Virgil, the Italians Dante, and the British Shakespeare. But nothing sings like the Psalms. As Ronald B. Allen has written, “Only a Philistine could fail to love the Psalms.”¹

No other body of poetry lyricizes the epic deeds of the living God, celebrating the past, signifying the future, interpreting the present, making God known. No other body of poetry both claims to be the word of God and has the Holy Spirit bear witness to that claim, a claim recognized by the people of God across space and through time. No other body of poetry has as its principle author God’s chosen king, whose line of descent traces back through Judah to Abraham, and further still to Shem, Noah, and Adam. Nor can any other poetic or literary tradition lay claim to the fact that King David, in writing of his own experience with God in the world, simultaneously wrote as a type of the one to come, Jesus, the world’s best and only hope (see further on interpretive culture in §5 of “Biblical and Theological Themes,” below). We love the Psalms because in them we encounter God, and as Scott Hafemann affirms, “knowing God is not a means to something else.”²

In addition to its biblical theological significance, in the words of Othmar Keel, the book of Psalms sings an “unsentimental power and

¹ Ronald B. Allen, *And I Will Praise Him: A Guide to Worship in the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 17. For a dated but still useful survey of scholarship, see Thorne Wittstruck, *The Book of Psalms: An Annotated Bibliography*, 2 vols., Books of the Bible 5 (New York: Garland, 1994).

² Scott J. Hafemann, “The Covenant Relationship,” in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 36.

beauty.”³ The splendor and truth of the Psalter leaves us speechless, until our hearts begin to swell with the song it sings, and we join the chorus of hallelujahs prompted by these pages.

The Psalms are true history, fulfilled prophecy, and enduring praise. The book of Psalms is a school of prayer, a fountain of truth, and a revelation of God himself. We will not master this book, but oh that it might master us, becoming the pulse to which our hearts beat, the soil in which our souls take root.

The Psalms speak the words of a loyal son recounting and responding to the promises of a loving Father.⁴ This statement makes many assumptions, as does the opening psalm.⁵ The opening psalm assumes the wider canonical context, both the story of the world told in Torah (Gen–Deut) and the narratives of how that story continued in the Former Prophets (Joshua–Kings).⁶ In this story everything starts with Adam, implicitly a king-priest son of God (Gen 1:26–28; 2:15; 5:1–3; cf. Luke 3:38), whose line of descent goes down to Noah (Gen 5:1–32), then from Noah’s son Shem to Abram (Gen 11:10–26), and from Abraham through Isaac to Jacob’s son Judah and on down to David (see Gen 49:8–12; Ruth 4:18–22).⁷

God told Abraham that kings would come from him (Gen 17:6), and the biblical authors expected one to arise from the line of Abraham through

³ Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 14.

⁴ The sonship is corporate/national: “Israel is my firstborn son” (Exod 4:22); and also individual, granted to the king, the nation’s covenant head: “My son are you” (Ps 2:7; cf. 2 Sam 7:14; Gen 5:1–3; and Luke 3:38).

⁵ See Elizabeth Robar’s discussion of the way language and grammar work, the Gestalt Effect (humans search for coherent wholes from the parts they experience), the Zeigarnik Effect (we do not rest until we understand the coherent whole), and how these relate to consciousness, memory, and attention in *The Verb and the Paragraph in Biblical Hebrew: A Cognitive-Linguistic Approach*, SSSL 78 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1–18.

⁶ For my own account, see James M. Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

⁷ For discussion of Adam as a king-priest son of God, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 181–217. See also Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises*, ABRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 279. Perhaps the best expositions of the ideas in this paragraph can be found in T. Desmond Alexander, “Genealogies, Seed, and the Compositional Unity of Genesis,” *TynBul* 44 (1993): 255–70; Alexander, “Further Observations on the Term ‘Seed’ in Genesis,” *TynBul* 48 (1997): 363–67; and Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

Judah to fulfill Gen 3:15 by crushing the head of the serpent and his seed (Num 23:21, 24; 24:7, 9, 17–19).⁸ This king was to be a man of Torah, making his own copy in his own hand that he would diligently study (Deut 17:14–20).⁹

Situated in this wider canonical context, the first two psalms introduce the whole collection and set the framework for it.¹⁰ The first psalm describes the blessing of the beloved son (the sonship made explicit in 2:7), which blessing he has by obeying the Father and abiding in his words. The second psalm develops the character of the wicked (who were introduced in 1:1), explaining that they are rebels plotting insurrection (2:1–3). In response, the Father asserts that he has installed his begotten son as king, and the wicked are warned that they should surrender themselves to his mercy (2:4–12). The wording of the Ps 2:7–9 decree clearly identifies the future king with the one promised to David in 2 Sam 7:12–14.

So begins the saga in song form, and throughout the blessing of God's promises to the king and his people inform their trust, their hope, and their prayer in the face of rebel persecution and ongoing enmity (see Gen 3:15). The prayers are based on the promises, to which the praises likewise respond, because there is none like Yahweh.

I. An Overview of the Psalter

This commentary seeks to interpret the book of Psalms as a *book*, that is, as a purposefully ordered collection of poems that build on and interpret one another.¹¹ The first two psalms introduce the whole collection, which

⁸ James M. Hamilton, "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham," *TynBul* 58 (2007): 253–73.

⁹ Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms*, AcBib 17 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).

¹⁰ Robert L. Cole, *Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter*, HBM 37 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013).

¹¹ David C. Mitchell suggests, "The writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls would probably have regarded the canonical Psalter as a purposefully shaped collection. This is evident not so much from their endorsing the MT-type sequence, although they probably did, but also, conversely, from their practice of producing alternative purposefully shaped collections," *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms*, JSOTSup 252 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 21. Mitchell also discusses "evidence that the rabbis regarded the Psalter's sequence of lyrics as purposefully arranged" (29).

is divided into five books as follows:¹²

Table 1. The five books of the Psalter.

Book 1	Book 2	Book 3	Book 4	Book 5
Pss 1–41	Pss 42–72	Pss 73–89	Pss 90–106	Pss 107–150

The movement of thought within the Psalms has tantalized interpreters across the ages. Commenting on Augustine of Hippo’s *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, David Gundersen writes,

Before his reflections on Psalm 150, Augustine comments briefly on the structure of the Psalter. He admits that “the arrangement of the Psalms ... seems to me to contain the secret of a mighty mystery” which “hath not yet been revealed unto me.” Because his generation has “not as yet pierced with the eye of our mind the depth of their entire arrangement,” he does not want to be “over-bold.” He likewise admits that “when I endeavoured to make out the principle of this [five-book] division, I was not able.”¹³

In the introduction to his treatise *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, the fourth-century Cappodocian church father Gregory of Nyssa [ca. 335–394] writes,

I have thought it necessary to begin, not by examining the inscriptions, but by setting forth first an approach to the systematic observation of the concepts concerning the Psalter in its totality, through which approach the subject matter [λόγος] of the inscriptions will subsequently be made clear to us.

First, one must understand the aim [σκοπός] to which this writing looks. Next, one must pay attention to the progressive arrangements of the concepts in the book under discussion.

¹² Gregory of Nyssa recognized that “the entire treatise of the Psalms has been separated into five sections, and there is a systematic arrangement and division in these sections,” *Gregory of Nyssa’s Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, OECs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 95, ch. 5, §37. For further discussion of patristic comments on the order of the Psalms, see Mitchell, *Message of the Psalter*, 33–36.

¹³ David Alexander Gundersen, “Davidic Hope in Book IV of the Psalter (Psalms 90–106)” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 11; citing Augustine of Hippo, “Expositions on the Book of Psalms,” *NPNF* 1/8:681–82.

These are indicated both by the order [τάξις] of the psalms, which has been well arranged in relation to knowledge of the aim, and by the sections of the whole book, which are defined by certain distinctive conclusions. The entire prophecy in the Psalms has been divided into five parts.¹⁴

Ronald Heine comments on Gregory's words: "He means that methodologically one must first grasp the goal of the Psalter as a whole, then one must give attention to the arrangement of the materials in the individual books of the Psalter in relation to its overall goal."¹⁵ With the recent interest in the narratival interpretation of the book of Psalms, Gregory's ancient approach of reading every individual psalm in light of the whole Psalter is new again.

Gregory believed that the goal of the Psalter was blessedness. He writes, "The whole teaching which turns us away from evil and attracts us to virtue has been delivered to us through the psalms."¹⁶ Heine cites M. Simonetti on the point that "the theme of Gregory's treatise is 'the progressive ascent of man from the moment when he turns away from sin, until the attainment of the final beatitude,' and remarks that 'we could say that the whole of Gregory's later exegesis tends to develop the theme which we have found in his treatise *On the Titles of the Psalms*.'"¹⁷

Remarkably, here too Gregory's ancient Christian conclusions on the Psalter match those of modern scholarship. Gordon Wenham has advocated the "canonical" and "narratival" reading of the Psalter as a book that stems largely from Gerald Wilson's 1985 dissertation, and Wenham also claims that "the Psalter is a sacred text that is intended to be memorized," using the work of David Carr to show that the point of memorizing ancient texts was "enculturation."¹⁸ Wenham writes, "Memorization and

¹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions of the Psalms*, 83 Part 1, intro, §§2–3.

¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions of the Psalms*, 83 n. 3, see also Heine's remarks in the introduction, 12.

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions of the Psalms*, 87 ch. 2, §16.

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions of the Psalms*, 1. For examples of other pre-Enlightenment explorations of the order of the Psalms and the Psalter as a book, see Adam D. Hensley, *Covenant Relationships and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, LHBOTS 666 (New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 20–22.

¹⁸ Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBLDS 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985). For a recent discussion of the state of Psalms studies dealing with "editorial criticism's crisis of credibility," see Michael K. Snearly, *The Return of the King: Messianic Expectation in Book V of the Psalter*, LHBOTS 624 (New York: T&T Clark, 2016), 9–22. David M.

recital of these texts thus served to transmit the values of this culture more widely among the people at large and to ensure that future generations followed it.”¹⁹

Interpreting the psalms in relationship to one another requires close attention to the superscriptions of the psalms, the link words that connect them, and the thematic relationships between them. Along with superscriptions, link words, and themes, the literary structures and message of both individual psalms and the way groups of psalms are indicated, by common superscription, for instance, are significant for determining the contours of the movements of thought within the Psalter. Establishing the beginning and end and the turning points in flow of thought requires attention to all relevant information. Michael Snearly writes that

scholars emphasize a variety of textual features in organizing [Book V]. No one feature is consistently ascendant—sometimes superscriptions are dominant, other times it is the form of the psalms, and then there are lexical and thematic parallels. Often, the same author will employ different criteria for different sections. Thus, this approach is labeled “variegated”—that is, variegated in the sense that no one criterion supersedes the others and all the criteria work together to yield the book’s division.²⁰

This is admittedly very difficult, and the material is open to more than one interpretation.²¹ Here I offer a brief overview based largely on the information in the superscriptions (more on the superscriptions in “The Superscriptions of the Psalms,” below), and in the commentary on each psalm to follow I consider its literary structure and verbal and thematic links with neighboring psalms. An overview of literary structures across the Psalter’s five books can be found below in “The Literary Structure and Meaning of the Psalter.”

Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 41–43. See also Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed: Praying and Praising with the Psalms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

²⁰ Snearly, *Return of the King*, 62–63. Snearly adopts this approach for his own study, 78.

²¹ Cf., e.g., the similar approaches but different emphases in O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015); and James Hely Hutchinson, “The Psalter as a Book,” in *Stirred by a Noble Theme: The Book of Psalms in the Life of the Church*, ed. Andrew G. Shead (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), 23–45.

Most of the psalms, 116 of the 150, carry a superscription (see below, “The Superscriptions of the Psalms”), and 13 of the 116 superscriptions contain references to historical situations. Twelve of these 13 are in Books 1 and 2, none are in Books 3 and 4, and the thirteenth is in Book 5 (Ps 142).

Along with the historical information in the superscriptions of Books 1 and 2, most of the psalms in Books 1 and 2 are Davidic, creating the impression that in the psalms of Books 1 and 2 David prays through his life, an impression strengthened by the words found at the end of the last psalm in Book 2, “The prayers of David the son of Jesse are completed” (Ps 72:20).²²

To reiterate because of the significance of this point, three pieces of evidence thus create the impression that Books 1 and 2 trace David’s life from God’s promise that he would be king (Ps 2) through his sufferings at the hands of Saul (Ps 52:ss²³ [MT 52:1]) and Absalom (Ps 3:ss [MT 3:1]):

1. The attribution of fifty-five of the seventy-two psalms of Books 1 and 2 to David;
2. The concentration of historical superscriptions that link up with biblical narratives of David’s life (again, twelve of the thirteen historical superscriptions are in Books 1 and 2, the thirteenth being in Book 5); and
3. The statement that David’s prayers are ended in Psalm 72:20.

Interestingly, in the books of Samuel, Saul persecuted David (1 Sam 16–31), then Absalom tried to usurp his father’s throne (2 Sam 15–18). These persecutions are reversed in the Psalms. After the poetic re-presentation of God’s promise to David in Ps 2, Absalom’s persecution is introduced in the superscription of Ps 3. Later in the Psalter, following the superscription about David’s sin with Bathsheba in Psalm 51, Saul’s persecution is introduced in Ps 52 (see the expositions of Pss 3 and 52 below). This arrangement suggests that the psalmist means for Saul and Absalom to

²² Unless otherwise noted, translations of biblical texts are my own.

²³ When I refer to superscriptions, which English translations do not number, I will use the abbreviation “ss” as here. Since the Masoretic Text (MT) numbers the superscriptions, the numbering of the verses in English and Hebrew does not always match. Where there are discrepancies, as in the reference above, I add the Hebrew verse reference after the English, prefacing the Hebrew verse reference with the abbreviation MT for Masoretic Text. See further “The Numbering of the Psalms and Their Verses,” below.

be interpreted as parallel figures.²⁴ Saul and Absalom are similar to one another in several significant ways: both are impressive and attractive in worldly terms; both set themselves against Yahweh and his anointed; both continue in unrepentant sin; both are rejected by Yahweh; and both die shameful deaths, testifying to the truth of the warning in Ps 2:10–12.

Psalm 1 presents the blessed man who meditates on God's word, and Ps 2 follows with God's promises regarding his anointed king. Psalm 3's superscription sets the scene for Book 1 of the Psalter, Pss 1–41, and these can be understood as the blessed king's prayers, based on God's promises, in response to rebellious attacks on God and his anointed.

Book 2 opens with a series of psalms of the sons of Korah (Pss 42–49) and a psalm of Asaph (Ps 50), followed by the reference to David's sin with Bathsheba in Ps 51. The sequence creates a noticeable alignment with the history known from the books of Samuel and Chronicles. We read of a "son of Korah" and "Asaph" in 1 Chr 6, in the listing of the "men David put in charge of the music in the LORD's temple after the ark came to rest there" (1 Chr 6:31, CSB). David brought the ark into Jerusalem in 2 Sam 6, received the promise from Yahweh in 2 Sam 7, began to conquer in every direction in 2 Sam 8–10, then sinned with Bathsheba in 2 Sam 11, bringing down God's judgment (2 Sam 12) through the sins of Amnon and Absalom (2 Sam 13–14) that led to Absalom's revolt (2 Sam 15–18).

The impressionistic narrative in Psalms seems to have David suffering in Book 1 until his establishment as king (cf. 1 Sam 16–2 Sam 5; Pss 3–41), then bringing the ark into Jerusalem at the beginning of Book 2 (Pss 42–50; 2 Sam 6), sinning with Bathsheba (Ps 51; 2 Sam 11), suffering the consequences (Pss 52–60; 2 Sam 12–20), and slowly recovering from them toward the end of Book 2 (Pss 61–72; cf. 2 Sam 21–24).

The majority of the psalms in Books 1 and 2 are psalms of David: fifty-five of the seventy-two. The last psalm in Book 2, Ps 72, bears the superscription "Of Solomon" and ends with the notice that "The Prayers of David ... are ended." These features of Ps 72 join with the dearth of psalms of David in Books 3 and 4—only one psalm of David in Book 3 (Ps 86) and only two in Book 4 (Pss 101 and 103)—to suggest that in Book 3 we move from the reign of David to that of Solomon and his descendants (cf. 1 Kgs 1–2, and on from there).

²⁴ See Roger T. Beckwith's discussion of "homiletical identification" in "The Early History of the Psalter," *TynBul* 46 (1995): 18–19.

Book 3 seems to begin from Solomon and work down through the kings descended from David to the exile from the land and the destruction of city and temple in Ps 89 (cf. 2 Kgs 25), noting various attacks on the temple along the way (Pss 74, 79; cf. 1 Kgs 14:25; 2 Chr 12:1–12). With the anointed king cast off and rejected (Ps 89:38), crown in the dust (89:39) and city walls breached (89:40), it looks as though God’s wrath has brought an end to the covenant with David (cf. 89:49–51).

At this point a brilliant and powerful theological statement is made by the final editor of the book. Twice in Israel’s time in the wilderness Yahweh told Moses that because Israel had broken the covenant, he would judge Israel by destroying the nation and beginning anew with Moses (Exod 32:10; Num 14:12). On both occasions Moses interceded with Yahweh, appealing to God’s concern for his own glory, and on both occasions Yahweh showed mercy to Israel, forgiving them (though there were consequences) and continuing in covenant with them. Now after Ps 89, the covenant with David seems to be in the same jeopardy posed to the covenant made at Sinai. Who better to intercede for Israel than Moses?

Book 4 thus begins with “A prayer of Moses, the man of God” (90:ss [MT 90:1]), and in the midst of his intercession Moses prays the very words in 90:13 that he prayed in Exod 32:12, “turn” (שוב), “relent” (נחם). O. Palmer Robertson observes, “Only in these two passages of Scripture [Exod 32 and Ps 90] and no others is Yahweh urged to ‘turn’ and ‘relent.’”²⁵ The result of the prayer of Moses in Ps 90 matches the result of his prayers in Exod 32 and Num 14. Psalm 91 celebrates the individual who dwells in the shelter of the Most High and experiences his deliverance. Satan quoted Ps 91 to Jesus (Matt 4:6; Luke 4:10–11), rightly discerning that Ps 91 speaks of the king from the line of David (see the exposition of Ps 91 below). Yahweh will enact his reign (Pss 93–100) through David’s son and Lord (110:1).

The Former Prophets (Joshua–Kings) narrate the nation’s persistence in sin that led to exile from the land. The Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve [Hosea–Malachi]) proclaimed that God would do a new exodus salvation for his people after the exile that would eclipse the exodus from Egypt (Jer 16:14–15; 23:7–8). The prophets set up a parallel between slavery in Egypt and exile to Babylon on the one hand, with the exodus from Egypt and the new and greater exodus God would do

²⁵ Robertson, *Flow of the Psalms*, 152. Cf. Jonah 3:9.

in the future on the other (see, e.g., Isa 11:16; 52:4; Hos 11:5). The whole Psalter reflects the same hope for a new exodus and return from exile, not least the end of Book 4 (Ps 106:47, “gather us from the nations”) and beginning of Book 5 (107:2–3, “those he redeemed ... from the lands he gathered them”).

Referencing the threat that Yahweh would scatter his people among the nations when he exiled them (e.g., Deut 4:27), the last psalm of Book 4 closes with the words, “Save us, O Yahweh our God, and gather us from the nations” (106:47). Book 5 then begins with a declaration that sounds like the longed for salvation has happened: “The redeemed of Yahweh must speak, those he redeemed from the hand of distress. Even from the lands he gathered them: from the east and from the west, from the north and from the sea” (107:2–3).

The plea that Yahweh would do the new exodus at the end of Ps 106 finds its answer in the celebration that he has done just that at the beginning of 107. Psalm 108 then reprises Pss 57 and 60, projecting the life of the historical David into the future, David typifying the one to come. Indeed, the wording of Ps 108 sounds like a new conquest. Psalm 109 prays an imprecation against enemies, focusing on one in particular, and then Ps 110 celebrates the enthronement of the future priest-king from David’s line at Yahweh’s right hand.

The conquest of the future king in Ps 110 issues in the “hallelujahs” of Pss 111–118, followed by the celebration of God’s law for the good of God’s people in God’s place in Ps 119. The Songs of Ascent (120–134, literally, songs of “the goings up”) appear to reference the “let him go up” that permitted the historical return to the land (2 Chr 36:23; Ezra 1:3). The exiles come streaming home to Zion, celebrating Yahweh’s lovingkindness (Ps 136), calling for the seed of the woman to bring final triumph against the seed of the serpent (Ps 137), hoping in the new king from the line of David (Pss 138–145), and at the end of all things, praising God (Pss 146–150).²⁶ As Adam Hensley has written,

The Psalter and its books are crafted around the hope of a coming “David” through whom YHWH would renew his people and

²⁶ Joachim Schaper, *Eschatology in the Greek Psalter*, WUNT 2/76 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), has argued that the Greek translation of the Psalter was messianic and eschatological. If I am correct, the Hebrew book the translators rendered into Greek was itself already thoroughly oriented toward messianic eschatology.

Zion (e.g., Pss 102–103) and lead them in the thanksgiving and praise of God (Ps 145 et al.). Announced as YHWH’s “anointed” and “son” in Ps 2, the king both conquers his enemies (Pss 2, 101, 110, 118; cf. 143:12) and suffers as he identifies with the people as YHWH’s servant (Pss 78, 86, 88–89, 102; cf. 18:1). This “David” is instrumental in YHWH’s fulfilment of his covenant promises to Abraham and exodus-like salvation of his people, announcing YHWH’s grace and favor as YHWH himself had done before Moses (Ps 103).²⁷

II. The Psalms in the Canon

Before we can interpret a text, we must establish the text to be interpreted. This section addresses both the text this commentary seeks to interpret and the implications of the canonical status of that text for the interpretive task. Here we address the canonical form of the text, the enumeration of its verses, the implications the canon has on the interpretive task, and the canonical worldview in which the Psalms make sense.²⁸

A. THE CANONICAL FORM OF THE TEXT

The inspired text is the canonized text. On this point I follow Peter Gentry, who writes,

What is authoritative as inspired Scripture is the canonical text. Factors defining a canonical text according to Nahum Sarna, are “a fixed arrangement of content” and “the tendency to produce a standardized text.”... The text of the OT in arrangement, content, and stability was fixed by the time of Ben Sira or more probably, at the end of the fifth century BC by Ezra and Nehemiah.²⁹

²⁷ Hensley, *Covenant Relationships*, 271.

²⁸ This section does not deal with the position of the Psalms in the arrangement of the Old Testament canon, but for my view on that question see James M. Hamilton, “Canonical Biblical Theology,” in *God’s Glory Revealed in Christ: Essays in Honor of Thomas R. Schreiner*, ed. Denny Burk, James M. Hamilton, and Brian Vickers (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2019), 59–73.

²⁹ Peter J. Gentry, “The Text of the Old Testament,” *JETS* 52 (2009): 19; see also Gentry, “The Septuagint and the Text of the Old Testament,” *BBR* 16 (2006): 193–218. See also Nahum M. Sarna, “The Order of the Books,” in *Studies in Jewish Bibliography: History and Literature in Honor of I. Edward Kiev* (ed. Ch. Berlin; New York: KTAV, 1971), 407–13, esp. 411 and 413, n. 15.

Gentry elaborated on his position in private communication with me:

I affirm that the texts in the canon of the Old Testament were inspired and authoritative from the beginning. Nonetheless, we have no access historically to the demarcation of the canon prior to the work of Ezra and Nehemiah who are responsible for the arrangement later described in *Baba Bathra* 14b. And since Ezra and Nehemiah formulated the rational literary arrangement that was firmly in place by the time of Judas Maccabeus and considered authoritative by Jesus Christ, this is the canonical form of the inspired text.³⁰

Having taken these positions, in this commentary I will not speculate on the form or content of individual psalms prior to the final canonical form we now possess, nor will I speculate on how individual psalms might have been grouped prior to the recognition that the Psalter belonged with the growing collection of canonical writings.³¹ I will comment on the canonical text and the groupings we find in it. Since the superscriptions comprise part of the canonical text, I receive and interpret them the same way I do the rest of the canonical text (see further “The Superscriptions of the Psalms,” below).

The object of interpretation in this commentary, then, is the canonical text of the book of Psalms witnessed to by the Masoretic Text (MT), which I mainly access through the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS). As David Mitchell notes, “The New Testament seems to regard the MT-type Psalter as definitive.”³²

³⁰ Peter J. Gentry, email message to author, May 15, 2018.

³¹ For discussion of the so-called Elohist Psalter, the fact that “אלהים [is] used almost exclusively within Pss 42–83,” see Terrance R. Wardlaw, *Elohim within the Psalms: Petitioning the Creator to Order Chaos in Oral-Derived Literature*, LHBOTS 602 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), quotation from p. 1. Surveying previous proposals, Wardlaw starts from the observation that “the use of the divine names seems to be integral to the canonical presentation and rhetoric of this unit” (6). He is sensitive to “the significance of the present canonical order” and interprets the text as it stands (13). Wardlaw demonstrates how “the Psalter was both composed and collected within the circles where Pentateuchal traditions were well known and in some sense determinative of religious life and institutions” (27), which puts him in position to argue that whereas Yahweh is God’s covenant name, when the psalmists refer to him as אלהים (God) they evoke Gen 1:1–2:3, God as Creator, and Exod 20:1 (with 21:6; 22:7–8 [ET 6–7]), God as “ethical re-creator or judge” (31–33).

³² Mitchell, *Message of the Psalter*, 26.

Some contend that evidence from the Qumran scrolls indicates that the Psalter had not achieved its canonical, fixed arrangement by the time the covenanters went to Qumran. The debate is complex, but the evidence indicates that the variant orders at Qumran themselves presuppose the already established MT order of the 150 psalms as we now have them. The variant order at Qumran can be compared to the way a church today might print selections of Scripture on a weekly handout for use in worship. Such a handout is not intended to replace the Bible but merely to facilitate worship. Along these lines, having surveyed the debate, Hensley writes,

The relationship of Qumran MSS to the canonical Psalter as Wilson and Flint interpret it remains highly speculative, and others more convincingly explain them as liturgically inspired arrangements that presuppose an existing MT Psalter. Since there is little to commend a wider provenance for 11QPs^a, the difference in its arrangement is best explained by the Qumran community's idiosyncratic liturgical needs.³³

There is evidence within the Old Testament itself that the book of Psalms achieved recognition as the word of God very early. Will Kynes writes regarding Job's quotation of Ps 107,

The authoritative status of the psalm, the verbatim citation of Ps 107:40 (Job 12:21, 24), the nearly exact repetition of Ps 107:42 (Job 5:16; 22:19), and the widespread allusions to the psalm all seem to suggest that the author of Job had the text of Psalm 107 before him. ... By examining cognitive theories of memory, Cynthia Edenburg has argued that, because of the "complex cognitive process" of making and identifying allusions, certain forms of involved intertextuality would be inaccessible to an oral audience, instead requiring texts fixed in writing that can be perused.³⁴

³³ Hensley, *Covenant Relationships*, 39. See Hensley's summary of the discussion (33–39), as well as his discussion of what the Greek translation of the Psalms contributes to the debate (39–41). See also Beckwith, "Early History of the Psalter."

³⁴ Will Kynes, *My Psalm Has Turned into Weeping: Job's Dialogue with the Psalms*, BZAW 437 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 95–95. Kynes here cites Cynthia Edenburg, "Intertextuality, Literary Competence and the Question of Readership: Some Preliminary Observations," *JOT* 35 (2010): 131–48. Kynes extends the kinds of statements he makes here to the other psalms Job quotes (140, see the footnote at the end of the exposition of Ps 39 below where

I regard the final, canonical form of the book of Psalms, the one received into the collection of Scriptures we now call the Old Testament, as breathed out by God (2 Tim 3:16).³⁵ I would thus attribute inspiration not only to the individual authors of each psalm but also to the editor(s)/anthologist(s) who put the book of Psalms into its canonical form.³⁶

B. THE NUMBERING OF THE PSALMS AND THEIR VERSES

The editor of the final form of the Psalter did not enumerate the verses of the psalms, though the enumeration of the individual psalms could indeed have gone back to him or further.³⁷ The individual psalmists often used internal structuring devices such as *inclusios* and chiasmic structures to mark the boundaries of a psalm, and we will see that the five books of the Psalter are punctuated by distinctive beginnings and conclusions.

In the Masoretic Text (MT) the superscriptions are always numbered as verse 1. The superscriptions have not been numbered in English translations. This results in a discrepancy between the Hebrew and English verse numbers. The superscriptions are part of the inspired text of Scripture and in my view should be numbered, not least to create consistency for

he is quoted on that point). Kynes also comments in his conclusion, “These allusions suggest these psalms were in written (though not necessarily complete) form when Job was composed and that the book itself was a written composition. Not only had the psalms likely reached a written form by this time, but they also seem to have taken on the status of ‘Scripture’ ” (188). See also the quotation from Zipora Talshir in the first paragraph of “The Canonical Shape of the Psalter,” below.

³⁵ See the magisterial work of Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

³⁶ I cannot agree with Anthony Gelston, who suggests, “The existence of occasional overlap between some individual psalms, and the virtual duplication of Pss. 14 and 53, indicate one negative conclusion that can be drawn. It is evident that there was no final process of editing the Psalter, by which such duplications might have been removed, and textual inconsistencies between parallel passages ironed out” (“Editorial Arrangement in Book IV of the Psalter,” in *Genesis, Isaiah and Psalms: A Festschrift to Honour Professor John Emerton for His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Katharine J. Dell, Graham Davies, and Yee Von Koh, VTSup 135 [Leiden: Brill, 2010], 165). I find it more plausible that such duplications and overlaps are intentional, along the lines of the way melodies and rhythms are reprised in modern musicals such as *Les Misérables* or *Hamilton*, and thus we should seek to understand what they signify and relish their beauty.

³⁷ Note Acts 13:33, “as also it has been written in the second psalm” (the textual variant that reads “the first Psalm” does not alter the point made here, which is that the enumeration of the psalms is ancient). For discussion of the variations in the enumeration of individual psalms, see Nancy deClaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 3–7.

those dealing with the original Hebrew and English translations. In my translation of the Psalms that accompanies this commentary, I have followed the numbering of the verses in Hebrew. In my comments, however, aware that most readers will access the Psalms primarily in English, I first list Scripture references according to their enumeration in English. Where there is a discrepancy, I follow the English enumeration with the Hebrew in parentheses, prefaced by “MT” for “Masoretic Text.” For instance, in the Hebrew text the superscription of Ps 3 carries the number 1. This makes the first verse in the body of the psalm verse 2. English translations do not follow the Hebrew numbering scheme, giving the superscription no number. As a result, what is verse 2 in Hebrew is verse 1 in English. In this commentary the verse will be noted as follows: Psalm 3:1 (MT 3:2).

There are also discrepancies between the enumeration of the Psalms in the Masoretic Text and their enumeration in the Greek translation. Karen Jobes and Moisés Silva summarize the problem succinctly:

The Septuagint, followed by the Vulgate and Roman Catholic Bibles, treats Psalms 9 and 10 as a single psalm, while Psalm 147 is divided into two psalms: 146 and 147. This means that the chapter numbering is off by one from Psalm 10 to 147, with Psalms 1–8 and 148–50 being the same in both traditions.³⁸

Jobes and Silva do not note that in the Greek translation Pss 114 and 115 are also combined in LXX Ps 113, and Ps 116 has been split into LXX Pss 114 and 115.³⁹ When I reference the Greek translation where the Psalm is enumerated differently, I will preface it (as already in this paragraph) with the abbreviation “LXX,” for instance, LXX Ps 11.

C. THE CANONICAL TEXT AND THE INTERPRETIVE TASK

Interpreting the Psalter *as a book found in the canon* sets us on a different course than the one charted by Hermann Gunkel, who wrote,

It is not sufficient to deal only with the biblical book of Psalms, ... rather, we are convinced from the outset that our presentation must include also those songs which do not belong to the Psalter, whether these are found in the Bible or, indeed, outside

³⁸ Karen Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 78–79.

³⁹ Rightly, Mitchell, *Message of the Psalter*, 16–17.

of Israel, insofar as they show any real inner relationship with the Psalms.⁴⁰

Against Gunkel, my concern here is with the biblical book of Psalms.⁴¹ The primary context in which an individual psalm must be interpreted is the canonical Psalter in which we find it, and then the broader backdrop is that of the Old Testament canon, which was recognized as an authoritative collection very early. I am consciously choosing not to investigate the history of religion, as Gunkel did, but rather to engage in biblical theology.⁴²

James Muilenburg writes,

Gunkel recognized that the earliest psalms were all cultic in character, but he believed that many of them were later liberated from their cultic setting into spiritual songs and prayers. His student, Sigmund Mowinckel, took issue with him there. Mowinckel was convinced that all the psalms were cultic, and in six important monographs ... he sought not only to define their cultic provenience and *Sitz im Leben*, their cultic terminology and imagery, but also the occasions of celebration and festival, of mourning and lamentation, and their relation to other contexts in the life of ancient Israel.⁴³

Like Gunkel's, Mowinckel's project involves no small amount of speculation. Since we lack detailed reports that tell us how the individual psalms were used in ancient Israel, interpreting the Psalter as a book in the context of the canonical collection of books is a far safer procedure.

Whereas Gunkel's and Mowinckel's interests were in the history of religion, genre classification, and the life setting in which the psalms were used, my interest is in what the canonical form of the text was intended

⁴⁰ Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, trans. Thomas M. Horner, Facet Books 19 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 1.

⁴¹ For an overview of the ways scholars have approached study of the Psalter as a book, see Michael K. Snearly's discussion of "Best Practices in Editorial Criticism," in *Return of the King*, 23–38, esp. the helpful table 3.1 on 37.

⁴² For the difference between the history of religion and biblical theology, see Robert Morgan, ed., *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter*, SBT 2/25 (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1973).

⁴³ James Muilenburg, "Introduction," in Gunkel, *Psalms*, viii.

to communicate.⁴⁴ Gunkel and Mowinckel took on a historical task. I take on a textual one. So much of Gunkel's program is based on assumptions he makes, which then become assertions. For instance, he writes,

Very frequently the Hebrew Hymn will begin: "Give praise," "Sing" (Exod. 15:21), "Give thanks" (Ps. 105:1, etc.). These phrases were originally the precentor's address to the choir. Then the hymn proceeds as the precentor invokes God's name ("Praise Yahweh" or "Sing to Yahweh") and at the same time addresses the singers, who are variously called "you righteous ones" (Ps. 33:1), "Daughter of Zion" (Zeph 3:14).⁴⁵

One of the problems with these assertions is that all we have is what the text tells us, and the text neither explicitly names a "precentor" (see "The Superscriptions of the Psalms" below, esp. the discussion of "to the Choirmaster") nor indicates that a choir is being directed. No stage-directions come with the words of the Psalms, making the reconstruction of the "life setting" in which they were employed necessarily speculative. Terrance Wardlaw puts it well: "The place of privilege should be given to the text before us rather than to its hypothetical antecedent forms."⁴⁶ Once again: my purpose is to interpret the canonical text.

D. THE PSALMS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

A full discussion of the Old Testament canon, dealing with contents, authorship, dating, and arrangement, is obviously beyond the scope of this commentary.⁴⁷ Because my views on these questions will be reflected both here in the introduction and throughout the commentary, and because more than one reader of prepublication versions of this project has flagged the issue, I want to offer some rationale for my position. In

⁴⁴ See Will Kynes, *An Obituary for "Wisdom Literature": The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁴⁵ Gunkel, *Psalms*, 11.

⁴⁶ Wardlaw, *Elohim within the Psalms*, 13.

⁴⁷ For my attempt to explain and defend the view that the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments are inspired by God and therefore inerrant, see James M. Hamilton, "Still Sola Scriptura: An Evangelical View of Scripture," in *The Sacred Text: Excavating the Texts, Exploring the Interpretations, and Engaging the Theologies of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. Michael Bird and Michael W. Pahl, Gorgias Précis Portfolios (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010), 215–40. As noted above, my views on the arrangement of the Old Testament canon can be found in "Canonical Biblical Theology."

the same way that choosing to do one thing often entails choosing not to do another, being open to one explanation necessitates being skeptical of another. In much post-enlightenment biblical scholarship one finds an openness and generosity toward scholarly theories, especially those regarded as established, and this sometimes comes with a skepticism toward the primary source data. So, for instance, in much biblical scholarship there is a high degree of skepticism toward the idea that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, and this comes with an open-minded and charitable attitude toward a variety of theories as to how the Torah—the first five books of the Old Testament—came into existence. The primary sources, meanwhile, make assertions like the following (all texts here ESV):

- “Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD” (Exod 24:4).
- “Moses wrote down their starting places ...” (Num 33:2).
- “Moses wrote this law ...” (Deut 31:9).
- “Moses wrote this song ...” (Deut 31:22).
- “When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites ... “Take this Book of the Law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant ...” (Deut 31:24–26).
- “as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses” (Josh 8:31).
- “a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written” (Josh 8:32).
- “the law that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you” (Josh 22:5).
- “Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses” (Josh 23:6).
- “... as it is written in the Law of Moses ...” (1 Kings 2:3).
- “him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote” (John 1:45).
- “For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me” (John 5:46).

Many more biblical texts like these could be cited, statements that refer to “the Law of Moses” or refer to the law that “Moses wrote.” In my own thinking, when it comes to weighing out the balance of openness and generosity on the one hand, and skepticism on the other, my inclination is to be open and generous to statements in the primary sources and skeptical of scholarly theories that contradict them. And I not only weigh

out the balance this way in theory but incorporate it into my practice, which will be reflected in this commentary by the frequent capitalization of the term Torah. The term Torah is an English transliteration of the Hebrew term typically translated law. When I capitalize it, it is because I am inclined to think that the referent is the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah of Moses. I think that Moses wrote the Torah, and that would make the Torah of Moses available to David and the other Psalmists, who, it seems to me, regard the Torah as a most foundational and shaping document for all of life.

The privileging of the primary sources also leads me to the conclusion that within the Old Testament we see a “canonical consciousness” developing. The texts themselves indicate that the believing remnant recognized certain books as coming from God, having divine authority. The Psalter was received into that collection at an early stage.

The fact that the Psalter was included in the collection of books we now recognize as the Old Testament canon tells us several things.⁴⁸ First, it tells us that the people of God recognized the book to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. That in turn tells us that they regarded the book as holy, belonging with the other books God had given to them. Further, and perhaps most significantly, this means that the people of God understood the Psalter to comport with their own worldview, to advocate their perspective, to see the world the way they saw it (see further “Biblical and Theological Themes,” below). Commenting on the way the psalmists “tapped their [pagan] predecessors for verbal formulas, imagery, elements of mythology, and even entire sequences of lines of poetry,” Robert Alter rightly asserts: “The Hebrew poems were manifestly framed for Israelite purposes that were in many regards distinctive and at best no more than loosely parallel to the polytheistic texts that served as poetic precedents.”⁴⁹

Biblical theology is the attempt to understand and embrace the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors, and the importance of

⁴⁸ That the Psalms were accepted into the canon is not disputed. For recent discussion and an accessible presentation, see Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁴⁹ Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2007), xiv, xv. For a catalogue of possible points of contact, see Roger O’Callaghan, “Echoes of Canaanite Literature in the Psalms,” *VT* 4 (1954): 164–76.

understanding the worldview of the biblical authors cannot be overstated.⁵⁰ There may have been Israelites who were idolaters, who had embraced foreign worldviews, but the biblical authors understood themselves to be faithful to Yahweh, God of Israel. The self-understanding of the biblical authors receives validation from the believing old covenant remnant that likewise rejected idolatry and preserved and perpetuated the writings that comprise the Old Testament canon.

What goes into a worldview? To summarize briefly, a worldview consists of the story through which people interpret the world (metanarrative), the truths derived from the story (doctrine), the behaviors promoted and discouraged by the story (ethics), the symbols that summarize and interpret the story (imagery, typology, etc.), and the worship the story intends to promote (liturgy).⁵¹

As the worship prompted by the story is incomprehensible apart from the story, so the Psalms are unintelligible apart from the rest of the Old Testament. The psalmists understood themselves to be celebrating the God revealed in the Old Testament. For the psalmists, God's character, which he stated plainly on his own behalf in Exod 34:6-7, determines everything. Out of God's character, his goodness, steadfast love, and righteousness, flows the very good world he made. God's character means evil will not prevail in the world. God will defeat sin and death and the serpent and his seed, and he will make the world his own holy dwelling place, a clean place of life, where he will reign over those who fear and love him.

On the basis of these considerations about worldview, unless we have explicit statements to the contrary, we should assume that the truths and doctrines of the Psalter will be the truths of the Law (Torah) and the Prophets. So, for instance, we should assume that what the Psalms tell us about Yahweh will correspond to what Genesis tells us about Yahweh. Similarly, the attitudes and actions promoted in the ethical statements of the Psalter will comport with the ethical statements made in the Ten Commandments, elaborated upon throughout Exodus through Deuteronomy. As with doctrine and ethics, we should assume that the imagery and typology of the Psalter will be rooted in earlier Scripture.

⁵⁰ James M. Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

⁵¹ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

The Hebrew title for the book of Psalms is “Praises” (תהלים). These praises respond to Yahweh, whose character and mighty works of creation and redemption are detailed in the rest of the Old Testament. The praises should be read, then, in relationship to the rest of the Old Testament.

Keel has written, “Faced with words and ideas, the individual hearer conceives their meaning in terms supplied primarily by his own preunderstanding.”⁵² And Wenham observes,

The terseness of poetry means that there are many gaps, which thereby force the reader to puzzle over the connection between one line and the next ... the absence of many details within the psalms gives them a general validity that allows their sentiments to be appropriated by readers in a variety of circumstances. ... The absence of precision opens up a psalm to a broad range of situations and invites readers to make its sentiments their own.⁵³

So far as possible, my aim has been to bring my preunderstanding into line with what I read in the Bible, to fill in the gaps with information from the Psalms and the rest of the Scriptures. In the same way that the lyrics of Don McLean’s 1971 song “American Pie” evoke a backstory that people in our culture recognize, the lyrics of the Psalms evoke a backstory. That backstory is not spelled out in every detail, but it is no less there. The strategy that we instinctively use when we think about McLean’s lyrics, or any other poetry, is the same strategy that we must use when interpreting the Psalms.

I want to understand what the authors of these texts intended to communicate.⁵⁴ My goal is for the worldview of the biblical authors to be my worldview, and my intent is to interpret the Psalms from that perspective. As Elizabeth Robar has written,

The discourse unit ... has as its purpose to help another person develop her own corresponding mental representation. ... To

⁵² Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 8.

⁵³ Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 62.

⁵⁴ Note Mitchell’s comment: “Calvin, aware of the abuses of mystical interpretation, regards authorial intention and historical context as essential to correct interpretation,” Mitchell, *Message of the Psalter*, 40.

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL THEMES

Though uttered in an entirely different context, the adage holds true for the Psalms: “Songs make history, and history makes songs.”¹ The Psalms were forged in the history of God’s people. God’s mighty acts made his people sing, and those songs informed hearts, created expectations, and provided interpretive frameworks.

In his introduction to the literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, C. S. Lewis described “the medieval synthesis” as “the whole organization of their theology, science, and history into a single, complex, harmonious mental Model of the Universe.” He then states his intention to argue “not only that this Model of the Universe is a supreme medieval work of art but that it is in a sense the central work, that in which most particular works were embedded, to which they constantly referred, from which they drew a great deal of their strength.”² In the same way, the biblical authors rely on and contribute to the Bible’s big story.

Biblical theology seeks to understand the biblical worldview. This has been addressed briefly above. Here we give more attention to the components of a biblical worldview: the master narrative with its characters, setting, and themes; the truths derived from the narrative; the behaviors it encourages and discourages; and the liturgy and culture all this produces. The way of life produced by the writings of the Old Testament is

¹ This quotation was a header in the Saturday/Sunday, June 29–30, 2019 print edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, C12, attributed to “Irving Berlin, on the coming of World War II.”

² C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 11, 12.

the cultural stream in which Jesus and his followers understood themselves to swim. If we understand the interpretive perspective of the Old Testament authors, we will see that their perspective has been embraced by the New Testament authors. The Psalms are particularly significant in this regard, for as William P. Brown has noted, “Of all the books regarded as Scripture in the New Testament, the Psalms is the most widely cited. Of the 150 canonical psalms, 129 make their appearance in some form in the New Testament.”³

§1. The Master Narrative

What Snearly says of the Psalter applies to the whole of the Old Testament: “The trajectory of the storyline is consistent throughout: Yahweh is king; he has appointed an earthly vice-regent who represents his heavenly rule on earth; the earthly vice-regent and his people travail against the rebellious of the earth.”⁴

God created the world very good (Gen 1:31). Man transgressed and incurred judgment (Gen 2–3), but the words of Gen 3:15 bring a promise of triumph over the one who tempted man to sin, and that promise hints that the judgments might be rolled back (cf. Gen 3:17–19 with 5:29) and the world made new. This hope includes the reversal of death itself. As T. Desmond Alexander correctly notes, “death was indeed perceived by the Hebrews as a punishment for man’s rebellion against God,” but “whereas the wicked were thought to remain in the dark, silent region of *Sheol*, the righteous lived in the hope that God would deliver them from the power of death and take them to himself (cf. Ps. 49:15).”⁵

God made promises to Abraham in Gen 12:1–3 that answered the judgments of Gen 3:14–19 point for point, and the promises to Abraham were passed down and expanded upon through the rest of Genesis.⁶ Eventually

³ William P. Brown, “The Psalms: An Overview,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.

⁴ Snearly, *Return of the King*, 1.

⁵ T. Desmond Alexander, “The Old Testament View of Life After Death,” *Them* 11.2 (1986): 42, 45.

⁶ Hamilton, “Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham.”

God made promises to David that show that the blessing of Abraham will be brought about through the future king from David's line (2 Sam 7).⁷

In addition to the growing collection of promises that develop and build upon one another, we have narratives of Israel's history, most particularly the exodus from Egypt, that have been interpreted and presented in light of the promises. The oppressive Egyptians are the seed of the serpent, and the Gen 3:15 promise that the seed of the woman would bruise the serpent's head receives an anticipatory fulfillment at the exodus. In this vein, Ps 74:13–14 interprets the parting of the Red Sea as a crushing of the serpent's head (see also 89:9–10 [MT 89:10–11]). The exodus from Egypt points forward to a greater defeat of the serpent and his seed through which God will liberate his people. The Sinai covenant likewise builds on previous covenants and anticipates a new covenant that will follow the new exodus.⁸ The pilgrimage through the wilderness to the land of promise also anticipates an even greater march on a better country, a new heaven and new earth. Israel's prophets use Israel's past as the paradigm for predicting Israel's future.⁹

§1.1. CHARACTERS

My comments here will be limited to the main characters in the Psalter: Yahweh, the messiah, the people of the messiah, and their enemies, the wicked.

Yahweh is the most important character not only in the Psalms but in the whole of the Bible. Robar rightly refers to him as “the protagonist of the Hebrew Bible.”¹⁰ The psalms that rehearse history celebrate his mighty deeds. The psalms that are prayers petition him. And the praises extol his goodness. His *character* is communicated through his word, and his character ensures that his word will be kept. One could argue that God's ultimate goal, the center of biblical theology, is the display of his character, seen most clearly when his justice serves as the backdrop for

⁷ For an excellent exposition of the theme, see T. D. Alexander, *The Servant King: The Bible's Portrait of the Messiah* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998).

⁸ Before leaving Sinai Israel had already broken the covenant and the Aaronic priesthood had failed (Exod 32–34). Moses repeatedly tells Israel that they will break the Sinai covenant but that Yahweh will remember the Abrahamic covenant (the covenant with the fathers, Lev 26:27–45; Deut 4:25–31; 28–32).

⁹ Here I have been very brief. See further Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?*; and for much more detail, Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*.

¹⁰ Robar, *Verb and the Paragraph in Biblical Hebrew*, 33.

the demonstration of his stunning mercy, which he accomplishes when he shows his glory in salvation through judgment.¹¹ More on Yahweh's character in §2.1, below.

Yahweh's world has come under attack, and the messiah comes as the hero through whom Yahweh's reign will be reestablished. Explicitly introduced as the one against whom Yahweh's enemies rage in Ps 2, the anointed king from David's line is the subject of key psalms at or near the Psalter's seams: Psalm 2 joins with Ps 1 to introduce the whole collection, and then Ps 72 prays for the fulfillment of God's promises concerning the messiah at the end of Book 2. Psalm 89 rehearses the covenant with David concerning his reigning seed and asks how long the promises will be deferred at the end of Book 3. Near the beginning of Book 5, in Ps 110 David recounts how his Lord was invited to sit at Yahweh's right hand and installed as the Melchizedekian high priest. More on the messiah in §5, below (culture of interpretation).

Those who have experienced Yahweh's character, which can be most prominently identified with the term *hesed* (חסד), lovingkindness (see esp. Ps 136), come to be referred to as the *hasidim* (חסידים), which English translations render as "saints" (ESV, KJV) "godly ones" (JPS, NAS), or "faithful ones" (CSB). In my translation I refer to this group as those "marked by" Yahweh's lovingkindness, his "lovingkind ones." These people embrace Yahweh as God, believe his promises because they trust his character, and live out their commitments by identifying with the king from the line of David. They are not perfect, but when they fail they confess their sin and repent of it. This puts them on the side of the angels.

The enemies do the opposite at every point. They do not take Yahweh as their God, believe what Yahweh has said, follow Yahweh's instructions, trust Yahweh's character, or submit to Yahweh's king. Whether they worship themselves, idols, or something else, they do not love God or his people. This puts them in constant conflict with God, his purposes, and his people.

As Keel has written, "The view which a particular group or culture holds of its enemies is crucial to an understanding of that group or culture."¹² The authors of the Old Testament believe what Yahweh has revealed about his character, his goodness, his righteousness, and they

¹¹ Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*.

¹² Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 78.

have embraced Yahweh's revealed instructions for life. The wicked, by contrast, worship idols instead of Yahweh, replace his righteousness with their own standards, and depart from his instructions to fulfill their own selfish desires. Their actions dishonor God and harm people, and the people of God—for whom the psalmists speak—denounce their treachery and pray against their agenda.

§1.2. SETTING

The most significant thing to say about the setting of the Psalms has to do with the Old Testament's presentation of creation as a cosmic temple.¹³ This explains the comparison of the temple to the heavens and earth (78:69). The references to the heavens being spread out like a tent likewise reflect tabernacle imagery (104:2), and these concepts inform the way that David can describe the upheaval of creation at the flood (29:3–8) before saying that everything in Yahweh's temple cries, "glory!" (29:9)—Ps 29 depicts everything in Yahweh's cosmic temple shouting that word, glory. This idea also has suggestive implications about David saying that he will dwell in Yahweh's house forever (23:6), implications that would entail a renewal of the cosmic temple (102:25–26) in the form of a new heaven and a new earth and a resurrection from the dead (cf. 17:15).

If the setting is a cosmic temple, the human characters are the visible *image* and *likeness* of the invisible God (Gen 1:26), placed in the cosmic temple to make manifest God's own character, presence, and reign. In a significant sense, Adam was God's son, and the messiah comes as a new Adam. See especially the exposition of Pss 2, 8, and 80.

§1.3. THEMES

Because a full discussion of the Psalter's themes could be as long as the body of this commentary, here I will briefly discuss three themes: first, God's word and the promises in it; second, the suffering righteous servant; and third, the sudden destruction of the seemingly powerful wicked.

The Psalter makes the same kinds of claims about God's word found in other parts of Scripture. It promises blessing and success to those who meditate on it constantly (Ps 1:2–3; Josh 1:8), affirming its pure truth (Ps 12:6; 18:30 [MT 12:7; 18:31]; Prov 30:5), and asserting that by it God made the world (Ps 33:6; Gen 1). God's word has life-giving, wisdom-imparting,

¹³ Beale, *Temple and the Church's Mission*.

enlightening, and lasting power (Ps 19:7–9 [MT 19:8–10]). God’s word teaches people how to think rightly about God’s world.

God’s word also makes promises about how and what God will do to redeem, cleanse, and renew his world, and with these promises come instructions on how to please God. The instructions are as sound as the promises are reliable. The Psalms begin the rehearsal of the promises in Ps 2, setting up a pairing of psalms celebrating God’s word with psalms celebrating his promise to the king from David’s line, a pairing that runs across the Psalter (Pss 1 and 2, 18 and 19 and 20 and 21, and 118 and 119).¹⁴ God’s promise to redeem centers on God’s promise to the king from David’s line, and the Psalter’s strategic arrangement puts a spotlight on the reliability of God’s creative word guaranteeing the reliability of his promise to redeem.

Much, much more could be said about God’s word in the Psalms, but a lot of that can be found in the exposition in the commentary below (see esp. on Ps 119). God’s word made the world. God’s word instructs his people on how to live in his world. God’s word heals and cleanses his people, renewing and reviving them after they have experienced the life-destroying power of sin. God has promised to redeem, and the promise to redeem is as certain as the command for creation to come into being.

Those who believe God’s creating and saving word always seem to be in the minority, and the majority always seem to resent them. Cain killed Abel. Ishmael mocked Isaac. Esau wanted to kill Jacob, and Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery. Then the Hebrews rejected Moses, and even after the exodus they wanted to stone him. David steps right into this line and receives the same kind of treatment from Saul and then Absalom.

Psalms 2 speaks of the nations raging against the Lord’s anointed, and then Ps 3 begins to illustrate that raging. Remarkably, however, the enemy in Ps 3 is not a foreigner but the king’s own son (Ps 3:ss [MT 3:1]). This continues throughout the Psalter, as David again and again speaks of the difficulty he faced from his Israelite kinsmen, which include Cush (7:ss [MT 7:1]), Saul (e.g., 18:ss [MT 18:1]; 57:ss [MT 57:1]), the Ziphites (54:ss [MT 54:1]), and the unnamed traitor (e.g., 41:9 [MT 41:10]; 55:12–14 [MT 55:13–15]).

On these occasions, the righteous sufferer often complains that his enemies hate him without cause (35:19 [MT 35:20]; 69:4 [MT 69:5]),

¹⁴ See Grant, *King as Exemplar*.

meaning that he has not wronged them (59:3–4 [MT 59:4–5]). Their enmity arises from their own selfish ambition, as did Saul’s and Absalom’s.

In the exposition to follow, I will argue that David has interpreted his own experience in light of earlier Scripture. He identifies with the likes of Abel, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses, and he identifies his enemies with their enemies. David also seems to have understood the conflict as Gen 3:15 enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, and he seems to have expected that the kings who would arise from his line would also experience that enmity, culminating in *the* king from his line, in whose experience the whole pattern would come to culmination. The future king would be righteous, he would suffer at the hands of enemies unjustly opposing him, and his ultimate triumph would be as dramatic as the death and resurrection reversal poetically described in Ps 22 (esp. 22:14–15 [MT 22:15–16]).

I contend that the authors of earlier Scripture intended their audience to see the enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, and further that they wanted to encourage God’s people to stand fast as the seed of the woman against the seed of the serpent. For David to see the outworking of the pattern in his own life, then, was in keeping with the intent of earlier biblical authors, and likewise for later kings—including the man from Nazareth—to identify with David’s experience, even to see David’s experience fulfilled in his own, would be fully in line with David’s intent (see further the discussion of interpretive culture in §5 below).

The enemies, the seed of the serpent, are described as the kings of the earth in Ps 2. They seem more numerous and, in worldly terms, more powerful and impressive, than the seed of the woman. Psalm 73 describes the way they enjoy long lives of indulgence. The Psalms, however, speak to the way that though they have power to dig pits, they will fall into them, all their sin will rebound onto their own heads, and suddenly they will be like chaff before the wind (Ps 1), destroyed in the way by the wrath of the king to come (Ps 2).

§2. Truths Derived from the Master Narrative

Life will triumph over death. Good will overcome evil. The defiled will be cleansed, the broken mended, the wicked judged, the faithful rewarded, and God’s creation purposes will be accomplished. All these realities play into biblical hope. From this perspective the psalmists write.

The psalmists have come to understand that Israel will be exiled from the land, but they also believe that Yahweh will keep his promises to show mercy in the form of a new exodus and return from exile (see Deut 4:25–31, and esp. the quotation of Deut 32:36 in Ps 135:14). They know that though the Davidic king may be dethroned (Ps 89), ultimately God will keep his 2 Sam 7 promises to David (Ps 110). Gary Millar concludes, “To pray in the psalter, then, is to call on the name of Yahweh, as the psalms fill out the conviction that has shaped the other material in the Old Testament.”¹⁵

§2.1. DIVINE SIMPLICITY

This is obviously not the place for a full-scale treatment of divine simplicity, but the idea that God is simple has profound explanatory power for understanding the Psalms.¹⁶ The psalmists see no conflict between Yahweh’s love and his justice because both are simply the application of his character. He shows steadfast love (דסח) by keeping his promises to forgive the repentant (Pss 32, 51) and judge their unrepentant oppressors (Ps 82). In fact, by judging them he teaches them his name (83:17–18 [MT 83:18–19]), and Asaph prays that they would seek Yahweh as a result (83:16 [MT 83:17]).

The one living and true God is not composed of different concerns and impulses. Rather, the mere human words that describe him, words that stem from Exod 34:6–7—merciful, gracious, patient, loving, true, forgiving, judging, punishing—are but different ways he makes known his character, his *hesed* (דסח). This explains, for instance, a statement like Ps 130:4, which asserts that there is forgiveness with Yahweh in order that he might be feared. We would expect God’s justice to prompt fear, but the application of God’s character to forgive brings the penitent one who has experienced mercy into contact with the God who is whole, simple. And the experience of God’s character—the experience of his forgiveness—prompts fear.

¹⁵ J. Gary Millar, *Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer*, NSBT 38 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 166.

¹⁶ For a good introduction to divine simplicity (though too harsh on fellow evangelicals), see James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017).

§2.2. THE FEAR OF GOD

The most important thing that can happen to anyone who studies the Psalms is precisely what their authors intended for their audience: an encounter with God. The reality that God should be feared cannot be limited to the occurrences of the word. The terrifying majesty of the living God pervades the Psalms and the Old Testament.

Recently my family visited a frozen lake in South Dakota, and we climbed up on a large rock that cropped out in the middle of the solid ice. Our youngest child was five years old at the time, and he was not altogether stable in his snow-boots. He had repeatedly slipped and fallen on the lake as we made our way across it to the rock. We began to scramble up the rock, and I noticed that toward the ledge on the backside of the rock there were patches of ice and snow, and the gentle slope fell away to a sheer face with nothing but the unforgiving granite-like surface of the lake below. As I earnestly held to my five-year old and steered him away from the ledge, my friend who had taken us there noticed me looking at the ledge and holding my son close and said: "Yeah, if he goes over he dies." The fear I felt for my son's safety was healthy and good. The delight I felt to be off that rock, and then off that frozen lake, was even better. This is the logic of the delight in Yahweh's Torah (see the note on "Torah" in "Translating the Psalms," above) the blessed man feels in Ps 1.

The undergirding assumption that informs the fear of God is God himself in all his tremendous majesty. He is not an unpredictable terror like the so-called gods, but he is altogether holy and pure in his justice. He has graciously revealed himself in his word, and those who value their lives recognize their need for that word. Those who disregard God care little for his word. They are fools. The ledge is slippery. The ice below will break them.

The perspective of Ps 1 is that life and death depend upon being in right relationship to Yahweh, and the fear of not being in right relationship with him is precisely what makes God's word so delightful, so nourishing, and so preoccupying. When Ps 1:4 says "Not so the wicked," it could as well say that the wicked do not fear God, and as a result they take no delight in his revelation of himself, of what pleases him, and of where his boundaries are.

And so it is with Ps 2. The raging nations and plotting peoples do not fear God, so they do not want to be constrained by God's warnings that the foot can easily slip on the gentle slope where the ice lurks beneath

the snow. God has, so to speak, given fair warning that the human body cannot survive a fall from that height, and God has given good instructions on where and how to tread the high places that the glorious views might be relished and the crashing falls avoided. The rebels do not fear God, so they attack his anointed (2:3). The declaration that Yahweh's messiah, the king from David's line, will execute his judgment on the insurrectionists (2:7–9) comes with a warning that they should learn wisdom (2:10), that is, that they should serve Yahweh with fear (2:11). That fear is precisely to avoid the anger in which the enemies will perish (2:12a), for the righteous king's wrath falls quickly on those who deserve it, while those who take refuge in him will be blessed (2:12b), blessed like the man who treasures God's word (1:1).

§3. Behaviors

The behaviors encouraged and discouraged by the Psalms do not need to be belabored, being obvious to anyone who reads the psalmists' words. What needs to be noted has to do with the way literature works. Whether narrative or poetry, commands do not need to be issued for an author's understanding of virtue to be clear to his audience. Illustrating this point, Carr quotes Nicoratus in Xenophon's *Symposium*, who explained, "My father, wishing me to become a good man made me learn the whole of Homer, so that even today I can still recite the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by heart (III.5)."¹⁷ The heroic values illustrated and enacted in those epic poems were transmitted through the literature, and this quotation makes sense to us because even when authors are not giving commands, their perspective on what they want their audience to do can be discerned. For instance, Ps 1 does not command people to delight in the Torah and meditate on it day and night, but by blessing the man who does those things, the psalmist commends that behavior. Similarly, Pss 14 and 53 do not issue the command: do not say in your heart that there is no God! By calling the one who does so a fool, however, the psalmist discourages such thinking.

The Psalms do not read like lectures, and yet they are didactic. Carr writes,

¹⁷ Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, 100–101.

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EXPOSITION

BOOK 3

At the end of Book 2, “The prayers of David the son of Jesse are completed” (Ps 72:20). Psalm 72’s superscription “Of Solomon,” and the fact that after Book 2 only one psalm contains historical information in its superscription (Ps 142, whereas twelve psalms in Books 1 and 2 had these), join together to suggest that when we move into Book 3 we move past David’s life into the reign of those who descended from him. This impression is strengthened by the move away from psalms ascribed to David. Whereas fifty-five of Psalms 1–72 are “Of David,” only one Psalm in Book 3 (Ps 86) and two in Book 4 are ascribed to him (Pss 101 and 103). And then there is the content of the psalms of Book 3: Psalms 74 and 79 describe attacks on the temple, and Ps 89 seems to respond to its destruction when Babylon conquered the city and dethroned the Davidic king.

We have seen how psalms at the seams of the books have engaged Pss 1 and 2, and Ps 89 interacts in particular with Ps 2. Just as Ps 2 rehearsed the 2 Sam 7 promises to David, so Ps 89 deals with the covenant Yahweh made with David as narrated in that passage. Psalm 2 recounts Yahweh’s declaration, “My son are you, I, today, have begotten you,” before rehearsing Yahweh’s promise that his son would inherit and possess the ends of the earth (2:7–8). Similarly, Ps 89 has the son crying out “My father are you” (89:26 [MT 89:27]), with Yahweh promising to “give him as the firstborn, the most high of the kings of earth” (89:27 [MT 89:28]).

In addition to engaging the beginning of the Psalter (the links with Ps 2), Psalm 89 also recalls the end of Book 3 by means of its interaction with themes from Ps 72. The prayer in Ps 72 entails oppressors being

crushed (דכא, 72:4), and Ps 89:23 has Yahweh promising to crush his foes (כתת). The prayer in 72:8 is for the son to reign “from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth,” and in 89:25 (MT 89:26) Yahweh promises, “I will put his hand on the sea, and on the river his right hand.” Both Pss 72 and 89 indicate that the king from David’s line will reign as long as the moon continues to shine (72:5; 89:37 [MT 89:38]). Standing at the end of books, 72 and 89 both conclude with doxologies (72:18–19; 89:52 [MT 89:53]).

For the literary structure of Books 2 and 3, see “The Literary Structure and Meaning of the Psalter” in the introduction. For the flow of thought in Pss 73–89, see the “Context” section on each psalm in this unit.

Psalm 73

OVERVIEW AND STRUCTURE OF PSALM 73

The movements in thought in Ps 73 seem to be marked out by the psalm’s three instances of the particle ךָא , which I have rendered “surely” at 73:1, 13, and 18 (CSB renders “indeed” at 73:1 and 18 but leaves the instance at 73:13 untranslated; ESV is similar with “truly” at 73:1 and 18 but ךָא untranslated at 73:13).¹ Cole argues persuasively that Ps 73 is linked by key words (see below) with Ps 72 and responds to the absence of what is prayed for there.²

The psalm opens with an affirmation of God’s goodness to Israel (73:1), but the psalmist explains how he almost stumbled over the prosperity of the wicked (73:2–12). His explanation of how he almost stumbled in 73:2 opens with ואני , “But as for me.” The psalm then closes with an affirmation of God’s goodness to the psalmist personally, a phrase that also begins with ואני , “But as for me” (73:28).

In Ps 73:1–12 the psalmist reflects on how he was tempted when he beheld the shalom of the wicked. He then relates in 73:13–17 how he was tempted to betray God’s people by envying the wicked, until he entered God’s holy places and perceived the end that awaits the enemies of God. Psalm 73 concludes in 73:18–28 with a resolution of the problem that

¹ Robert L. Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III (Psalms 73–89)*, JSOTSup 307 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 17; Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

² Cole, *Shape and Message of Book III*, 15–27.

tempted the psalmist in the opening section, describing the destruction of the wicked and the goodness of God's presence.³

73:1–12, The Problem: The Shalom of the Wicked

73:13–17, The Psalmist's Struggle

73:18–28, The Solution: Judgment and Salvation

SCRIPTURE

CSB

A psalm of Asaph.

¹ God is indeed good to Israel,
to the pure in heart.

² But as for me, my feet almost slipped;
my steps nearly went astray.

³ For I envied the arrogant;
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

⁴ They have an easy time until they die,
and their bodies are well fed.

⁵ They are not in trouble like others;
they are not afflicted like most people.

⁶ Therefore, pride is their necklace,
and violence covers them like a
garment.

⁷ Their eyes bulge out from fatness;
the imaginations of their hearts run
wild.

⁸ They mock, and they speak
maliciously;
they arrogantly threaten oppression.

⁹ They set their mouths against
heaven,
and their tongues strut across the
earth.

¹⁰ Therefore his people turn to them
and drink in their overflowing words.

¹¹ The wicked say, "How can God
know?

Does the Most High know everything?"

¹² Look at them—the wicked!

Author's translation

¹ A Psalm of Asaph.

Surely God is good to Israel, to the
pure of heart.

² But as for me, my feet almost rolled;
like nothing my steps were poured
out,

³ for I envied the boastful. I saw the
shalom of the wicked:

⁴ for there are no bonds to their
death, and fat is their belly.

⁵ In the trouble of man they have no
part, and with man they are not
plagued.

⁶ Therefore his necklace is majesty; a
garment of violence covers them.

⁷ Their eye goes out from fatness; the
imaginings of the heart cross
over.

⁸ They mock and speak in evil.
Oppression from on high they
speak.

⁹ They have set their mouth against
the heavens, and their tongue
walks the earth.

¹⁰ Therefore his people return here,
and the full waters are drained out
for them.

¹¹ And they said, "How does God
know? And is there knowledge with
the Most High?"

¹² Behold, these are the wicked, and
the ones at ease of the age:

³ For the use of Ps 73 in Job, see Will Kynes, *My Psalm Has Turned into Weeping: Job's Dialogue with the Psalms*, BZAW 437 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 161–79.

They are always at ease,
and they increase their wealth.

¹³ Did I purify my heart
and wash my hands in innocence for
nothing?

¹⁴ For I am afflicted all day long
and punished every morning.

¹⁵ If I had decided to say these things
aloud,

I would have betrayed your people.

¹⁶ When I tried to understand all this,
it seemed hopeless

¹⁷ until I entered God's sanctuary.

Then I understood their destiny.

¹⁸ Indeed, you put them in slippery
places;

you make them fall into ruin.

¹⁹ How suddenly they become a
desolation!

They come to an end, swept away by
terrors.

²⁰ Like one waking from a dream,
Lord, when arising, you will despise
their image.

²¹ When I became embittered
and my innermost being was
wounded,

²² I was stupid and didn't understand;
I was an unthinking animal toward
you.

²³ Yet I am always with you;
you hold my right hand.

²⁴ You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me up in
glory.

²⁵ Who do I have in heaven but you?
And I desire nothing on earth but you.

²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart,
my portion forever.

²⁷ Those far from you will certainly
perish;

they have increased wealth.

¹³ Surely in vain I cleansed my
heart and washed my hands in
innocence.

¹⁴ And I was plagued all the day, and
my reprimands every morning.

¹⁵ If I said, I will recount it like this,
behold, I would have betrayed the
generation of your sons.

¹⁶ And when I considered to know
this, it was trouble in my eyes,

¹⁷ until I went to the holy places of
God.

I understood their end.

¹⁸ Surely you put them in slippery
places. You cause them to fall in
deceptions.

¹⁹ How they have suddenly become
desolations! They come to an end,
finished by terrors.

²⁰ Like a dream on waking, my Lord,
on rising their image you despise.

²¹ When my heart was embittered, and
in my kidneys I was pierced,

²² then I was brutish and did not
know: like beasts I was with you.

²³ Yet I am continually with you. You
have taken hold of my right hand.

²⁴ In your counsel lead me, and
afterward in glory receive me.

²⁵ Who is for me in the heavens? And
with you, I have no desire on the
earth.

²⁶ Spent are my flesh and my heart.
The rock of my heart and my portion
to the age is God.

²⁷ For behold, those who leave you
will perish.

You annihilate all who play the whore
from you.

²⁸ But as for me, the nearness of God is
my good.

you destroy all who are unfaithful to
 you. I have set my refuge in my Lord
 Yahweh, to recount all his works.
²⁸But as for me, God's presence is my
 good.
 I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,
 so I can tell about all you do.

CONTEXT: VERBAL AND THEMATIC LINKS WITH SURROUNDING PSALMS

As noted above, Ps 73 responds to the prayer of Ps 72. The ideal situation prayed for in Ps 72 meets wicked reality in Ps 73, causing the psalmist no little consternation. The reuse of Ps 72 terminology in Ps 73 brings out this dynamic. Whereas Ps 72:3 and 7 contain prayers for the shalom of God's people, Ps 73:3 objects to the shalom of the wicked. In 72:14 the future king redeems his people from "violence," but in 73:6 the wicked have covered themselves with a garment of "violence." In 72:4 David prays that the king will crush the "oppressor," while in 73:8 the proud speak "oppression." The reuse of key terms from Ps 72 indicates that the psalmist's perplexity in Ps 73 (note his confessed lack of understanding in 73:16, 22) arises from the dissonance between what was prayed for in Ps 72 and his perception of the way things are in Ps 73.⁴

Psalm 73 is the first of a series of psalms of Asaph (Pss 73–83; Ps 50 is also attributed to him). See the opening comments in the exposition of Ps 50 for what the OT says elsewhere about Asaph. Second Chronicles 29:30 describes the Levites praising Yahweh with the words of David and Asaph, which seems to indicate that the psalms with "Of David" and "Of Asaph" in their superscriptions were understood to have been written by David and Asaph (see further "The Superscriptions of the Psalms" in the introduction). The placement of these Asaph psalms (Pss 73–83) after the prayers of David have ended (72:20) strengthens the impression that the reign of David has come to an end, and, in the Psalter's impressionistic narrative, the story shifts to the period of Israel's history between David and exile in Ps 89. The placement of these psalms after the end of David's prayers may also indicate that Asaph's ministry continued into the reign of Solomon.

⁴ Cole, *Shape and Message of Book III*, 15–16.