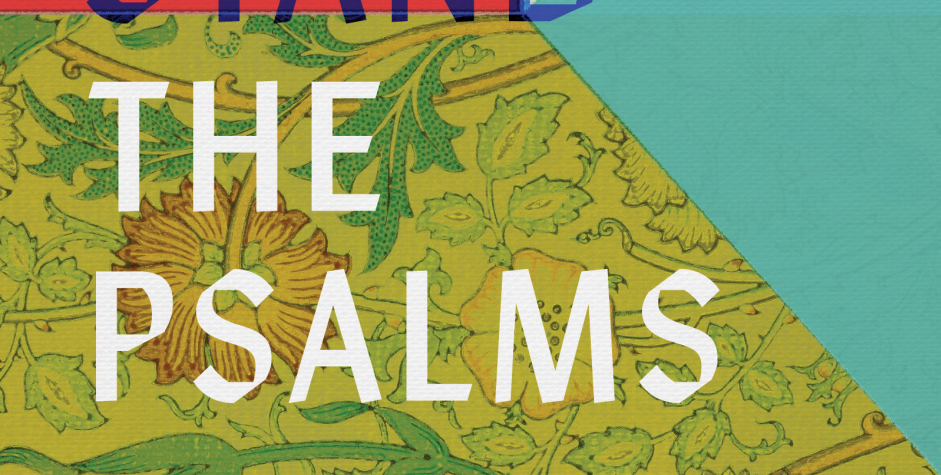




HOW
TO



READ &
UNDER-
STAND



THE
PSALMS

BRUCE K. WALTKE & FRED G. ZASPEL

FOREWORD BY SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON



“As has often been said, the Psalms reflect every aspect of the human soul. Without them, our worship would be impoverished and less honest, lacking the elements of righteous anger, confusion, and dejection that so often permeate the Psalms. Bruce Waltke and Fred Zaspel have provided us with a gem of a book that opens up fresh insights into the structure, meaning, and purpose of the Psalms. This book crystallizes the fruit of long careers of devoted scholarship with clarity, insight, and skill. Hopefully this book will drive the church back to the Psalms to gain much-needed courage and nourishment. What a wonderful gift to the church.”

Derek W. H. Thomas, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina; Chancellor’s Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

“The most obvious virtue of *How to Read and Understand the Psalms* is its scope. An appropriate subtitle for the book might be *What You Always Wanted to Know about the Psalms*. As part of this admirable scope, detailed explications of specific psalms balance the chapters that explore the topics important to scholarship on the Psalms.”

Leland Ryken, Emeritus Professor of English, Wheaton College

“This work by Waltke and Zaspel is a milestone achievement, encapsulating a lifetime of study in an accessible form that will serve students, pastors, and anyone else who wants to deepen and enrich their understanding of the book of Psalms.”

Iain M. Duguid, Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Bruce Waltke and Fred Zaspel have provided the academy and the church with a rich and comprehensive book on how to read and understand the Psalms. Years of scholarship and devotion come to fruition in this masterpiece. It is an essential read for those studying the Psalms.”

Mark D. Futato, Robert L. Maclellan Professor of Old Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“What better way to encounter the book of Psalms—a book with such a wide range of topics, emotions, and types of psalms—than through the eyes of a skilled interpreter like Bruce Waltke, assisted by experienced pastor and writer Fred Zaspel. Waltke has spent the better part of a lifetime pondering the Psalms and wisdom literature, and it shows in this eminently readable introduction. It is at once engaging, insightful, and uplifting. I heartily recommend it.”

David M. Howard Jr., Professor of Old Testament, Bethlehem College & Seminary; author, *The Structure of Psalms 93–100*; coeditor, *The Psalms: Language for All Seasons of the Soul and Reading the Psalms Theologically*

“A few years ago, I visited the Jeita Grotto in Lebanon. Hidden beneath a nondescript hillside of rock and scrub lies a vast underground cavern, a gallery of dizzying vistas, towering earth sculptures, and precarious chasms—all of it stunningly beautiful. This book feels like that. Waltke and Zaspel take us into and under the Psalter and show a huge, dazzling world teeming there. I’m stumped to know what else could have gone into this monumental book. It is scholarly, highly readable, instantly useful, spilling with insight, and massively comprehensive. The material on David alone is worth the price of the book. Every serious reader, teacher, and preacher of the Psalms needs a copy.”

Mark Buchanan, author, *David: Rise* and *David: Reign*

How to Read and Understand the Psalms

How to Read and Understand the Psalms

Bruce K. Waltke and Fred G. Zaspel

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WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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*For Reformed Baptist Church
Franconia, Pennsylvania*

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Foreword

IT IS A PRIVILEGE TO SERVE as herald to Drs. Bruce Waltke and Fred Zaspel as they step forward to offer this outstanding volume to all lovers of the book of Psalms. Do not let its workmanlike title dampen either your interest or enthusiasm; you are in for a treat in the almost six hundred pages that follow. Although I am neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, I think I can safely predict that *How to Read and Understand the Psalms* is a book you will return to frequently and treasure permanently.

The conception, birth, and maturation of this work are explained by the authors in their preface. Together they bring to its pages an array of gifts and graces: Bruce Waltke has for many years been regarded as a prince, perhaps even a king, among Old Testament scholars; Fred Zaspel has put many of us in his debt through his outstanding works on the great Princeton theologian Benjamin B. Warfield. Perhaps there is something more than merely whimsical in the thought that their collegial work echoes some of the conversations that the great Old Testament theologian Geerhardus Vos shared with Warfield on their regular constitutionals around Princeton Seminary. At any rate, the combination of Old Testament theologian and systematic theologian is an irresistible one!

Here, then, in their combined labors we are given rich exposition of the Psalms rooted in careful study of the Hebrew text, distilled through a well-matured and reflective mind, and brought together in this form

by two humble lovers of Scripture. This is the work of two disciples of the one who, more than any other, knew, loved, understood, and applied to himself the book of Psalms. For this reason alone, even were there no others, a book such as this, on the words that helped shape and inform both our Lord's self-understanding and his own emotional and affective life and experience, deserves to become our regular companion along the pilgrim way to the heavenly Zion.

Readers familiar with the work of either or both of these two “doctors of the church” will open these pages with high confidence and anticipation of finding good things. To that confidence I would like to add a word of personal testimony.

I have the privilege of being what the older writers would have quaintly called a “sometime colleague” to Professor Waltke at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Three scenes come to mind that may help readers catch a glimpse of the man himself. Dr. Waltke will remember none of them—underlining the fact that his impact on others has been far greater than he himself could ever imagine.

The first well-remembered scene is of a “water fountain” (or, more accurately, “coffee pot”) conversation at the beginning of a new academic year. As though talking to himself as much as to me, Professor Waltke commented on the way he had been praying for the help of the Holy Spirit as he looked forward to teaching his students in the coming semester. They, I am sure, believed that his expertise far surpassed the sum total of their knowledge. Yet the abiding memory is of his dependence on the Lord—a reminder to a junior colleague, as well as to his students, that while one plants and another waters, only God can give the increase.

A second remembered scene takes me back to a dinner conversation at the table of friends whose guests we both were. Dr. Waltke was, at that time, writing his magisterial two-volume commentary on the book of Proverbs. As we talked about various things it was clear Proverbs was much on his mind. What was evident to me was that C. H. Spurgeon's famous words about John Bunyan (“Prick

him anywhere; and you will find that his blood is Bibline”)¹ could be reapplied to my fellow dinner guest: “Prick him anywhere, and you will find that his blood is Proverbine!” Sacred Scripture had—as Paul put it to the Thessalonians—been received by him “not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you” (1 Thess. 2:13).

The third scene is directly related to the theme of this book. It is the memory of an unspoken aspiration experienced while sitting listening to Dr. Waltke expound Psalm 51: “Would that, somehow, this richly satisfying exposition, and many more like it, were available to a wider public!” In view of his many commitments my hope was, confessedly, not accompanied by great faith. But now, thankfully, the sight of these pages is a rebuke I gladly welcome (“O you of little faith!”).

Dr. Fred Zaspel has also been a friend over many years—a friendship initiated (I suspect) by a common concern for pastoral exposition that combines biblical exegesis with biblical theology and is given depth by the penetration of biblical logic that leads to health-giving theology and fruitfulness in ministry. With many others I am indebted to, and have derived benefit from, his important contributions to the study of the multifaceted writings of B. B. Warfield. He has also been a means of encouraging the people of God to understand that in some measure “we are what we read.” With all this Dr. Zaspel has been an encourager of other authors and at times their editor, thus exercising a ministry to his fellow Christians that has often been hidden from public view.

From a more personal viewpoint as someone belonging to the circle of friends who have known Dr. Zaspel and his wife, Kim, for many years, I have witnessed the ways that they have walked together with grace over the sometimes rough and testing pilgrim path and followed in the footsteps of the psalmist. It has been moving to watch from a distance as they have found God’s strength and provision to be as real for them as it was for David. And as surely as he was able to echo the

1 Charles Spurgeon, *The Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon, Compiled from His Diary, Letters, and Records by His Wife and His Private Secretary*, vol. 4, 1878–1892 (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1900), 268.

Patriarch Jacob's testimony that the Lord had been his lifelong shepherd, so too Fred and Kim have relied on and known the Lord's sure presence.

There is something especially fitting, therefore, that the gifts, graces, and experiences of our two doctors have combined to provide this exposition of the book that John Calvin stated contains "an Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul."² In this exposition of the Psalms, then, these pages present spiritual instruction for the mind and medicine for the soul.

But the herald must refrain from detaining readers any longer by adding to these introductory fanfares! So with these words of introduction to the authors who will guide you through the varied spiritual terrain of the Psalter, I happily exit stage left and leave you to enjoy and profit from *How to Read and Understand the Psalms*. As you make the ascent of the hill of the Lord you will, I feel sure, frequently retain the services of your expert guides, Bruce Waltke and Fred Zaspel, until, by God's grace, the summit is in sight for us all.

Sinclair B. Ferguson
 Chancellor's Professor of Systematic Theology
 Reformed Theological Seminary

2 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 1, trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), xxxvii.

Preface

THIS BOOK WAS A JOINT EFFORT, but the bulk of the work was done by Bruce over many decades. Bruce began teaching the Psalms on the graduate level in 1958, the year I (Fred) was born. Many have profited from his long years of focused study. His and James Houston's *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, *The Psalms as Christian Lament*, and *The Psalms as Christian Praise*; his various published articles; his sermons; and his classroom and online lectures all are gold mines of Psalms exposition. His *Concise Commentary on the Psalms* is forthcoming also, to be published online at The Gospel Coalition. Bruce tells the story of his life teaching and learning of the Psalms in his "Biblical Theology of the Psalms Today: A Personal Perspective."¹

Bruce and I became acquainted when I was editing the Concise Bible Commentary Series for The Gospel Coalition and invited him to write the commentary on the Psalms. Our acquaintance since has been mutually enriching. When I was pursuing Psalms studies in preparation for my own preaching responsibilities, I began listening to his online lecture series at BiblicalTraining.org (also at BiblicalLearning.org), and after hearing only a few lectures I proposed this book project. I was delighted when he so eagerly agreed. I did all the writing, Bruce then combed through it all and gave further input, and so on the process went. The book is a joint effort based primarily on his lecture material,

1 Published in *The Psalms: Language for All Seasons of the Soul*, ed. Andrew J. Schmutzer and David M. Howard Jr. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013), chap. 1.

but much more has been added.² We both take full responsibility for the accuracy of our book.

Preaching the Psalms is the frequent privilege and responsibility of pastors, and the Psalter is in many ways uniquely suited to enrich the hearts of God's people. Our goal in this book is to equip Christians to read the Psalms profitably. We have sought to keep the material at the lay level for wide accessibility, but our leading hope is that those who preach and teach the word of God will be equipped by this book to read, teach, and preach the Psalms with greater insight and confidence. To accomplish this we will address matters ranging from authorship and historical setting to psalm forms, Hebrew poetry, rhetorical techniques, the psalms' liturgical use in ancient Israel, and the final shape of the Psalter as we have it. We provide exposition and theology primarily as illustrative examples. Our aim is to enable the lay person as well as the preacher to "get behind" the Psalms, as it were, and into the minds of the psalmists to grasp how they themselves conceived their work and how they shaped and stated their message. If God will use this effort to enrich pastoral expositions of the Psalter and the spiritual life of its readers, we will be most grateful to him for it.

2 For extensive bibliography see J. Kenneth Kuntz, "Continuing the Engagement: Psalms Research Since the Early 1990s," *Currents in Biblical Research* 19 (2012): 321–78; William P. Brown, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Beat Weber, "Bibliography of Psalms and the Psalter since 1990," Academia.edu (website), accessed September 27, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/5910732/BiblioPss1990ff_Bibliography_of_Psalms_and_the_Psalter_since_1990.

Introduction to the Psalms

The Psalms and the People of God

The book of Psalms is the most popular book of the Old Testament in both the Jewish community and the Christian community. The Psalter is the most represented corpus in the Qumran community also. In fact, the Psalms is a favorite of the biblical writers as well. Its language is taken up by later Old Testament writers, and it is the most frequently quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus Christ probably memorized the book. He quoted it often—in his teaching ministry, in his debates with the Jewish leaders, in his final hours on the cross, and in his resurrection ministry to his apostles. And in all these scenarios he demonstrated that the Psalms spoke of him. The apostles cited the Psalms often, and as they had learned from their Master, they understood it as speaking of him. Quotations and allusions to the Psalms are found in every book of the New Testament, except 1 Thessalonians, Philemon, and 2–3 John—more than four hundred times total.¹ Most of these writers were not formally educated—they were not scribes—and yet they had such an instinctive grasp of the Psalter that they were able to use it adeptly and with keen exegetical insight and illuminating application in light of the person and work

1 See “Index of Quotations” and “Index of Allusions and Verbal Parallels” in Barbara Aland et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 5th rev. ed. (New York: American Bible Society, 2014), 858–59, 871–74.

of Jesus. That these unlettered men—mostly fishermen—had this kind of knowledge astounded the scribes and the lawyers and the educated such that they asked, “Where did these men get this knowledge?” Of course, they had the advantage of divine inspiration, but in inspiring these men, the Holy Spirit used what was already there. It seems they had memorized these Scriptures. Most of them were “laymen” without a formal education who had spent their lives in the Psalms thoughtfully and piously, and because of that they could breathe the Psalms when they prayed and when they sang.

We see this in the book of Revelation. When John hears the angel singing, he hears the book of Psalms. Mary’s Magnificat is another example. These early Christians clearly lived with the Psalms. Paul says in Romans 8:36, “We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered” — that is Psalm 44:22. The New Testament writers held the Psalms close always—the Psalter was deeply a part of them.

This love of the Psalter continued in the early church of postapostolic times. “Early Christian schools, especially monastic schools, introduced young initiates to the study of Scripture through the psalms and selected New Testament texts. Once admitted to the monastery, the neophyte had to commit psalms to memory and recite them while performing his daily chores.”² When Marco Polo (1254–1324) discovered “a certain manner of people” without Buddhist idols or Zoroastrian fire, they represented themselves with the book of Psalms and identified themselves as Christians; they numbered more than 700,000 families.³ The book of Psalms was the first book printed on the Gutenberg press, and as the Bible came to be cast in the vernacular it became the most widely translated book in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. Today, Psalm 23 is probably the best-known text in the world. Still today, when the New Testament is published separately, the book of Psalms is often included with it. As Christian mission makes its advance, the book of Psalms is often one of the first books to be translated. It was the first for

2 Alan Cooper, “Some Aspects of Traditional Jewish Psalms Interpretation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 258.

3 Laurence Bergreen, *Marco Polo* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 231–32.

Jerome in his translating of the Bible into Latin, in what became known as the Vulgate.⁴ For centuries, the church sang only the Psalms in their corporate meetings; and still today renditions of and references to the Psalms pervade our hymnals. Martin Luther's rendering of Psalm 46, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," is still used regularly in our churches, as is Isaac Watts's rendering of Psalm 72, "Jesus Shall Reign," the much beloved "Old One Hundredth," and of course Psalm 23 and others. The customary "call to worship" in our church meetings finds precedent in the Psalms, and, in fact, the Psalms are still routinely used for that purpose. The Psalter is the book we turn to in times of anxiety and grief and stress—and of blessing and joy. And in committing Scripture to memory, Christians today have probably memorized more verses from the Psalms than any other book—Psalm 1, Psalm 23, Psalm 46, Psalms 90–91, Psalm 100, Psalm 121, selections from Psalm 119, and Psalm 139, to name a few examples.

All this to say, with a fair amount of certainty, that the book of Psalms is the most popular Old Testament book within the Christian community, and it has been so for centuries. It is quite remarkable that songs and prayers written three thousand or so years ago are still in such demand and use today all over the world. We are privileged to be studying them, and as we do, we participate in a community and a long history of study and reflection.

Approaching the Psalms

Title

The Hebrew Bible provides no title to the book of Psalms. Old Testament books in the Hebrew text are sometimes named according to the first words of the book. For example, the title Genesis is "In the Beginning," and the title of Exodus is "These Are the Names." And the prophetic books are named after the prophet himself. But the book

4 Jerome actually made three translations of the Psalms: the first based on old Latin texts; the second on the Septuagint (the Gallican Psalter), which was memorized by the monks; and a third on the Hebrew text. The monks balked at remembering the third, and so the second, the Gallican Psalter, is used in the Vulgate.

of Psalms has no title in the Hebrew text. Psalm 72:20 may hint of an early collection of some of the Psalms when it says, “The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended”—it may be that an early collection of psalms was named “The Prayers of David.”⁵

The title of the book in Rabbinic and subsequent Hebrew literature is *Sepher Tehillim* (סֵפֶר תְּהִלִּים, “Book of Praises”) or simply *Tehillim* (“Praises”). Although this word (in the singular) is used to title just one psalm (Ps. 145), its later use as a title for the book itself derives from its content—the book of Psalms is a book of praises. There are praise hymns, individual songs of grateful praise, and even the lament or complaint psalms are couched in praise. Each of the Psalms (except Ps. 88) contains expressions of praise, so this title is entirely appropriate. The Hebrew word for “psalm” (מְזִמֹּר) occurs dozens of times in the book (e.g., 3:1), and the Septuagint (Codex Vaticanus) picks this up in the plural as the title of the book—*Psalmoi* (ψαλμοῖ). In Codex Alexandrinus, the title given is *Psalterion* (an ancient stringed instrument), from which we have the name “Psalter.” Then in Jerome’s Latin Vulgate, it became *Libra Psalmorum*, “The Book of Psalms.” So the English title, “The Book of Psalms,” comes to us from the Greek through the Latin. The Hebrew word “psalm” denotes “a song sung to an instrumental accompaniment,”⁶ but because the note of praise is so dominant in these psalms, the word has come to denote simply a song of praise, a sacred song, or a hymn.

The Psalms as Music

The praises of the Psalms, then, were intended to be sung to musical accompaniment. They must be understood as poetry also, and we will examine this important aspect of our study in a later chapter. But

- 5 David C. Mitchell challenges this assumption vigorously in *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms* (Newton Mearns, Scotland: Campbell, 2003), chap. 2.
- 6 Sigmund Mowinckel, *Offersang og sangoffer; salmediktningen i Bibelen* 9 (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1951), 492; Delekat, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 280, cited in Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 4 vols., trans. and ed. under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999), 566 (s.v. מְזִמֹּר).

we should be aware of the role of both in the psalter. The Psalms are prayers of petition and praise expressed in music and poetry. Music and poetry seem always to have been a chosen means of expressing the deep moving of the heart, and the Psalms are no exception. We will note this at times throughout this book, and the Psalter itself reminds us of its musical orientation with its frequent designation “To the choirmaster.” As we will see, at least the majority of the Psalms were composed specifically for use in the temple to accompany the Mosaic ceremonies. The frequent “Selah” is probably another musical notation, perhaps to signal an interlude, although no one knows its precise meaning (some sixty definitions have been proposed!). Other musical designations appear in the superscripts also—although, again, the precise meanings of many have been lost to us. And many of the psalms themselves call for enthusiastic engagement in song and musical accompaniment.

We have all experienced the stimulating effects of music, both emotionally and intellectually. Music has an ability to inspire and enthuse the listener and performer, and music in David’s time, as now, served the important function of attaching truth to emotion. Most of us who have had a long experience in the church have found that the great hymns we have sung have burrowed deep into our hearts such that, as needed, they arise in our memory with great spiritual power and with encouragement. Not just the words but the words set to music has a profound effect. So also with the Psalms. Both the laments and the joys of the Psalter were set to music to enhance their messages, and we do well to keep this musical atmosphere of the temple in mind as we read them.

The Psalter’s “Five Books”

We will address this important topic at some length in the final chapter, but it will be helpful to note up front that the Psalter, as we have it, is a final product. It is a “hymnbook” of one hundred and fifty psalms carefully arranged and divided by doxologies at the end of Psalms 41, 72, 89, and 106 into five “books”:

Book 1: Psalms 1–41

Book 2: Psalms 42–72

Book 3: Psalms 73–89

Book 4: Psalms 90–106

Book 5: Psalms 107–150

Just briefly, for now, we should note that these five books represent the history of Israel from the united monarchy to the exile.

Books 1–2 are principally by David and represent the triumph of the king. Here very often David is in crisis, but his psalms usually end in praise.

Book 3 anticipates Israel's exile. This is known as the “dark book” of the Psalter. Here Israel's kings—the house of David—fail, and the sanctuary is destroyed. This book climaxes in Psalm 89 and its lament of the seeming collapse of the Davidic covenant.

Book 4 is oriented to Israel in exile. She has no king, but here the psalms fall back on God in trust that he is their king. Hope is still alive because God is Israel's eternal refuge.

Book 5 praises God for Israel's restoration and return from exile, and here praise is offered to him from among the nations.

Studying and Understanding the Psalms

It is often pointed out that the Psalms reflect virtually every human emotion. They are “mirrors of the soul,” as Calvin famously remarked.⁷ This is a valuable observation, particularly in that in the Psalms we find these emotions as they are brought before the Lord. Our fears, our anger, our distress, our joy, our anxiety—in the Psalms we find how to bring these to God in prayer and in song. And because of this

7 J. A. De Jong, “‘An Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul’: Insights into Calvin's Spirituality from His Psalm Commentary,” in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor*, ed. W. H. Neuser (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 121–41, cited in Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 64.

the Psalter is often seen as a sort of spiritual and emotional “pick-me-up.” This is good, as far as it goes, and it explains in some measure the Psalms’ popularity. But the message of the Psalms goes far deeper, addressing the entire range of human existence in its relationship to God, and we must seek in our reading of the Psalter to go beyond the emotional pick-me-up and uncover its message in its fullness for the metanarrative of the Bible and for our own spiritual lives.

The Book of Psalms is not only the Bible’s most popular book. It is also one of the longest and most complex books, containing a collection of religious Hebrew poetry extending over a period of about one thousand years, from Moses (Ps. 90) to the exilic era (Ps. 137). It achieved its final shape before the time of the New Testament. The book of Psalms contains a variety of genres. Some psalms are prayers. Some are praises, both individual and community oriented. Some express praise for who God is and what he has done in the past and will do in the future. Others (“new songs”) express praise for recent personal intervention and deliverance. And still others praise God for his self-revelation of his nature, for his saving deeds, for Torah, and for Zion. Some psalms, by contrast, lament or complain and cry out to God for help in current crises. Some psalms ask for God to destroy the enemy without mercy. Some psalms are marked by exuberant joy, and others are marked by deep soul anguish and suffering. Some are prayers, and some are prophecies. Some express robust trust in God’s providential care. Some provide historical narrative. Some sing of Zion, the place of God’s dwelling. Some are “didactic,” teaching through meditating on the law, through historical narratives, or sounding like the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. In some psalms the psalmist speaks to God; in others, he speaks of God to others. The Psalter consists of a wide array of genres indeed.

This present book attempts to enable better reading and understanding of these psalms in their own context as intended by their authors. It is one (wonderful) thing to read the Psalms quickly and hope to pick up a devotional gem along the way, but it is quite another to read with insight to the psalm’s message. The complexities of the book of Psalms

present unique challenges to interpretation, and even its poetry requires thoughtful reflection. The historical setting of the Psalms themselves is distant from ours, and even the (old covenant) religious setting differs considerably from ours. All this requires significant learning on our part to maximize our understanding.⁸

The attempt here is not a commentary, although there is quite a bit of that. The attempt is not to produce a biblical theology of the Psalter, although there is much of that also. The attempt here is something preliminary to all that. We want to enter the preunderstandings, the mind of the psalmists, as it were, and gain the proper lenses for reading the psalms so that we can interpret more faithfully, understand more precisely, develop our theology more firmly, and expound more fully. The concern here is with fundamentals of understanding and interpreting the Psalms. It is a truism: the meaning of a text cannot be known until it is known *how* it means, and so we explore just how the various psalms go about establishing their message. We want to understand how the various psalms “work”—how the psalmists structured them and how they intended them to be read and used. In brief, we want to find just how the psalmists go about conveying their message.

To accomplish this goal, we must learn to approach the Psalms from various angles simultaneously:

Chapter 1 introduces the Psalter in broad terms.

Chapter 2 sketches out the leading factors necessary for a responsible interpretation of the Psalter.

Chapter 3 examines the historical setting of the Psalms—specifically, the superscripts, the question of Davidic authorship.

Chapter 4 demonstrates the royal orientation of the Psalter, its focus on the Davidic king, which forms the ground of its messianic outlook.

8 For significant contributions to the study of Psalms in the last half century, see Willem A. VanGemeren, “Entering the Textual World of the Psalms: Literary Analysis,” in *The Psalms: Language for All Seasons of the Soul*, ed. Andrew J. Schmutzer and David Howard Jr. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013), 29–48.

Chapter 5 examines the liturgical setting of the psalms and their use in temple worship.

Chapter 6 examines the various poetic devices employed by the psalmists to convey their message. Here we consider how parallelism and imagery, for example, convey meaning.

Chapters 7–11 highlight “form criticism” and examine the various genres of psalms and their respective forms—hymns of praise, petition psalms, songs of grateful praise, and psalms of trust. Recognizing these forms is basic to understanding the psalmist’s message.

Chapter 12 surveys how the Psalms point us to Christ.

Chapter 13 examines didactic psalms.

Chapter 14 examines how a text establishes its meaning through various rhetorical devices and conventions.

Chapter 15 examines how the book of Psalms was put together and considers the message of its ordering and final arrangement.

Our method to achieving our goal will be, first, to learn how to read the Psalms with these various lenses in place. Then, at each step, we will examine a variety of representative psalms with the new lenses and provide selected expositions. In each category we have arranged the selected psalms not in numerical order but according to their respective treatments. First we highlight some psalms briefly to demonstrate a given psalm form, and then we progress to “exceptional” cases and fuller expositions.

The words of the psalmists are by the Spirit’s inspiration of the word of God to us. Combining these various interpretive approaches, and trusting the Spirit’s illumination, we hope to gain a clear understanding of this ancient and beloved book—and then to internalize them and so increase our knowledge and love for the triune God who inspired them, and to grow in righteousness to his glory. In this way, it is hoped, our own sacrifice of praises and petitions to God will become ever more pleasing to him.

PSALM 1

WICKET GATE TO THE PSALTER

As we have noted, not all psalms are alike. There is a variety of psalm genres, and there are subvarieties also. One comparatively small but important group of psalms is the didactic psalms, psalms given to moral and ethical instruction directing God's people in faithful living before him. A subgroup is the Torah psalms, which commend the law as a source of authoritative instruction. We will examine this genre in a later chapter, but we meet a didactic-torah psalm immediately as we open the Psalter. Psalm 1 is not praise as such, and it is not petition. It is instruction to embrace the law for faithful living before God, and with this instruction, this opening psalm prepares the reader for entering the book of Psalms as a whole.

We do not know who wrote this psalm. All we know about him (as we will see) is that he is a covenant partner with the Lord God, that he treasures God's law, that he is an inspired sage, and that he is a literary artist.

- 1 Blessed is the man⁹ who walks not in the counsel of the wicked
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
- 2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
- 3 He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
- 4 The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
- 5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,

9 Note that the Hebrew term for "man" here signifies a person, an individual within a social context, not a male in contrast to a female.

- nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
 6 for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked will perish.¹⁰

Structure

Rhetorical criticism has to do with the logic of the psalm and how it is put together. This psalm may be structured in a number of ways. One approach is to highlight the way the psalm is “stitched” together by contrasting positive and negative ideas.

“Does not walk in step with the wicked” (1:1)
 versus “His delight is in the law of the LORD” (1:2).

“He is like a tree” (1:3)
 versus “The wicked . . . / are like chaff” (1:4).

“The way of the righteous”
 versus “the way of the wicked” (1:6).

“The LORD knows the way of the righteous”
 versus “the way of the wicked will perish” (1:6).

Or this psalm may be structured in two halves, based on the two “ways”:

The way of the righteous (1:1–3)
 The way of the wicked (1:4–6)

Survey Exposition¹¹

The psalm begins similarly to Jesus’s “Beatitudes” (Matt. 5:3–12). It pronounces the blessedness of the person who is devoted to the LORD’s law. It has become popular to translate the word “blessed” (אַשְׁרֵי) as

¹⁰ In some places throughout this book, poetry line breaks in the ESV have been altered to better reflect the original language and meaning of the psalm at hand.

¹¹ See also Waltke and Houston, *Psalms as Christian Worship*, chap. 4.

“happy,” but this is inadequate and relatively trite. God’s “blessing” ultimately results in happiness, but the two concepts are not the same. We probably do not have an exact equivalent for this word in English. The Hebrew word usually refers to the future and indicates a blessed destiny based on your relationship with God and his favor. In Job 5:17–18, for example, we read,

blessed is the one whom God reproves; therefore despise not
the discipline of the Almighty.
For he wounds, but he binds up; he shatters, but his hands heal.

The idea is that you will have a blessed future, favored by God. This sense is conveyed in the New Testament in the Beatitudes of Jesus in Matthew 5. The “blessed” (μακάριος) person may be one who mourns and suffers and is persecuted or even put to death, but he is “blessed” nonetheless. The “blessed” person is one who is favored by God for being faithful to him; rather than cursed, he will be rewarded. “Happy” fails to capture this sense, but in English we have no exact equivalent. Perhaps “How rewarding” or “How favored” would come closest.

So the Psalter opens with the prospect of divine favor—surely the highest hope any person could entertain. Psalm 1:1–2 describes the reason for that blessedness, explaining in terms of this person’s behavior and ideals. The blessed person is one “who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, / nor stands in the way of sinners, / nor sits in the seat of scoffers” (1:1), but rather “delights” in and “meditates” on “the law of the LORD” (1:2). The metaphor of the two divergent “ways” dominates this psalm, as it does the book of Proverbs. “The way” in 1:1 and 1:6 brackets Psalm 1 (an *inclusio*), and by this metaphor life is pictured as a journey—a common figure in both Psalms and Proverbs. “Way” connotes the context, conduct, and consequences of a particular direction taken in life, and this psalm stresses that the “way” of the righteous differs from the “way” of the wicked in these respects.

In 1:1, the expression “stand in the way of sinners” presents a challenge in translation. To “stand in the way” frequently means to

obstruct or oppose. Those of us who grew up in the church are so familiar with Psalm 1:1 that we scarcely notice that this can be—and in fact often is—confusing to the new convert reading the psalm. Many have taken “does not stand in the way of sinners” to mean “does not interfere” with sinners in their course of sin. To avoid this confusion, the NIV translates it as “does not . . . stand in the way that sinners take,” adding the idea of “take” to clarify. That is, the blessed person is the one who does not “go the same way” as sinners. Nor does he heed the counsel of the wicked or give ear to those who scoff at divine wisdom.

As commentators commonly observe, 1:1 reflects a sense of progression, a hardening in sin on several levels:

- The nouns “counsel . . . way . . . seat” moves from sinful advice to sinful behavior and then to settled association with sin.
- “Wicked . . . sinners . . . scoffers” likewise moves from “wicked,” a broad term for those who violate God’s law and incur guilt, to “sinners,” a term for criminals, and then to “scuffers,” who mock the teachings of Scripture.
- The verbs slow down, as it were, from “walking” to “standing” and finally to “sitting,” indicating again a progressive hardening in sin.

Together this well-ordered terminology reflects “a gradual descent into evil, in which one first walks alongside, then stops, and ultimately takes up permanent residence in the company of the wicked.¹² James Smith explains,

Sin takes a downward course. Adoption of the principles of the wicked (“walked in the counsel of wicked men”) leads to persistence in the practices of notorious offenders (“stood in the way of sinners”).

12 Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms Volume 1*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 94.

This in turn leads to deliberate association with those who openly mock at faith (“sit in the seat of the scorers.”).¹³

The blessed person does not think like the wicked, behave like the wicked, or take part in wickedness in any way. He or she will not take one step onto this slippery “way” to destruction. The “blessed” person takes a different route in life entirely, pursuing the way directed by “the law of the LORD” (1:2). “Law” here is *Torah*, which in the book of Psalms invariably refers to the Mosaic Law and essentially connotes catechetical instruction, not the “commanding” aspects of the law only but the law’s entire direction for living. It is instruction for living. It has to do with a way of life, the way you live because you believe God has redeemed you. The psalmist insists that the “blessed” person is the one who lives by God’s direction and is not influenced by the ungodly.

Those who are blessed “delight” in this divine instruction (1:2a). They do not merely conform outwardly. They understand the value of God’s revealed will and prize it accordingly, with zeal and affection. It is not a drudgery but a joy to live by divine instruction—they find it rewarding. Thus, they “meditate” on it continuously (1:2b). This is not the meditation of mysticism in search of inner lights. It is careful, prolonged contemplation, poring over the Scriptures eagerly to know God in his self-revelation and to live unto him faithfully. Implicit is the idea of trust: the blessed are those who trust God’s direction for life; convinced that this instruction is best, they entrust their lives to it.¹⁴ Obedience, therefore, is not begrudging but joyful and confident. A regenerate heart is obviously presupposed. This person is “righteous” (1:6) and has godly appetites. This is not legalism but childlike dependence upon God in recognition of his law’s ideal. And by extension we must of course understand this in terms of the believer’s delight in all the word of God, climaxing in the supreme revelation of God in Christ. This is what distinguishes the righteous from the wicked—their

13 James E. Smith, *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1996), 216.

14 James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 42.

attitude toward and response to God's word. The righteous recognize God's wisdom and authority, and so they approach his word worshipfully and submit to it gratefully. This entails both the negative and the positive: the godly will not follow the way of sin but will delightfully pursue the way of God's word. The wicked think they will find joy in the pursuit of sin. The righteous know better: they understand the value of God's word and so are eager to know it and be shaped by it. Thus they "meditate" on it continuously, "day and night." They pay attention to it and accept it and prayerfully seek by God's enabling grace to live by it.

Psalm 1:3–4 draws out the contrast between the wicked and the righteous, a contrast already implicit in 1:1–2. The wicked delight in the way of sin and devote themselves to it. Those who are blessed reject the way of sin and love the way of righteousness; they value and delight in God's instruction for life, devote themselves to it, and seek to live accordingly.

As a consequence of this delighted reception of God's word, the godly person "is like a tree / planted by streams of water / that yields its fruit in its season, / and its leaf does not wither. / In all that he does, he prospers" (1:3). The picture is that of a tree transplanted (לְהַנְטֵץ) and placed next to an irrigation channel (אֲבָקָה) where it receives continuous nourishment and so is strong, is stable, and produces fruit (cf. Ps. 92:12–15; Jer. 17:5–8). The metaphor points us to the word of God as nourishing and invigorating. Like a tree by a canal, the blessed person is well nourished, stable, and fruitful (cf. John 15:1–6), enjoying eternal life here and now. This person who pursues God's law and who is nourished by it "prosperes" and succeeds in life under God (Ps. 1:3; cf. Josh. 1:8).

The "blessed" person of the first stanza is the "righteous" person of the second (Ps. 1:5–6) and here stands in contrast to the "wicked." The psalmist does not describe the wicked with the same detail as it does the righteous, but he does set them in stark contrast: The wicked are "not so" (1:4). This contrast reaches back to 1:1–3. The righteous treasures God's law and is faithful to it; the wicked do not treasure it and, in fact, oppose it. They are "wicked." Nor do the wicked have a

fruitful, stable existence, as the righteous do; rather, they are unstable, worthless, and fleeting—“like chaff that the wind drives away.” Artur Weiser comments perceptively that

in the opinion of the poet the life of the wicked, a life lived apart from God, is just as empty, just as meaningless and worthless as the chaff. To anyone holding such a view God means indeed everything, and everything else which life could offer in other respects and which from the human point of view might be a matter of temptation is nothing in comparison with it.¹⁵

The self-directed life is indeed chaff-like and worthless, as the book of Ecclesiastes argues at length. This is likely entailed in the psalmist’s imagery. But what his simile ultimately signifies (“therefore,” Ps. 1:5) is that in the final judgment: “the wicked will not stand [their ground]” or “pass muster,”¹⁶ or have part “in the assembly of the righteous.” Like worthless chaff that is blown away, the wicked will not endure judgment (1:4, 6). Unlike Psalm 73, this psalm turns a blind eye to the present prosperity of the wicked; it looks only at the end of the way, how it turns out. The righteous and the wicked come to two very different ends, and the difference turns on their response to God’s word. Here, along with 1:6, the psalm links to a prominent theme of Scripture—that of eschatological judgment. The climactic establishing of the kingdom of God will be marked by the final blessedness of the righteous and destruction of the wicked (cf. Dan. 12:2; Matt. 3:11–12; 7:13–27; 24:37–41; 25:13–46; 2 Thess. 1:5–10; Rev. 19–22).

Many have observed further hints of an eschatological perspective here. The “judgment” and “perish[ing]” in view (Ps. 1:5–6) is certainly, at least ultimately, eschatological, and “chaff” is a familiar

15 Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 106.

16 A. H. McNeile, *The Psalms*, vol. 1 of *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. C. Gore, H. L. Goudge, and A. Guillaume (New York: Macmillan, 1942), 345.

symbol employed in that context (cf. Matt. 3:11–12; 7:21–27). The precise language of the Edenic allusions of Ps. 1:3 is taken up in Ezekiel’s vision of the eschatological temple (Ezek. 47:12). So also the “new creation” connotations of the well-nourished tree planted by the water (cf. Ps. 92:13–14; Isa. 30:25; 32:2; Ezek. 17:1–23; 19:10, 13; 47). “Transplanted upon [חַי] rivers of waters” (Ps. 1:3, authors’ translation) may echo in Ps. 2:7, the king enthroned “upon Zion.” This considered, the “it shall come to pass” (1:3, הַיָּבֹא) just may have eschatological overtones.¹⁷

Psalm 1:6 summarizes. On the one hand, “the LORD knows the way of the righteous.” To “know” in Scripture often signifies knowing with favor (cf. Ps. 31:7; 37:18; Amos 3:2; Matt. 7:23; Rom. 11:2; 2 Tim. 2:19), and that is plainly its connotation here. The righteous person, the one who treasures God’s word, enjoys God’s favor, and will have a sure standing in judgment. The righteous are “blessed”—God regards them with favor and watches over them accordingly. And so in the day of judgment they will “stand.” “But the way of the wicked will perish” (Ps. 1:6)—they will end in ruin (cf. 2:10–12). God does not “know” them.

This psalm is one of sustained contrast between the righteous and the wicked, and the difference between them is graphically portrayed in the first and last words: “Blessed . . . perish.” The two ways differ greatly in life and in death, in time and for eternity. “So the two ways, and there is no third, part for ever.”¹⁸

We may outline the psalm as follows:

- I. The two ways (1:1–2)
- II. The two ways pictured (1:3–4)
- III. The two ends (1:5–6)

¹⁷ See Robert L. Cole, “Psalms 1–2: The Psalter’s Introduction,” in Schmutzer and Howard, *The Psalms*, 189–92. See also James M. Hamilton Jr., *Psalms*, vol. 1, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 94–96.

¹⁸ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 66.

Psalm 1 in the Psalter

The instruction of Psalm 1 opens the Psalter and prepares the reader for entering. It also identifies those for whom the Psalter is intended—the righteous. The Psalter is for those pronounced “blessed,” who refuse the way of sin and devote themselves to divine revelation. God does not want the feigned worship of the wicked—he despises it and finds it repugnant. He accepts only the worship of the righteous, those who honor him with their life as well as their lips. Since the days of the early church, Christians have recognized that Psalm 1 functions as a gateway to the Psalter—the way in. In his masterful allegory, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan presents one Pilgrim fleeing from the City of Destruction. This pilgrim realizes that the city is doomed, and he wants to escape. And he soon learns that he has to go through the wicket gate to enter the road to the Celestial City. If he will not go through the gate, then he must return to the City of Destruction. There is no third way. That is how Psalm 1 functions in the Psalter. There is no third way. We either enter as “the righteous” that Psalm 1 describes or we have no place in the book of Psalms at all. “Psalm 1 stands like a Levitical gatekeeper, warning the wicked to proceed no further.”¹⁹ “Just as one must reject profane and wicked conduct to enter a holy area (cf. Isa. 55 and Prov. 9:1–6), so one must reject wicked companions to pray the sacred psalms.”²⁰

The Psalter therefore begins by declaring that godliness is essential to worship. God does not want worship from unclean people (cf. Ps. 24:3–4). Such “worship” would be abominable to him. Obedience is required. Nor are these didactic psalms concerned with mere external adherence to the law (legalism); they are concerned with a heart for God and a dependence upon him to live faithfully.

In a later chapter we will examine Psalm 2, a psalm of the messianic King. But we should note here that along with Psalm 1, Psalm 2 completes the “gateway” to the Psalter. There are significant verbal links between

19 Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 55.

20 Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 1–72*, Abington Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 41.

Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 that together indicate that these two psalms were intended by the final editors of the Psalter to be together. For example, Psalm 1 begins by pronouncing “blessed” (יְבֹרָכֶה) the person who adheres to God’s law; Psalm 2 ends with the same pronouncement regarding those who submit willingly to his rule (2:12). Psalm 1:1 warns of the “seat” (מוֹשֵׁב) of the mockers; Psalm 2:4 reassures us that God is “seated” on his throne. In 1:2 the blessed man “meditates” (הִתְהַלֵּךְ) on the law of the Lord; in 2:1 the nations “plot” their vain rebellion. Both psalms employ words for mocking: in Psalm 1 the wicked mock the righteous, and in Psalm 2 God mocks the wicked. The key word “way” of Psalm 1 (דֶּרֶךְ, 1:1, 6) concludes Psalm 2 also (2:12). The warning that the wicked will “perish” (אָבַד) concludes both psalms (1:6; 2:12). The wicked in Psalm 1 who reject God’s law and therefore “perish” are the ones who in Psalm 2 oppose God’s King and so will be destroyed by him. The wicked who reject God’s law in Psalm 1 are the “heathen” (KJV), rebellious nations, of Psalm 2 who rage and conspire against God and his king. Psalm 1 is about the law, and Psalm 2 is prophecy—law and prophecy, the twin “foci around which the whole of the Old Testament moves.”²¹ Psalm 1 directs the reader to a right attitude toward the law, and Psalm 2 “gives the essence of prophecy.”²² These verbal and conceptual links indicate an intended unity of these two psalms that together form an introduction or gateway to the Psalter.²³

The parallels go further. Psalm 1 counsels regarding morals and righteousness, describing the kind of person who may enter and profit from the Psalter. Psalm 2, a psalm of the great King, presents us with the subject and hero of the Psalter who is celebrated throughout. Put more simply, Psalm 1 tells us *for whom* the Psalter is intended (the righteous), and Psalm 2 tells us *about whom* it speaks (the King). “While Psalm 1 provides us with insight into the purpose of the book of Psalms

21 W. Graham Scroggie, *The Psalms* (Ada, MI: Revell, 1978), 48.

22 H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1969), 31.

23 Some early manuscripts of Acts 13:33 identify our Ps. 2 as “the first psalm.” Metzger here summarizes impressive evidence that the editors intended for Pss. 1–2 to form a unit. See Bruce Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: American Bible Society, 1994), 363–64.

[instruction in the law of the LORD], Psalm 2 provides us a window on the message of the whole” (the Lord’s reign).²⁴ The Psalter, like the rest of the Bible, is principally concerned with the establishing of God’s kingdom in the earth through his appointed King, the Lord Jesus Christ. So we might say that if Psalm 2 tells us of the King’s foreign policy, then Psalm 1 provides his domestic policy, describing his kingdom ideals. And if Psalm 2 presents the King in his royal rule, Psalm 1 presents his character. Psalm 1:3 makes unmistakable allusion to Joshua 1:8, only with the obvious difference that Joshua’s prosperity and success is conditional, while that of the blessed man of Psalm 1:3 is certain.²⁵ In this way the “prosperous” man of Psalm 1:3 is parallel to the one in Psalm 2 who is enthroned and brings God’s kingdom to full realization.

These observations seem to indicate clearly that these two psalms, though independent, were brought together by the final editors to open the door and provide entrance to the Psalter as a whole. They have a uniform message—the pious and righteous are fully rewarded, and in the time of judgment they triumph over the wicked in the presence of the king.²⁶

Moreover, these two psalms set a trajectory that continues through the Psalms and the entire biblical canon. Psalm 1 may resonate with the redeemed heart and excite joy by its ideal and love for God’s word: this is what God’s will done on earth as in heaven looks like! Yet this idealized portrait of the righteous person may also arouse feelings of guilt for our failures to live up to that ideal. This psalm indeed presses its ideal on us, and it is the mark of God’s people that we make it our goal. Yet it is a goal that not one of us attains—not David, not Moses, not Abraham.

Ultimately, in the larger flow of Scripture and even within the Psalter itself, Psalm 1 points us to another Joshua who delights and meditates

24 Mark D. Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook*, Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2007), 59.

25 Cole, “Psalms 1–2,” 190. Cf. Hamilton, *Psalms*, 96.

26 See Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 884–85.

on God's law (1:2–3; cf. Josh. 1:8) and therefore leads the people of God aright.²⁷ Psalm 1 introduces us to the great King of Psalm 2 who as our representative and as the very embodiment of the righteous person of Psalm 1 ascends the hill of the LORD with “clean hands and a pure heart” (24:3–4)—the one who steadfastly refused the counsel of the wicked (Matt. 4:1–11), the one who (unlike King Saul; 1 Sam. 15:22–23) delighted in the law of the Lord supremely (Matt. 3:17; John 4:34) and followed it perfectly (John 8:44), the one who took our sin to himself and became for us all the righteousness God requires of us (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21), the one who by his Spirit writes God's law on our hearts (Jer. 31:31–34) and enables us to bear fruit unto God (John 15:1–6; 17:17), and the one who shares his glorious reign with all those who submit to his rule and take refuge in him (Ps. 2:10–12).

27 Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 84.