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**The Shape of the Psalter and the Lord’s Covenant
Faithfulness through Israel’s Disobedience**

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Introduction..... 1
A. The Canonical Approach to the Psalter..... 2
B. The Macrostructure of the Psalter 5
 1. Psalms 1-2 as an Introduction to the Psalter..... 7
 2. The Shape of Book I (Psalms 3-41) 12
 3. The Shape of Book II (Psalms 42-72)..... 13
 4. The Shape of Book III (Psalms 73-89)..... 15
 5. The Shape of Book IV (Psalms 90-106)..... 19
 6. The Shape of Book V (Psalms 107-145) and the Concluding Doxology (Psalms
 146-150) 22
Conclusion 26
Bibliography 27

Introduction

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. (Exodus 34:6-8)

The Lord’s patient and persistent steadfast love and covenant faithfulness, or *hesed*, is a central theme throughout Scripture, as is

humanity's response of worship. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Psalms, which have served to shape the hearts of God's people, are overflowing with the acknowledgement of God's gracious forgiveness and *hesed*. The Psalter also highlights the gravity and consequence of Israel's sin, which ultimately led to the loss of their land, their temple, and their king. God's *hesed* and Israel's shattered state of existence after the events of 586 BC may lead one to wonder, did God really remain faithful to Israel, given their breach of the covenant? If so, what did that faithfulness look like, if not the protection of Zion and her king? This paper seeks to examine how the faithfulness of the Lord vis-à-vis Israel's disobedience is portrayed by the editorial arrangement and structure of the final form of the Psalter. After a brief introduction to the canonical approach to the Psalter, we will examine its shape, paying particular attention to psalms introducing and concluding each section, and focusing primarily on how the shape of the Psalms presents the *hesed* of the Lord.

A. The Canonical Approach to the Psalter

Prior to the Enlightenment, Psalms scholarship within the church was dominated by allegorical and Christological hermeneutics. After the Enlightenment, focus shifted to the concerns of historical criticism. In the early twentieth century, however, Hermann Gunkel changed the course of Psalms study once again through form criticism, which sought to identify and categorize psalms by form, or genre, and which sought to uncover the *Sitz im Leben* that gave rise to each form.¹ Form criticism remains a popular approach to the Psalms;² however, a canonical approach to the Psalms that takes into account the editorial purpose of its structure, as well as the literary

¹ Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-critical Introduction*, trans. Thomas M. Horner (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967).

² Gunkel's legacy is seen clearly in such common descriptors of the Psalms as the "hymnbook" of Israel, an unfortunate analogy because it assumes that the psalms were merely a collection of independent songs, with little or no connection to their literary contexts, and with no overarching literary plan. John H. Walton's analogy of a "cantata" is more appropriate because it acknowledges the independent origins of the individual psalms while maintaining that they "have been woven together into a secondary framework in order to address a particular subject," "Psalms: A Cantata about the Davidic Covenant" *JETS* 34 (1991): 24.

context of individual psalms, has gained substantial esteem among many scholars.

As early as the 1970's, Brevard Childs had voiced his desire for a thorough canonical approach to the Psalter, taking into account the effect of the editors' decision to place Psalm 1 as an introduction to the entire book, and the structural and theological function of the superscriptions.³ In 1981, under the supervision of Childs, Gerald Wilson wrote his ground-breaking dissertation, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, which carefully studied other collections of hymns in the ancient Near East, identified evidence for intentional editorial shaping in the Psalms, and discussed the theological implications of this shaping.⁴

Wilson's thesis immediately took hold in Psalms scholarship, and streams of important works have further contributed to a canonical approach the Psalms. These works fall into two broad categories, focusing on either (1) the "shaping" of the Psalms; that is, the history of how the Psalms came to be in their current shape;⁵ or (2) the "shape" of the Psalms; that is, the final, intentionally edited form of the Psalms. Those who study the shape of the Psalms generally

³ Brevard Childs, "Reflections on the Modern Study of the Psalms," in *Magdalia Dei, the Mighty Acts of God: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright* (ed. Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller, Jr.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1976), 377-388; See also Childs' approach to the Psalms in *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 504-525.

W. H. Bellinger cites Samuel R. Hirsch, a Jewish scholar writing in the late nineteenth century, among the first to read the Psalms as a story for Israel in the aftermath of the exile. Claus Westermann, too, in the mid-twentieth century, noticed that the Psalter moved from a tone of lament to psalms that were saturated in praise, with the turning point at Ps 90, Bellinger, 2-3. INTRO too

⁴ Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series, vol. 76; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

⁵ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger may be the best representatives of those scholars whose primary interest lays in the editing stages, motives, and background of the Psalter. See, for example, Hossfeld's "[Der Elohistische Psalter Ps 42-83: Entstehung und Programm](#)" in *Composition of the book of Psalms*, p 199-213 (ed. Erich Zenger; Walpole, MA: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2010) and Zenger's "[The Composition of the Book of Psalms = Neue Wege der Psalmenforschung: der Psalter als Buch: Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense LVII \(2008\)](#)" *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, 84 (2008): 625-635; and of course their commentary, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*, Hermeneia, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005). Susan Gillingham, too, has done substantial work arguing for a Levitical background for the shaping of the final form (see, for example, "The Levitical Singers and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter" in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms*, pp. 91-124.

focus on the macro structure of the entire book,⁶ the microstructure of adjacent psalms or collections,⁷ or themes or leitmotif that help to identify the form and overall purpose of the Psalms.⁸ However, although scholars have used the canonical approach to identify a (or the) key theological purpose for the whole Psalter, or parts of the Psalter, the canonical approach has not been used as a lens through which to view a particular theology.

This article seeks to fill this lacuna by examining how the editorial shape of the final form of the Psalter portrays God's covenant faithfulness to Israel through her own covenant disobedience. Certainly, a canonical approach to the Psalms is not the only valid methodological approach, but it an approach that has been overlooked for much of church history, and thus promises insightful contributions for our study.⁹

⁶Probably the best representatives of this approach are Gerald Wilson, Nancy L. de-Claissé-Walford, especially *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997); and J. Clinton McCann, "Books I-III and the Editorial Purpose of the Hebrew Psalter," in *Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann, Jr., pp. 93-107 (JSOTSupp, vol. 159; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993; and [*A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah*](#) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

⁷ David Howard's monograph is an excellent example of a work that has thoroughly tested Wilson's thesis of editorial intent on a smaller collection of psalms, *The Structure of Psalms 93-100* (Biblical and Judaic Studies, vol. 5; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997). Robert L. Cole examines Book III with a similar approach, *The Shape and Message of Book III (Psalms 73-89)* (JSOT; Sheffield, England : Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

⁸ Jerome F. D. Creach looks at how the imagery of the Lord being the psalmists' refuge helps to elucidate the shaping and shape of the Psalter, *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (JSOTSupp, vol. 217; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

⁹ By focusing on the "final form," we are not disregarding the original form, context, or significance (when such can even be found). However, the Psalms more than any other book have intentionally obscured their original contexts in order to be re-appropriated for the audiences of their current, canonical forms. We likewise acknowledge that the Psalms have a deeper significance in light of the New Testament, so that the messianic and eschatological thrusts of the Psalms are clearer than they perhaps were to the original authors or editors. Bruce Waltke describes these layers of understanding as "vistas" on a mountain, with four lookout points as it were on the way toward the summit: (1) the meaning to the original poet, (2) the meaning in a first temple collection of the psalms, (3) the meaning in the final form (our focus here), and (4) and the meaning in light of the entire canon and the coming of the messiah, Jesus, ("A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg* [ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg; Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1981], 9). By stopping short of the summit (the fourth level of meaning), we are simply looking at the text as Jesus' contemporaries would have read it, and we will leave the final push for the summit to New Testament scholars.

B. The Macrostructure of the Psalter

The Psalter is divided into five books, which is evinced by their concluding doxologies, the shift in authorship at the major disjunctions (for Books I-III), and the patterning of *hōdû* and *halēlû* (for Books IV-V).¹⁰ This five-fold division of the Psalter reflects the five-fold division of the Pentateuch, implying that the Psalms are the very Torah of the Lord. This intention is underscored by the introductory function of Psalm 1, which defines the righteous in terms of Torah devotion. A major disjunction between Books II and III is marked by the colophon in Ps 72:20: “The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended.” Books I and II are characterized by their predominant Davidic authorship, whereas Book III mostly contains psalms by Asaph and Korah. Book IV opens with a psalm of Moses, who is a dominant figure throughout the fourth book, and Book V contains many anonymous psalms within a Davidic frame.

The storyline of the Psalter follows the history of Israel from the Davidic monarchy to the postexilic context which produced its final form. Books I and II focus on David’s reign, ending with a Solomonic psalm that shows the transference of the covenant from David to his son. Book III illustrates the turmoil preceding the exile by alternating between lament and hope and concluding with the psalmist’s tragic lament over the Lord’s apparent rejection of the Davidic king and the destruction of Zion.¹¹ Book IV reflects the exilic psalmists who answer the lament of Book III by highlighting the kingship of Yahweh, which preceded the monarchy and which now has outlived the monarchy. Book V then reflects the postexilic perspective, celebrating Israel’s physical restoration from exile, and

¹⁰ Wilson notes that the headings and doxologies probably predated the final shaping of the Psalter, which means that the editors could not alter them, but they could and did reorder the psalms themselves, unless they were already part of an established collection, such as the Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-134), *Editing*, 157-158.

¹¹ Walton argues that Book III has the Assyrian crisis in view because Psalms 84-89 are a “positive response” to the preceding psalms (27). However, because Psalm 79 explicitly mentions the fall of Jerusalem (as Walton freely admits) and because Psalm 89 ends in what is far from a “positive response,” it is best to view this book as depicting the crisis of 586 BC. Moreover, the omission in Walton’s scheme of the exile, which was a major turning point in Israel’s history, is highly unlikely. The positive notes in Book III should rather be understood as hope in the midst of crisis and the beginnings of an answer to Israel’s dilemma and the questions of Psalm 89 (See McCann’s argument in the following note.)

spiritual restoration from their iniquities, culminating in exuberant praise.¹²

Most scholars agree that even if an earlier edition of the Psalter was structured around royal themes and Zion theology, the final form of the Psalter betrays a wisdom concern.¹³ This is clear from the prevalence of wisdom elements and the placement of wisdom psalms at crucial places throughout the Psalter, including the introduction and the seams.¹⁴ Also, many psalms that are not classified by form critics as wisdom psalms contain much wisdom terminology and many wisdom themes (such as the fear of the Lord and the contrast between the ways of the righteous and the wicked).¹⁵ Many of these wisdom psalms overlap in theme and function with teaching psalms. John Goldingay notes that Books I, III, IV, and V all open with didactic psalms, calling the Psalms a “primer” on worship.¹⁶ That the five books of the Psalms mirror the five books of the Torah underscores this teaching function.

This overall narrative and macrostructure of the Psalms sheds light on God’s faithfulness through Israel’s disobedience in several ways. First, the storyline shows a God who both judges sin and redeems his people, showing that judgment neither precludes deliverance nor voids the covenant. In fact, judging sin was a part of God’s covenant with his people. He warned Israel of the curses, including exile, that would fall upon them if they did not keep covenant (Deuteronomy 27-28). In fact, compared to the curses described in Deut 28:15-68, it appears that the Lord actually took it easy on Israel!

Second, the storyline of the Psalter shows that although God had rejected (at least from the perspective of the psalmists) the Davidic monarchy and his holy dwelling place (Psalm 89), this was only a

¹² McCann argues that the answer to the failure of the Davidic monarchy, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the exile is addressed already in Book I-III (“Books I-III,” 95), yet it seems that the answer is much more pronounced after the failure is made explicit in Psalm 89.

¹³ Wilson, *Editing*, 208; Howard, *The Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 200; J. Reidl, “Weisheitliche Bearbeitkkg von Psalmen: Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der Sammlung des Psalter,” in J. A. Emerton (ed.), *Congress Volumen, Vienna 1980* (VTSup, 32; Leiden: Brill, 1981).

¹⁴ Howard, *The Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 200.

¹⁵ Kenneth Kuntz, “[The canonical wisdom Psalms of ancient Israel : their rhetorical, thematic and formal dimensions.](#)” in *Rhetorical Criticism* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1974).

¹⁶ John Goldingay, *Psalms*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 23, 36.

temporary rejection. God would return his favor on his people, as books IV-V show, and he would yet again raise another king from the line of David. In the meantime, Israel still had the greatest king, Yahweh, of whom their human king was only a shadow. Wilson explains this movement well saying

As a result of its final form, the Psalter counters continuing concern for the restoration of the Davidic dynasty and kingdom with the wise counsel to seek refuge in a kingdom ‘not of this world’—the eternal kingdom in which YHWH alone is king.¹⁷

However, Wilson goes too far when he argues that the kingship of Yahweh in Book IV subverts the Davidic monarchy, which falls into the background for the remainder of the book. The Davidic psalms of Books I-II are emphatic that it is ultimately Yahweh who is king, and that David is merely his servant and earthly “vice regent.”¹⁸

This leads us to the third way in which the storyline of the Psalter sheds light on God’s covenant faithfulness, namely, that it points to an eschatological reality beyond that which was experienced by the original authors or even editors. Even through the most trying times, the psalmists maintain hope in God’s faithfulness, so that perennial question of “how long?” did not betray despair, but a deep-seated hope that God would in fact deliver them; it was only a question of when his appointed time would come. Childs states, “There was a reinterpretation which sought to understand the promise of David and Israel’s salvation as an eschatological event.”¹⁹ Indeed, the many Davidic and royal psalms that remain in the canonical form of the Psalter attest to this eschatological hope.²⁰

1. Psalms 1-2 as an Introduction to the Psalter

One of the most explicit and hermeneutically-important aspects of the Psalter’s shaping is the placement of Psalms 1-2 as the

¹⁷ Wilson, “Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalms,” in *Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann, Jr., pp. 72-82 (JSOTSupp; vol. 159; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 81.

¹⁸ Howard, *The Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 203. For psalms in Books I and II that emphasize the kingship of Yahweh, see, for example, Pss 5:2; 9:11; 10:16; 22:3; 22:28; 24:7-10; 29:10; 33:14; 44:4; 47:2, 6-8; 48:2; 55:19; 59:13; 66:7; and 68:24.

¹⁹ Childs, *Introduction*, 522.

²⁰ Waltke, “A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms,” 15-16.

introduction to the Psalter. While some scholars believe that only Psalm 1 serves as the introduction to the whole Psalter and that Psalm 2 serves as the introduction to Book I, there is ample evidence to suggest that the psalms should be read together.²¹ No other psalms in Book I are untitled, save for Psalms 10 and 33, which are traditionally read together with the preceding psalms. Psalms 1 and 2 also share key lexemes. Psalm 1 opens with *šērē* (“happy is”) and Psalm 2 closes with the same expression, forming an *inclusio* around both psalms. The psalms also share the term *hāgā*, used in Ps 1:2 of the righteous who “meditate” day and night on Torah, and in Ps 2:1 of the nations who “plot” against the Lord’s anointed.²²

Psalm 1 functions in several important ways. According to Wilson, it serves to shift the function of the Psalms from cultic worship to private meditation: “In a strange transformation, Israel’s words of response to her God have now become the Word of God to Israel.”²³ While Wilson goes too far when he asserts that the final form of the Psalter is now a book of private devotion and not one of public worship, it is true that Psalm 1 transforms what was once primarily used in cultic contexts into Scripture that can also be studied privately by anyone who aspires to be counted among the “righteous.”²⁴ This leads to another important aspect of Psalm 1, namely that it describes the type of person one must aspire to be in order to approach the Psalms: one who is righteous, meditating on and delighting in God’s Word, and seeking to understand his will through wisdom. The placement of Psalm 1 also prepares readers for two

²¹ See, e.g., Mays, “The Question of Context in Psalm Interpretation,” in *Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann, Jr., 14-20 (JSOTSupp; vol. 159; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 16; Howard, “Editorial Activity in the Psalter: A State-of-the-field Survey,” in *Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, 58.

²² De-Claissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 45; David Howard, *The Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 202. Moreover, the Old Greek translation adds titles to every psalm, save the first two, suggesting that they were interpreted as the introduction, *ibid.*, 203.

²³ Wilson, *Editing*, 206. Childs describes this effect thus: “The point to be stressed is that within Israel the psalms have been loosened from a given cultic context and the words assigned a significance in themselves as sacred scripture. These words of promise could be used in a variety of new contexts. They could be reworked and rearranged in a different situation without losing their meaning,” *Introduction*, 515.

²⁴ McCann warns against ignoring the communal focus of the psalms by becoming too engrossed in their individual focus: “While not denying that the psalms may address individuals in crisis in any generation, it also serves as a warning against allowing individual appropriation of the psalms to become a form of pious escapism that ignores the pain of others and the suffering of the world,” *Books I-III*, 107.

facets of wisdom that will be developed throughout the Psalms: the contrasting ways of the righteous and the wicked, and an emphasis on Torah.²⁵

Walter Brueggemann has uncovered another important function of Psalm 1. The psalm asserts that the righteous will be blessed and the wicked will be judged, yet this “orientation” meets “disorientation” almost immediately in Psalm 2, and especially Psalm 3, as well as many other psalms throughout the Psalter that wrestle with the antinomy between the retribution theology of Psalm 1 and the reality of the psalmists, in which the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper.²⁶ Psalm 2 opens by asking “Why do the nations rage?” (v1a), but if the wicked are like chaff (Ps 1:4b), why are the nations a threat, especially to the righteous who would presumably prosper in everything (Ps 1:3c)?²⁷ Brueggemann also notes that Psalm 150 ends in “unfettered” praise, begging the question of where within the Psalter lies the resolution.²⁸ He argues that the worshipper moves through the Psalter from simple obedience (Psalm 1) to “abandonment and trust” (Psalm 150), and he describes this move saying,

The move is difficult because Psalm 1 guarantees that the problem of theodicy will emerge, for in fact God is clearly not one who causes the righteous to flourish and the wicked to disappear. If we do not reflect much, we can imagine a direct move from obedience to praise. The lived experience of Israel, however, will not permit such an easy, unreflective, direct move. The Psalter itself knows better.²⁹

²⁵ Patrick D. Miller, “The Beginning of the Psalter,” in *Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, 85. The construction *šerē hā’iš* (“happy is the one”) is also characteristic of the wisdom literary conventions of Proverbs, Mays, “The Place of the Torah Psalms in the Psalter,” *JBL* 106 (1987): 4; Wilson, “King, Messiah, and the Reign of God: Revisiting the Royal Psalms and the Shape of the Psalter,” in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 395.

²⁶ Walter Brueggemann integrates the work of Paul Ricoeur by classifying psalms based on their function of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation (in that order), “Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function,” *JSOT* 17 (1980): 3-32.

²⁷ Terence Collins cites this link as further evidence that Psalms 1-2 should be read together as the introduction, “Decoding the Psalms: A Structural Approach to the Psalter,” *JSOT* 37 (1987): 49.

²⁸ Brueggemann, “Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Cano,” *JSOT* 50 (1991): 67.

²⁹ Brueggemann, “Response to James L. Mays, ‘the Question of Context,’” in *Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, 38.

Rather than a “direct move” from obedience to praise, Brueggemann argues that the psalmists move to praise through “candor about suffering and gratitude about hope.”³⁰ The turning point is Psalm 73, which opens Book III of the Psalter by affirming the theology of Psalm but then exposing how very different his reality in fact is.³¹ The only way beyond this impasse, according to Brueggemann, is to move “beyond protest toward profound trust in God who keeps faith (though not as simply as in Psalm 1), and who therefore will be praised.”

Brueggemann exposes an important facet of the final form of the Psalms, namely that Psalm 1 could not have been interpreted as normative. However, he unnecessarily denigrates the Psalm, thus missing much of its positive function. The fact that Psalm 1 does not speak to most experiences of reality yields two important truths that guide our reading of the Psalms. First, it speaks of the ideal Israelite, to which no sinner can yet fully aspire to. The juxtaposition with Psalm 2, which highlights the king, or the representative and ideal Israelite, further supports this thesis. Second, and most importantly, Psalm 1 points to an eschatological interpretation of Psalm 1. By the time of the final form, the royal psalms, including Psalm 2, were being interpreted eschatologically, which in turn places the piety of Psalm 1 in an eschatological framework.³² Yes, the righteous will be blessed and the wicked will be judged, but not necessarily in this lifetime.

But what of God’s *hesed*, of his steadfast love and covenant faithfulness? Does he remain faithful only to those with perfect obedience, condemning those who fall short of the Psalm 1 ideal? Brueggemann shows that the Lord’s *hesed* is not explicit in Psalm 1, but that it is showcased in the midst of the Psalter, through the laments, struggles, and hopes of the psalmists. He states, “While Yahweh’s *hesed* pays careful attention to the obedience of Israel, it is not in the end determined by it.” Indeed, the fidelity of humanity proves to be dependent on the fidelity of God.³³

³⁰ Brueggemann, “Bounded,” 72.

³¹ Brueggemann, “Response,” 40.

³² Mays, “The Place of the Torah Psalms,” 10-11.

³³ Brueggemann “Bounded,” 77.

In Psalm 2, the ways of the righteous and the wicked individuals in Psalm 1 are broadened to the ways of the righteous and the wicked nations, and in so doing, key motifs in both psalms are transformed. Moreover, the “wicked” in Psalm 1 are aligned with the “enemies” in Psalm 2, so that the wicked who do not seek God’s will or delight in his Word are specifically one of the “enemies” of the anointed of the Lord.³⁴ Psalm 2 also shifts from the individual meditating on Torah to the king and introduces the theme of refuge, describing the one who takes refuge in the Lord as “blessed.” The juxtaposition of a psalm focusing on individual piety (Psalm 1) and a psalm focusing on the king (Psalm 2) serves to democratize the latter.³⁵ Deut 17:18-20 prescribes the primary responsibility of the king of Israel as constant Torah meditation and adherence, and yet this is precisely the responsibility of each individual in Psalm 1. Thus, the king is the model layperson, which enables the laity to then re-appropriate the royal psalms for their own lives.³⁶

Psalms 1-2 also function to introduce the importance of God’s presence with his people as their ultimate source of blessedness. The enveloping beatitude of Psalm 2 concludes the psalm with the line, “Blessed are all who take refuge in him [the Lord],” which not only recalls the blessing of the righteous in Ps 1:1, but also highlights the importance of God’s presence as the ultimate blessing and security.³⁷ Yes, God is present through his representative king. Yes, he is present in his holy city and temple. But if and when these institutions fail due

³⁴ Miller, 88-89.

³⁵ Childs adds that the superscriptions of the psalms also serve to democratize and re-appropriate them for later generations: “The titles, far from tying these poems to the ancient past, serve to contemporize and individualize them for every generation of suffering and persecuted Israel,” “Reflections on the Modern Study of the Psalms, 384; c.f., Wilson, *Editing*, 172.

³⁶ Miller, 91. This democratization is supported by Psalm 8, which otherwise seems out of place in the context of laments, and which describes humanity as being “crowned with glory and honor” (v5b), and given “dominion” (v 6a) over creation. *Ibid.*, 92.

Mays notes how wisdom was also democratized by Psalm 1: “The torah of the Lord replaces wisdom and its human teachers. The responsibility that once was primarily that of Israel’s leaders is laid squarely on the shoulders of the pious,” “The Place of the Torah Psalms in the Psalter,” 4. However, although a democratization of wisdom seems apparent from Psalm 1, the Psalter does not seem to have replaced wisdom with Torah. In fact, most scholars agree that the final editors of the Psalter organized the book around wisdom, which of course includes the importance of Torah meditation, Wilson, “Editorial Linkage,” and Howard, *The Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 200.

³⁷ The theme of God’s presence as the psalmists’ ultimate blessing is recurrent in throughout the psalms, not least of all at the crux of Psalm 73, and arguably the entire Psalter, Ps 73:17.

to Israel's disobedience, he is still present to those who take refuge directly in him.

2. The Shape of Book I (Psalms 3-41)

Just as the *š'ere* ("happy is") construction formed an inclusio around Psalms 1-2 as the introduction to the Psalter, so also it forms an inclusio around Book 1 with the opening strophe of Ps 41:2: "Blessed is the one who considers the poor!"³⁸ Book I contains eight total beatitudes, most of which describe the blessedness of those who trust the Lord or whose sins are forgiven. In Ps 41:2, however, one's blessedness is characterized by one's relationship to others, namely the poor. Thus, those who are blessed in Book I of the Psalms are those who obey the two greatest commandments, loving God and others.³⁹ This construal of blessedness helps to nuance what the Psalms mean by "righteous," as McCann explains,

Righteousness in the Psalms is never self-righteousness. Again, righteousness, or prosperity, or happiness is essentially a matter or trust, of fundamental dependence upon God for life and direction and future.⁴⁰

God's *hesed*, even in Book I, was never conditioned upon Israel's obedience, but upon their trust in him.

But as we noted above, the righteous do not seem happy, at least not by most standards. McCann argues that the "shape" of happiness in Book I is not measured by material prosperity or even physical health and security, but by "the fundamental orientation of the self to God, constantly delighting in God's 'instruction' (Ps 1:2); and with finding 'refuge in God' (Ps 2:12)"⁴¹ and, in light of the closing beatitude in Ps 42:2, with loving one's neighbor, those whom God loves. But even with the confidence of the Lord's presence and guiding instruction, how can the psalmist truly feel blessed and happy while he is afflicted and the wicked prosper? Moreover, if God is present with the sufferer, then God suffers as well, for the enemies of

³⁸ Psalms 1 and 41 also form an inclusio with the term ("delighted"), in describing the psalmist's delight in the Torah of the Lord (Ps 1:2), and God's delight in the psalmist (Ps 41:11), McCann, "The Shape of Book I of the Psalter and the Shape of Human Happiness," in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 345.

³⁹ McCann, "The Shape of Book I," 344.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 344.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 343.

the Psalter are also the enemies of God.⁴² Again, the shape of happiness and the shape of Book I point towards a hope in a future fulfillment of full blessedness, as McCann explains: “the theological perspective of the Book of Psalms is eschatological—that is, God’s sovereignty is proclaimed amid persistent opposition that seems to deny it.”⁴³

3. The Shape of Book II (Psalms 42-72)

Book II concludes with one of the most explicit marks of shaping within the psalms, namely the colophon of Ps 72:2: “The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended,” thus characterizing these two books as being very Davidic. Psalm 3 introduces Book I and portrays David as the ideal king.⁴⁴ Indeed, he is credited with every psalm in that book (if, as was noted, Psalms 10 and 33 may be read with their preceding neighbors). In Book II, David remains the dominant voice, but he is not entirely infallible (Psalm 51), nor does he sing alone. In fact, the book opens with Korahite psalms, the very first of which shows that even during the “ideal” dynasty, suffering persisted.⁴⁵ David’s voice also begins to fade as only eighteen of the thirty-one psalms are attributed to him. Finally, by attributing the concluding psalm, Psalm 72, to his successor, Solomon, David falls almost entirely from view in Books III and IV.

The Korahite psalms that open Book II contribute greatly to our understanding of God’s faithfulness through Israel’s disobedience. Psalms 42 and 43 are individual laments in which the psalmist feels forgotten by the Lord (Ps 42:9b) and even rejected (Ps 43:2b); and yet in the same breath, he attributes *hesed* to the Lord (Ps 42:8a) and refers to God as his “rock” (Ps 42:9), “salvation” (Pss 42:11d and 43:5d), and “refuge” (Ps 43:2a).⁴⁶ Psalm 44 is a lament of a righteous

⁴²Many psalms speak of God’s enemies, but Pss 83:2, 89:51, and 139:20-22 emphasize that God’s enemies and the psalmists’ enemies are one and the same.

⁴³ McCann, “The Shape of Book I,” 345.

⁴⁴ De-Claissé-Walford, 7

⁴⁵ De-Claissé-Walford, 7.

⁴⁶ The many linguistic and thematic connections between Psalms 42 and 43 are well-known. Interestingly, the psalmist’s feelings of being forgotten and rejected are linked in these psalms by virtue of the repetition and slight alteration of the each reference’s strophe. In other words, whereas some strophes in Psalm 42 are repeated verbatim in Ps 43 (e.g., Ps 42:5, 11; c.f., Ps 43:5), Ps 43:2 is parallel to, but not identical with, Ps 42:9. This parallelism invites a semantic connection between the psalmist’s feelings of being forgotten and being rejected, which may suggest that feelings of rejection do not [Footnote continued on next page ...]

person (Ps 44:17-18), who pleads for God’s salvation “for the sake of [his] steadfast love,” showing that the basis for the Lord’s deliverance was his steadfast love. Psalm 45 is a royal psalm that combines human and divine kingship imagery, and Psalms 46-48 are Zion psalms, juxtaposing God’s cosmic reign with his local reign in Zion, showing that Zion was a microcosm of the world, a transformation that is elaborated on especially in Books III and V.

The ending of Book II also shows significant concerns of the Psalter in its canonical form. Psalm 72 closes the book with a positive tone, affirming the Davidic king’s righteousness and requesting the Lord’s blessing on the king, while maintaining that it is the Lord “who alone does wondrous things,” with the implication that his human vassal is merely his representation and servant. In addition, long before this psalm was strategically placed as the conclusion to the “prayers of David” and even long before the exile, readers would have recognized that Solomon did not fulfill his responsibility to the Davidic covenant. His idolatry and disobedience, which resulted in the division of the kingdom, would be his ultimate legacy, so that despite the psalm’s positive tone, focusing on the glory days of Solomon’s enthronement and reign, the observant reader anticipates impending judgment, and that judgment will come to a climax by the end of Book III.

Books I-II reveal what God desires from those in covenant relationship with him: repentance and a heart devoted exclusively to the Lord. The two figures who envelop these psalms, David and Solomon, illustrate that God forgives the penitent sinner, but judges the one who does not make Yahweh alone his refuge and trust. Thus, the Israelites who prayed these prayers and sang these songs would have found comfort in knowing that they, like David, would persevere in the covenant because they too trusted exclusively (albeit imperfectly) in the Lord’s unfailing *hesed*.

necessarily entail feelings of absolute denunciation. The psalmist’s feelings of rejection do not invalidate or challenge the Lord’s faithfulness; they merely express feelings that do not conform to the psalmist’s understanding of reality, a reality wherein God is refuge. The final strophe in both psalms illustrates how the psalmist reconciled this tension: with hope and praise for God’s salvation.

4. The Shape of Book III (Psalms 73-89)

The importance of Book III as a turning point in the Psalter is underscored by the strong disjunction between Psalms 72 and 73. In addition to the aforementioned colophon, the psalms differ in both authorship and genre, whereas most structural divisions in the Psalter involve a change in authorship, but a “softening” of the disjunction, or a “binding,” through the continuity in genre.⁴⁷ Also, in Books I-II, the psalmists primarily cry out for deliverance from physical enemies, whereas in Books IV-V, they plead more for deliverance from their own unfaithfulness,⁴⁸ leaving Book III as the turning point. The shift from Davidic and individual laments in Books I-II to communal laments in Book III also signals a shift from the representative king to those whom he represents. Nancy de-Claissé-Walford also notes this major disjunction, describing the first two books as answers to the question, “who are we?” and the remaining three books as answers to the question, “what are we to do?”⁴⁹

Psalm 73 opens Book III with language reminiscent of Psalm 1 (“Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart”) which the psalmist immediately calls into question. In his experience, the righteous are oppressed and have seemingly kept their hearts pure in vain (v 13), whereas the way of wicked seems to prosper (v 35). Such a reality does not correspond to the retribution theology of Psalm 1 or even the blessings and curses of the covenant. However, in v 17, the psalmist finds the key to his theological quandary: “until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.” Through fellowship with the Lord, who continues to “hold [the psalmist’s] right hand” throughout his sufferings, the psalmist realizes that the wicked will be judged, if not in this lifetime then at death. The psalmist concludes this pivotal lament by recounting Psalm 2: “I have made the Lord God my refuge,” thus alluding to both introductory psalms in this introduction to Book III, and helping to reorient the readers’ understanding of God’s *hesed* vis-à-vis the righteous and the wicked.

⁴⁷ Wilson, *Editing*, 165.

⁴⁸ Wilson, *Editing*, 208-209.

⁴⁹ De-Claissé-Walford, 79

Susan Gillingham identifies within the Asaphite collection the following arch pattern, which reveals an important structural correspondence between Psalms 73 and 78:⁵⁰

73	didactic psalm: God's judgment on the impious
74	communal lament
75-76	the divine response (through oracles): God's abode is in Zion
77	individual lament //
78	didactic psalm: God's judgment on his own people
79-80	communal laments
81-82	the divine response (through oracles): God's abode is in Zion
83	individual lament

Psalm 73 teaches through personal experience, while Psalm 78 teaches through the experience of Israel's history. It highlights how God is committed to keeping covenant with Israel's descendents, despite the sinfulness of their parents (v 5-8), showing that even God's temporary rejection of a generation does not affect his commitment to their children, which certainly would have encouraged the Israelites living in exile. Psalm 78 also shows how God punishes disbelief and lack of trust (v 21-22), yet in the very next line of the poem, God provides for that same generation with manna and meat (v 23-29). Again and again, God returns Israel's faithlessness with compassion and forgiveness (eg, v 37-39). Finally, God "rejects" Israel, and specifically Shiloh and the old framework of worship and leadership (v 59, 67), choosing instead the house of David and the city of Jerusalem (v 68).⁵¹ This strong language of rejection elucidates the use of rejection language in Psalm 89, where it is used of God's rejection of his anointed, the king. In both psalms, the Lord does not reject his people, but their leadership. Instead, he will eventually choose another king, a future, anointed Davidic king, to rule forever.

The alternation in Book III between psalms of lament and hope reflects the cycle of Israel's sin, judgment, cry for help, and deliverance, which serves to highlight the Lord's relentless love and forgiveness. This alternating structure also serves to reorient exilic

⁵⁰ Susan Gillingham, "The Zion Tradition and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter," in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, ed. John Day (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), 325.

⁵¹ Anthony F. Campbell, "[Psalm 78: a contribution to the theology of tenth century Israel.](#)" *CBO* 41 (1979), 61.

Israel's perception of the Davidic covenant. According to McCann, "The canonical juxtaposition of the traditional Davidic/Zion theology with community psalms of lament serves to signal the rejection of this basis for hope."⁵² The placement of Ps 78:68-72 (which espouses traditional Davidic/Zion theology) before Psalm 79 (which describes the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem) is a strong case in point.⁵³ Psalm 89 also points towards reorientation by shifting from a positive outlook on the traditional understanding of the Davidic covenant to a negative outlook of the "rejected" anointed monarch. However, the interspersed psalms that offer the hope of God's judgment of Israel's enemies and his faithfulness in generations past precludes the conclusion that the Davidic covenant has failed entirely.⁵⁴

Zion tradition is also transformed within what McCann calls "traditional Zion psalms." For example, Psalm 84 describes Zion as place attainable only in one's heart (v 5, 7), suggesting that the Zion metaphor has transformed into a spiritual reality in the present and a physical reality in the future. Similarly, Psalm 87 universalizes the Zion metaphor by describing it as the home of the nations. Thus, we need not assume that the juxtaposition of Zion psalms with laments is necessarily an effort to call traditional Zion theology into question, as though the editors were using psalms with bad theology to prove a point (c.f. Goldingay's similar view of Psalm 1 above). Rather, these psalms in and of themselves reveal a transformed, eschatological and universalized vision of Zion as a future reality that includes all nations, extends to the ends of the earth, and truly is indestructible.

The end of Book III is unquestionably the nadir of the entire of Psalter. Psalm 89 begins on a positive note, recounting the Davidic covenant and God's promise to "establish [David's] offspring forever" and to "build [his] throne for all generations" (v 4 and similarly in v 28-29; 36-37). The Lord even promises that although he will punish David's descendants if they transgress the Torah and God's will (v 30-31), he will nevertheless remain faithful to his covenant with David, and he will not remove from David his steadfast

⁵² McCann, "Books I-III," 99.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵⁴ McCann, "Books I-III," 100.

love (v 33-34). However, in v 38, the tone changes dramatically, and the remainder of the psalm seems to call into question all that precedes it. The psalmist accuses God of having “cast off and rejected” his anointed king and having “renounced the covenant with your servant” (v38-39). This lament over the failure of the Davidic king and the nations’ defeat over Israel is a direct foil to Psalm 2, which celebrates the reign of God’s anointed over the raging nations.⁵⁵

Wilson interprets this language as evidence that the Davidic covenant is “broken” and “failed”⁵⁶ and that the kingdom of Yahweh has replaced it, pointing to the emphasis on Yahweh’s kingship in Books IV-V. However, an emphasis on the reign of Yahweh is emphasized throughout the Psalter,⁵⁷ and even though it is of particular importance in the Yahweh Melek Psalms of Book IV (Psalms 93, 95-100), it is by no means incompatible with the reign of the Davidic king, the Lord’s anointed.⁵⁸ Rather than interpreting Psalm 89 as evidence of the failure of God’s covenant with Israel or as a final denunciation of every Davidic king, the readers of the final form of the Psalms would have understood it as a reprimand for their overreliance on a fallible institution that was only ever intended to represent Yahweh’s kingdom. Indeed, Psalm 89 does not reveal the failure of Yahweh to maintain covenant with Israel, but Israel’s failure to maintain covenant with Yahweh, as Howard explains,

[T]he point of the Psalter is not that the Davidic Covenant itself has failed; it is a gift from YHWH to David and to his own people Israel. Rather, YHWH’s people have failed, and thus the Davidic Covenant has of necessity taken a back seat historically (and in the Psalter) for a time.⁵⁹

Thus, Israel’s failure led to the temporary rejection of the Davidic king, but not an eternal rejection of him; the Lord’s promise to David for a descendent to sit on his throne forever would remain true. The Davidic line need not be consecutive to be eternal.

⁵⁵ Mays, “The Question of Context in Psalm Interpretation,” 16-17.

⁵⁶ Wilson, *Editing*, 213.

⁵⁷ See footnote 18 above.

⁵⁸ Howard, The structure of Psalms 93-100, 201.

⁵⁹ David Howard, The Structure of Psalms 93-100, 205.

Moreover, when the psalmist uses such strong language of rejection juxtaposed with sentiments of hope, it is clear that he is using phenomenological language to express what appears to be happening, as well as possibly hyperbolic language to bring out the gravity of the situation. From his exilic perspective, looking back at a destroyed Zion and a humiliated dynasty, the Davidic covenant seems to be over for good. God appears to have finally run out of patience. And yet, the psalmist asks the Lord “How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?” (v 46). If the psalmist truly believed that the Lord had rejected Israel forever, it would have been meaningless to ask the Lord “how long” he would continue to hide himself because the implicit answer would be “forever.” No, the psalmist maintains hope that the Lord will return his favor to his people and reestablish the Davidic dynasty. Moreover, since Israel prayed this psalm in exile, they must not have interpreted the events of 586 BC as a total failure of the covenant because they believed that it could be reestablished. Similarly, the horrors of the destruction of Zion and the experience of exile did not jade the chronicler’s positive perception of the Davidic covenant, so it is likely that the postexilic psalmists and editors responsible for the final form of the psalms likewise maintained optimism in the Davidic covenant.⁶⁰

5. The Shape of Book IV (Psalms 90-106)

Wilson calls Book IV the “editorial center” of the Psalter,⁶¹ and most scholars concur.⁶² Although we argued above that Psalm 89 did not announce the absolute failure of the Davidic covenant, it did effectively call the veracity of the Davidic covenant and the Lord’s *hesed* into question. Book IV responds to this query by emphasizing the eternal kingship of the Lord, reminding his people that he was their king long before there existed a monarchy to fail, and he was their refuge long before Mt. Zion was established.⁶³

⁶⁰ Ibid., 205.

⁶¹ Wilson, *Editing*, 215.

⁶² Creach is a notable exception. He believes that Book IV is not the center because the ideas expressed therein are already introduced in Books I-III, “Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter,” 125. McCann also emphasizes that the answers to Israel’s problems begin to surface before Books IV and V, *Books I-III*, 95. However, although the ideas have previously been expressed, their emphasis in Book IV, as well as the place of Book IV in the storyline of the Psalter, suggests that it is in fact the theological heart of the Psalter.

⁶³ Wilson, *Editing*, 215.

As he had done centuries before, the Lord reassures his people through the voice of Moses, to whom the introductory psalm is attributed (Psalm 90), and who is mentioned seven times in Psalms 90-106.⁶⁴ That Moses answers the lament of Psalm 89 is significant for at least two reasons: (1) Moses led Israel while the nation dwelt outside of their promised land, without a human king, and (2) Moses interceded for sinful Israel. De-Claissé-Walford shows how Moses had the unique role of persuading the Lord not to judge Israel according to their sins, but to forgive her graciously in accordance with his abundant *hesed*:

Only in Exodus 32 and Psalm 90 does a human being admonish God to “turn” (שׁוּב) and “repent” (נָחַם). And in both passages, Moses is the human being who commands YHWH not to act against the ancient Israelites in retribution for their sins.⁶⁵

The prominence of Moses and the diminished place of David in Book IV may also suggest that the editors are presenting the Mosaic covenant as the prior and thus principal covenant over and against the Davidic covenant that Israel felt had been forgotten.⁶⁶

Book IV answers the dilemma left by Psalm 89 in a clear, linear fashion. Psalm 90 functions as a wisdom psalm and a “bridge” between the laments of Book III and the “towering affirmations” later in Book IV.⁶⁷ This introductory psalm shifts the focus from the Lord’s sovereign rejection of the Davidic king to Israel’s sin, i.e., the cause of the breakdown of covenant (Ps 90:8).⁶⁸ After the cause of the problem has been identified as Israel’s sin, the solution is set forth

⁶⁴De-Claissé-Walford also notes the various allusions to Exodus and Deuteronomy throughout Book IV, 8-854; c.f., Robert E. Wallace, Robert E. *The Narrative Effect of Book IV of the Hebrew Psalter* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 19, 80, 90.

⁶⁵ De-Claissé-Walford, 85.

⁶⁶ Wallace, 68.

⁶⁷ Howard, “A Contextual Reading,” 111. De-Claissé-Walford also notes how Psalms 90 and 1 share important lexemes, so that the beginning of Book IV alludes to the beginning of the Psalter just as the beginning of Book III (Psalm 73) did, 86. Note how In Book III, the editors used a wisdom psalm (Psalm 73) to introduce the problem that would climax in Psalm 89, and in Book IV, the editors used another wisdom psalm (Psalm 90) to introduce the solution that would climax in the Yahweh Melek Psalms.

⁶⁸ Wilson, *Editing*, 215; Howard, “A Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” in *Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, 111.

in Psalm 91.⁶⁹ Israel must make Yahweh her refuge, trusting in him to deliver her and to keep her safe, and loving him (Ps 91:1-2, 9, 14). Psalm 92 responds to Psalm 91 with thanksgiving, and speaks of the “fool” and the “wicked” with wisdom language (Ps 92:6-7), reaffirming the conclusion of Psalm 73, that though the wicked prosper now, “they are doomed to destruction forever” (v 7c). Psalm 92 ends with language similar to Psalm 1, affirming the blessing of the righteous with an eschatological reorientation.

Psalms 93-100 are the Yahweh Melek Psalms, with the exception of Psalm 94, which shares language and themes similar to those of Psalms 90-92, thus serving to bind the beginning themes of the book with the Yahweh Melek Psalms.⁷⁰ Psalm 95 recalls how the unfaithfulness of Moses’ generation caused them to forfeit their enjoyment of the land. Such a reminder of the contingencies of the blessings of the covenant would have struck a sensitive nerve with the exilic Israelites who once again failed to maintain the blessing of the land due to their unfaithfulness. Note, however, that although the blessings of the covenant were contingent upon Israel’s faithfulness, the Lord’s *hesed* endured. The rest of the Yahweh Melek Psalms (Psalms 96-100) celebrate the Lord as a judge who punishes iniquity but readily forgives those who call upon him. Thus, the Lord did not ignore Israel’s iniquity, but he punished it; nor did he forgive Israel completely without warrant, as though grace were cheap. His forgiveness, rather, was dependent upon Israel’s repentance, and of course ultimately on the atoning work of his promised anointed one.

Psalms 101-103 are a Davidic group of psalms that reflect wisdom concerns, contrast the righteous and wicked, lament the transience of man, celebrate the kingship of Yahweh, and plead for his mercy.⁷¹ Psalm 104 has strong verbal ties to Psalm 103 (sharing

⁶⁹According to Howard, Ps 90 begins to answer Ps 89 by suggesting that “numbering our days” and aspiring to attain wisdom is the key to living in a covenant relationship with Yahweh, “A Contextual Reading,” 111.

⁷⁰Wilson refers to such this linking as an “overlap/interlock technique” that offers an “interpretive context,” “Shaping the Psalter,” 76. In the case of Psalm 94, the editor probably wanted his readers to interpret the Yahweh Melek (Psalms 93, 95-100) in light of Psalms 90-92 and vice versa.

⁷¹Although David’s voice is heard in Book IV, Moses remains the dominant figure. As Wallace argues, “David is the psalmist in Psalms 101-103, not the object of the song. Moses, on the other hand, more frequently finds himself not as singer, but as song. It seems to the reader that David is looking for answers, and in Psalm 103 David turns to Moses,” “The Narrative Effect,” 67.

[Footnote continued on next page ...]

the line “Bless the Lord, O my soul”) and also Psalms 105-106 (all ending with “Praise the Lord”), suggesting that it functions as a transition psalm, or Janus psalm, between the two groups. Psalms 104-106 recount God’s work in creation (Psalm 104) and in the history of Israel (Psalms 105-106). Psalm 106 ends by attributing Israel’s oppression by the nations to Yahweh’s wrath against Israel’s sin, and by attributing Yahweh’s deliverance of Israel to his steadfast love and remembrance of the covenant (v 45). Finally, on the basis of the Lord’s past acts of salvation, the psalmist petitions the Lord to once again rescue Israel from exile “among the nations” (v 47b). According to Wallace, Book III ends by “questioning” the Davidic covenant, whereas Book IV ends by “deemphasizing” it.⁷² The dreary ending of Book IV reminds the reader that even Moses was not a perfect intercessor or leader,⁷³ thus pointing to the hope of an eschatological manifestation of the Lord’s reign, and Israel’s need to rely solely on their divine king.

One of the most important implications of the reign of Yahweh for our understanding of his faithfulness through Israel’s disobedience is that he is absolutely in control. Though human monarchs may fail and even lead Israel astray, bringing the Lord’s judgment upon the entire nation, the Lord’s sovereign reign means that Israel’s ultimate fate is not dependant on faltering, transient monarchs, but on the Lord’s unfaltering, eternal *hesed*.

6. The Shape of Book V (Psalms 107-145) and the Concluding Doxology (Psalms 146-150)

After the introductory psalm, Psalm 107, the structure of Book V contains two Davidic bookends (Psalms 108-110 and Psalms 138-145) and the concluding doxology for the entire Psalter (Psalms 146-150). By framing the main portion of the book with Davidic psalms, the editors put forth David as the psalmist responding to the exiles’ pleas in Psalm 106. First, David reminds the Israelites that they must rely solely on Yahweh and not on men who can fail and deceive (Psalms 108-110); and last, following the lament over the exile in

Ps 102 is untitled, but its placement between two Davidic psalms suggests that it is to be read as a psalm of David.

⁷² Wallace, 82.

⁷³ Wallace, 82.

Psalm 137, he reminds them that the proper response to the exile is still praise (Psalms 138-145).⁷⁴ That the Lord's praises can and must be sung in any land illustrates the universalization of Zion, which is no more limited to the land of Canaan than is the kingdom of God. Moreover, Book V emphasizes the importance of trusting in Yahweh above all else, an attitude which will result in obedience to God's word.⁷⁵

Book V contains various collections of psalms which had probably already attained their fixed forms. The editorial arrangement of these collections seems to center around Psalm 119 and the Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-134), perhaps to encourage post exilic Israel to make Torah a central part of their lives, and providing a warrant for their devotion in the reminder of their deliverance from exile and return to the promised land. On either side of this center are two hallelujah collections, Psalms 111-117 and Psalm 135. These hallelujah psalms are in turn enveloped by the Davidic collections (Psalms 108-110 and 138-145), leaving the introductory psalm, Psalm 107, and the final doxology, Psalms 146-150.⁷⁶

Psalm 145, the conclusion to Book V, forms an *inclusio* with Ps 1:6 and pulls together important theological points. In Ps 145:5, David promises, "on your wondrous works, I will meditate (*hāgā*)."⁷⁷ The term *hāgā* is also used in Ps 1:6, wherein the righteous are said to continually meditate on God's law.⁷⁷ In his final psalm, David is also emphatic that the Lord is King, addressing the Lord as such in Ps 145:1 and mentioning his kingdom and dominion four times in 145:11-13. He alludes to Ex 34:6 in describing the Lord as "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Ps 145:8). He echoes the recurrent theme in the Psalter of God's power as creator and his providence as sustainer (Ps 145:14-16), and his confidence in the Lord's deliverance is never more sure (Ps 145:17-

⁷⁴ Wilson, *Editing*, 221.

⁷⁵ Wilson, *Editing*, 227.

⁷⁶ In this scheme, Psalm 118 functions as an introduction to Psalm 119, and Psalms 136-137 allude to Psalm 107 as a bridge and introduce Psalms 138-145, William L. Holladay, *The Psalms over Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress: 1996), 79-80.

⁷⁷ Miller, 106.

20). The penultimate line, immediately before the doxology, describes the two ways of the righteous and the wicked: “The Lord preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy” (Ps 145:20). In language that brings to mind the two ways set forth in Psalm 1, David now concludes with a developed understanding of the righteous individual. Righteousness is not merely Torah obedience; it is more fundamental than that. It is a heart orientation like that of David, sinful and imperfect, and yet full of loving trust that yields the fruit of obedience.⁷⁸

The central placement of the Psalms of Ascent is also helpful in understanding God’s faithfulness amidst Israel’s disobedience. Psalms 120-134 celebrate Israel’s return from exile, and thus God’s deliverance, as well as Israel’s need to trust in the Lord.⁷⁹ The preceding context, particularly Books III and IV, makes it clear that Israel did not deserve the Lord’s forgiveness and deliverance, any more than Moses’ generation did. However, the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, even when it is not returned. Psalm 130 highlights the Lord’s *hesed* for Israel saying,

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness,
That you may be feared (v 3-4).

In the following strophe (v 5-6), the psalmist emphasizes how fervently he “waits” for the Lord, which suggests that the psalmist is waiting for deliverance from exile. Then, in the final strophe, the psalmist waits for spiritual salvation from his sins:

O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
And with him is plentiful redemption.
And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities (v 7-8).

Thus, the psalmists saw their forgiveness and the restoration of covenant as the ultimate deliverance for which they hoped.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Wallace argues that the David of Book V is a humbler David than Books I-III, a David who has been shaped by Book IV: “The David of Book V is a David whose power is not absolute, and whose throne and progeny are not certain. It is a David who begins to sing like Moses,” 84.

⁷⁹ Walton, 29.

⁸⁰ Another important theme highlighted in the Psalms of Ascent is the transformation of the image of Zion to a cosmic reality. In Psalm 125, the Lord is likened to the mountains surrounding [Footnote continued on next page ...]

Another Psalm of Ascent, Psalm 132, helps to refine our understanding of how the Lord faithfully upheld the Davidic covenant, even through the disobedience of the covenant's representative monarchs. Psalm 132 describes the Lord's promise to David thus:

The LORD swore to David a sure oath
From which he will not turn back:
“One of the sons of your body
I will set on your throne (v 11).”

This much, the Lord fulfilled, not tearing the kingdom from Solomon, but from his son, Rehoboam. However, the security of subsequent kings of David's lineage was conditioned upon their faithfulness, as the following verse indicates:

If your sons keep my covenant
And my testimonies that I shall teach them,
Their sons also forever shall sit on your throne (v 12).

This verse shows how “forever” is qualified by the conditions of faithful obedience.⁸¹ It bears repeating, however, that while the blessing of the perpetuity of a king's reign may have been revoked on account of unfaithfulness, the Lord was free at the appointed time to reinstate a Davidic king, who of course was the long-awaited messiah. Moreover, this lapse in Davidic kingship by no means implies that God's covenantal faithfulness likewise lapsed. To the contrary, the climax of praise concluding Book V of the Psalter highlights the Lord's unending faithfulness to his people and their ultimate trust in him, despite their rocky history.

In the final doxology, Psalms 146-150, the universalizing of Zion, the people of God, and covenant is clear from the thematic progression. In Psalm 146, the voice of an individual, presumably an Israelite or even the king, confers many of the attributes of the ideal king to Yahweh, ending with accolades praising the Lord's eternal reign (v 10). It is the voice of an individual, presumably an Israelite

Jerusalem, and those who trust in him are likened to Mt. Zion, so that the geographic Mt. Zion is not essential, only faith in the true protection of Israel.

⁸¹ Wallace, 84.

or even the king.⁸² In Psalm 147, all of Jerusalem is exhorted to praise the Lord (v 12), who “builds up Jerusalem” and “gathers the outcasts of Israel” (v 2). Psalm 148 expands the scope of worshippers to include angels (v 2), celestial bodies (v 3-4), and all of the earth (v 7-12). The focus shifts back to Israel again in Ps 148:14 through 149:9, the microcosm of God’s kingdom and the foundation on which God’s cosmic kingdom will be built. This universalizing is helpful for our understanding of God’s faithfulness through Israel’s disobedience because it shows that God’s *hesed* and the purpose of his covenant is ultimately for “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3c), so that debate about the failure of the Davidic covenant for Israel seems short-sighted in light of the Psalm’s ultimate purpose.

Finally, Psalm 150 concludes the Psalter with unabashed praise, so that the ideal readers of the Psalms, who have allowed God’s word to shape their hearts, will likewise join in the heartfelt worship of their faithful King.

Conclusion

This study has shown how the shape of the Psalter highlights the Lord’s unfaltering *hesed* through Israel’s disobedience. The storyline of the Psalter exposes the cause of the destruction of Zion and Israel’s plight in exile, namely Israel’s continuous sinfulness and lack of trust in the Lord. However, Israel’s punishment was not the end of the story, or else Psalm 89 would have been the final word, rather than the escalation of praise climaxing in the final doxology of Psalms 146-150. The shape of the Psalter also highlights its eschatological dimension. It is true that reality does not always reflect the Lord’s kingdom ideals, but the hope of the psalmists, and the hope of the church, is that the Lord will deliver the righteous and judge the wicked, and until then, we find comfort in the Lord’s presence and love for us. We have seen how the shape of the Psalter seeks to reorient our understanding of the ways of the righteous and the wicked, human happiness, and God’s promises to Zion. Finally, the shape of the Psalter emphasizes the reign of the Lord, his sovereignty, and our need to trust exclusively in him, and not in human frailty.

⁸² De-Claissé-Walford believes that the voice of David carries over into Ps 146 from 145, though there is no textual support for such a conclusion, 100.

And that trust entails believing in him even when it difficult, even when we are in exile and even when we feel abandoned or forgotten. For the Lord of the Psalms is a Lord who punishes his children (Heb 12:6) and even a Lord who, in his sovereignty, allows the wicked to prosper for a time, but he is also—and especially—a Lord of unfathomable *hesed* and a refuge for all who believe in him.

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