



EXPOSITORY

*Commentary*

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*Psalms - Song of Solomon*

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# ESV Expository Commentary

VOL. V

**Psalms—Song of Solomon**

EDITORS

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# EXPOSITORY

## *Commentary*

VOL. V

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### *Psalms—Song of Solomon*

Psalms

*C. John Collins*

Ecclesiastes

*Max Rogland*

Proverbs

*Ryan Patrick O'Dowd*

Song of Solomon

*Douglas Sean O'Donnell*

ESV Expository Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms–Song of Solomon

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# PREFACE

## TO THE ESV EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

The Bible pulsates with life, and the Spirit conveys the electrifying power of Scripture to those who lay hold of it by faith, ingest it, and live by it. God has revealed himself in the Bible, which makes the words of Scripture sweeter than honey, more precious than gold, and more valuable than all riches. These are the words of life, and the Lord has entrusted them to his church, for the sake of the world.

He has also provided the church with teachers to explain and make clear what the Word of God means and how it applies to each generation. We pray that all serious students of God's Word, both those who seek to teach others and those who pursue study for their own personal growth in godliness, will be served by the ESV Expository Commentary. Our goal has been to provide a clear, crisp, and Christ-centered explanation of the biblical text. All Scripture speaks of Christ (Luke 24:27), and we have sought to show how each biblical book helps us to see the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

To that end, each contributor has been asked to provide commentary that is:

- *exegetically sound*—self-consciously submissive to the flow of thought and lines of reasoning discernible in the biblical text;
- *biblically theological*—reading the Bible as diverse yet bearing an overarching unity, narrating a single storyline of redemption culminating in Christ;
- *globally aware*—aimed as much as possible at a global audience, in line with Crossway's mission to provide the Bible and theologically responsible resources to as many people around the world as possible;
- *broadly reformed*—standing in the historical stream of the Reformation, affirming that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, taught in Scripture alone, for God's glory alone; holding high a big God with big grace for big sinners;
- *doctrinally conversant*—fluent in theological discourse; drawing appropriate brief connections to matters of historical or current theological importance;
- *pastorally useful*—transparently and reverently "sitting under the text"; avoiding lengthy grammatical/syntactical discussions;
- *application-minded*—building brief but consistent bridges into contemporary living in both Western and non-Western contexts (being aware of the globally diverse contexts toward which these volumes are aimed);

- *efficient in expression*—economical in its use of words; not a word-by-word analysis but a crisply moving exposition.

In terms of Bible translation, the ESV is the base translation used by the authors in their notes, but the authors were expected to consult the text in the original languages when doing their exposition and were not required to agree with every decision made by the ESV translators.

As civilizations crumble, God's Word stands. And we stand on it. The great truths of Scripture speak across space and time, and we aim to herald them in a way that will be globally applicable.

May God bless the study of his Word, and may he smile on this attempt to expound it.

—The Publisher and Editors

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# ABBREVIATIONS

## *General*

AT	Author's Translation	i.e.	that is
Aram.	Aramaic	Lat.	Latin
b.	born	lit.	literal, literally
c.	circa, about, approximately	LXX	Septuagint
cf.	confer, compare, see	mg.	marginal reading
ch(s).	chapter(s)	MT	Masoretic Text
d.	died	NT	New Testament
diss.	dissertation	OT	Old Testament
ed(s).	editor(s), edited by, edition	r.	reigned
e.g.	for example	repr.	reprinted
esp.	especially	rev.	revised (by)
et al.	and others	s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> (under the word)
etc.	and so on	trans.	translator, translated by
ff.	and following	v., vv.	verse(s)
Gk.	Greek	vol(s).	volumes
Hb.	Hebrew	vs.	versus
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , in the same place	Ug.	Ugaritic

## *Bibliographic*

AB	Anchor Bible
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
AcT	<i>Acta Theologica</i>
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Edited by James B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969.

- ApOTC Apollos Old Testament Commentary
- AYB Anchor Yale Bible
- BBR *Bulletin for Biblical Research*
- BBRSup *Bulletin for Biblical Research, Supplements*
- BCOTWP Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
- BDB Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*.
- BHS *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Edited by Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983.
- BSac *Bibliotheca Sacra*
- BST The Bible Speaks Today
- BT *The Bible Translator*
- BZAW Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
- CBQ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
- CC Continental Commentaries
- ConC Concordia Commentary
- CTR *Criswell Theological Review*
- CurBR *Currents in Biblical Research*
- CurBS *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies*
- CurTM *Currents in Theology and Mission*
- ECS Pauline Allen et al., eds., *Early Christian Studies*. Strathfield, Australia: St. Paul's Publications, 2001–.
- EvQ *Evangelical Quarterly*
- ExpTim *Expository Times*
- FOTL Forms of the Old Testament Literature
- FRLANT *Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments*
- GTJ *Grace Theological Journal*
- HALOT *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 5 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000.
- HBAI *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel*
- HCOT Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
- HS *Hebrew Studies*
- HUCA *Hebrew Union College Annual*

- IBHS *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O'Connor. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990.
- ICC International Critical Commentary
- JBL *Journal of Biblical Literature*
- JBQ *Jewish Bible Quarterly*
- JCS *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*
- JESOT *Journal for the Evangelical Study of the Old Testament*
- JETS *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
- JNSL *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages*
- JOTT *Journal of Translation and Textlinguistics*
- Joüon Joüon, Paul. *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*. Translated and revised by T. Muraoka. 2 vols. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1991.
- JPT *Journal of Psychology and Theology*
- JSem *Journal of Semitics*
- JSJSup Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
- JSOT *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
- JSOTSup Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
- JTI *Journal for Theological Interpretation*
- JTS *Journal of Theological Studies*
- K&D Keil, Carl Friedrich, and Franz Delitzsch. *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*. Translated by James Martin et al. 25 vols. Edinburgh, 1857–1878. Repr., 10 vols., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996.
- KHC Kurzer Hand-Kommentar zum Alten Testament
- LHBOTS The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
- NAC New American Commentary
- NBD<sup>3</sup> *New Bible Dictionary*. Edited by D. R. W. Hood, Howard Marshall, J. D. Douglas, and N. Hillyer. 3rd ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
- NIB *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004.
- NICOT New International Commentary on the Old Testament
- NIDOTTE *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997.
- NIVAC NIV Application Commentary
- NPNF<sup>2</sup> *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2*

NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
OTE	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTP	<i>Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> . Edited by James H. Charlesworth. 2 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1985.
OtSt	<i>Oudtestamentische Studiën</i>
PTW	Preaching the Word
QJS	<i>Quarterly Journal of Speech</i>
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
REC	Reformed Expository Commentary
ResQ	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
SJOT	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
SK	<i>Skrif en kerk</i>
START	<i>Some Technical Articles Related to Translation</i>
THOTC	Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary
TJ	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TynBul	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZECOT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament
ZIBBC	Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary

### *Books of the Bible*

Gen.	Genesis	Ruth	Ruth
Ex.	Exodus	1 Sam.	1 Samuel
Lev.	Leviticus	2 Sam.	2 Samuel
Num.	Numbers	1 Kings	1 Kings
Deut.	Deuteronomy	2 Kings	2 Kings
Josh.	Joshua	1 Chron.	1 Chronicles
Judg.	Judges	2 Chron.	2 Chronicles

Ezra	Ezra	Mark	Mark
Neh.	Nehemiah	Luke	Luke
Est.	Esther	John	John
Job	Job	Acts	Acts
Ps., Pss.	Psalms	Rom.	Romans
Prov.	Proverbs	1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	2 Cor.	2 Corinthians
Song	Song of Solomon	Gal.	Galatians
Isa.	Isaiah	Eph.	Ephesians
Jer.	Jeremiah	Phil.	Philippians
Lam.	Lamentations	Col.	Colossians
Ezek.	Ezekiel	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians
Dan.	Daniel	2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
Hos.	Hosea	1 Tim.	1 Timothy
Joel	Joel	2 Tim.	2 Timothy
Amos	Amos	Titus	Titus
Obad.	Obadiah	Philem.	Philemon
Jonah	Jonah	Heb.	Hebrews
Mic.	Micah	James	James
Nah.	Nahum	1 Pet.	1 Peter
Hab.	Habakkuk	2 Pet.	2 Peter
Zeph.	Zephaniah	1 John	1 John
Hag.	Haggai	2 John	2 John
Zech.	Zechariah	3 John	3 John
Mal.	Malachi	Jude	Jude
Matt.	Matthew	Rev.	Revelation

*Apocrypha and Other Noncanonical Sources Cited*

1 Macc.	1 Maccabees	Sir.	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus
2 Macc.	2 Maccabees	Tob.	Tobit
Bar.	Baruch	Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon



# THE PSALMS

*C. John Collins*

“And is it not for this reason, Glaucon,” said I, “that education in music is most sovereign, because more than anything else rhythm and harmony find their way to the inmost soul and take strongest hold upon it, bringing with them and imparting grace, if one is rightly trained, and otherwise the contrary? And further, because omissions and the failure of beauty in things badly made or grown would be most quickly perceived by one who was properly educated in music, and so, feeling distaste rightly, he would praise beautiful things and take delight in them and receive them into his soul to foster its growth and become himself beautiful and good. The ugly he would rightly disapprove of and hate while still young and yet unable to apprehend the reason, but when reason came the man thus nurtured would be the first to give her welcome, for by this affinity he would know her.”

Plato, *Republic*

I trust none of my readers is that grotesque anomaly, an unchurched Christian. The New Testament knows nothing of such a person. For the church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history. On the contrary, the church is God's new community.

John Stott, *The Living Church*

# INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

## *Overview*

The book of Psalms, or Psalter, has supplied believers with some of their best-loved Bible passages. This collection of 150 poems expresses a wide variety of emotions, including love and adoration toward God, sorrow over sin, dependence upon God in desperate circumstances, the battle of fear and trust, walking with God even when the way seems dark, thankfulness for God's care, devotion to the Word of God, and confidence in the eventual triumph of God's purposes for the world.

In his *Reflections on the Psalms*, C. S. Lewis sums up how to think about the Psalter: "What must be said, however, is that the Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung: not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons."<sup>1</sup> This basic insight finds general agreement among those who study the Psalms; the distinctive contribution here will be to implement this insight in a consistent manner. Since this view of the Psalms plays such a large role in this commentary, the rest of this introduction will support this position and show what it means for interpretation. This commentary focuses on exposition of the Psalms as we find them, much more than on, say, reconstructing the history of their composition. It therefore engages in what might be called biblical theology and theological interpretation. This focus makes it impossible to cover in detail the vast range of topics that arise in regard to the Psalms, nor the vast amount of secondary literature devoted to them. (The footnotes refer interested readers to surveys of the field.)

## *Title*

The Hebrew Bible labels the book *Sefer Tehillim* ("Book of Praises"), which points to the characteristic use of these songs as the praises offered to God in public worship. It is uncertain just what led to this name. It could have been the idea that the acts of praise, which we find sprinkled throughout the Psalms, serve as a metonymy (a part for the whole) of the book's contents, without claiming either a predominance or a special status for praise over against other acts (such as lament or instruction). This would be a similar metonymy to the common practice of referring to the book as the "Psalms of David" even though David is the attributed author of fewer than

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1958), 2.

half of the psalms. Another possible explanation is that the whole range of acts found in the Psalms—from adoration and thanks to needy cries for help (even the desolate moan of Psalm 88)—praises God when offered to him in the gathered worship of his people.

The English title comes from the Greek *psalmos*, which translates Hebrew *mizmor* (“song”) found in many psalm titles and simply translated “psalm” (e.g., Psalm 3). The Greek especially draws a connection to the harp that accompanies such songs. This Greek name for the book was established by the time of the NT (Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20).

### *Authorship, Occasion, and Date*

Many psalms indicate their author or sponsor, while many others are anonymous. The standard way psalms indicate this is with the word translated “of”: *of* David (73 psalms), *of* the sons of Korah (11 psalms), *of* Asaph (12 psalms), *of* Solomon (2 psalms), *of* Ethan the Ezrahite (Psalm 89), *of* Moses (Psalm 90). Specialists in Hebrew note that this word (“of”) can also mean “to,” “belonging to,” “about,” or “for” and may sometimes designate sponsorship rather than authorship, strictly speaking.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand Psalm 18 is “a psalm of David,” while in the parallel we find that “David spoke to the LORD the words of this song” (2 Sam. 22:1), which implies that David produced the words. Hence we expect that the expression usually attributes authorship, but we can allow that in a few places it may indicate a looser relationship, such as sponsorship (Song 1:1). Further, the sons of Korah and Asaph may well have represented guilds, in which case these psalms would not be tied to a specific author. David’s authorship is assumed in NT citations (e.g., Mark 12:36; Acts 2:25; Rom. 4:6; 11:9), which adds two more to the list of Davidic psalms—Psalm 2 (Acts 4:25) and Psalm 95 (Heb. 4:7).

Davidic authorship of many psalms corresponds well with biblical testimony. David was “skillful in playing the lyre” (1 Sam. 16:16–23) and an accomplished songwriter (2 Sam. 1:17–27; 22:1–23:7); his reputation as the “sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam. 23:1) is credible, as is the way 1 Chronicles presents him as taking an active role in developing Israel’s worship (e.g., 1 Chron. 16:4–7, 37–42; 23:2–6; 25:1–7).

The sons of Korah served in the sanctuary (1 Chron. 9:19), and some of them along with Asaph were “in charge of the service of song in the house of the LORD” (1 Chron. 6:31). Solomon is known for his achievements in “wisdom,” but he also wrote “songs” (1 Kings 4:29, 32), which could include two psalms (Psalm 127 and possibly Psalm 72). Moses provided songs for the whole assembled people (Ex. 15:1–18; Deut. 31:30–32:44; cf. 33:1–29).

By the end of the nineteenth century many scholars had concluded that the titles had little or no validity; some of their strongest arguments involved the presence of words and phrases in the psalms that look to be more at home in later

<sup>2</sup> On the preposition *le* cf. Joüon, §130b.

Hebrew or even Aramaic than in standard biblical Hebrew. This would imply that the psalms as we have them came from the final few centuries of the first millennium BC. The discovery of more ancient Near Eastern writings since that time has made it possible to make a fuller history of the Hebrew language and a fuller appreciation of ancient literary conventions, and it is now harder to sustain these arguments for late dating. Many scholars will now allow that quite a few of the psalms come from before the Babylonian exile.<sup>3</sup> Further, the LXX, the earliest extant translation of the Hebrew Bible, translates the psalm headings that attribute authorship, and in some of these headings there is other information that the LXX translators found baffling (probably because it was too archaic for them). These factors indicate that these attributions are old. Hence we have good reason for taking these inscriptions at face value. The NT authors accept David as author of the psalms attributed to him (e.g., Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16; 2:25; Rom. 4:6; 11:9), and sometimes the characters in a story make David's authorship a key part of their case (e.g., Luke 20:42; Acts 4:25–26; 13:36–39). (For the question of what use to make of the authorship, especially of David, cf. *The Psalms as Christian Scripture*.)

Fourteen of the Davidic psalms add further information in their titles, connecting the psalms to specific incidents in David's life (cf. table 1.1). It is often said that these are later additions to the psalms, since they narrate events in third person (while the psalm is in 1st person). Some wonder as well whether such polished productions (e.g., Psalm 34) could have arisen from the circumstances described in the title. In reply there is no reason why an author could not narrate about himself in the third person (e.g., Isa. 20:2; Jer. 20:1–2; 21:1–3; 26:1–24; Hos. 1:2–6); further, the titles do not imply that David composed the psalm at the time of the event, only that the event led to the psalm and that the psalm is to be interpretively tied to this event. The fact that two of the titles (Psalms 7; 30) cannot be correlated with anything in 1–2 Samuel argues against the idea that a later editor added these titles after carefully examining biblical texts.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, this historical information often lends help in both interpreting the psalm and discerning how it should be applied. The overall interpretive stance in this commentary is that the psalms are fundamentally hymnody, to be sung in the gathered worship of God's people. This implies that, in using the handful of psalms that have historical incidents in their titles, autobiography is the wrong place to look for the function of these titles. A better way to view them is as aids in concretization—to show how true faith encounters specific crises. An example comes from the Canadian singer Bruce Cockburn. His 1976 album, *In the Falling Dark*, includes a track titled "Little Seahorse," which is dated December 14, 1975, in Toronto; it is dedicated

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gary A. Rendsburg, "The Psalms as Hymns in the Temple of Jerusalem," in *Jesus and Temple: Textual and Archaeological Explorations*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 95–122. Cf. J. G. S. S. Thomson and Derek Kidner, "Psalms, book of," *NBD*<sup>3</sup>, 981a–985a. Thomson and Kidner agree that calling the Psalter "the hymn-book of the second Temple" is true enough; at the same time, they insist that there is plenty of evidence that much of the Psalter comes from the First Temple period.

<sup>4</sup> For fuller discussion cf. Willem A. VanGemeren and Jason Stanghelle, "A Critical-Realistic Reading of the Psalm Titles," in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 281–301.

“to Jenny, at eight weeks of foetal life.” The song is a meditation on the coming birth of his first child. Knowing the occasion for the poem enables the audience to enter into the imagery, in which the developing embryo is likened to a seahorse “swimming in a primal sea.” The song expresses a mixture of wonder and anticipation, together with fear for how the dangerous world might “sweep you away.” This poem would be a failure, however, if we hear it simply as a bit of Cockburnian autobiography. Rather, it provides a vehicle to guide any expecting parent, especially a father, in reflecting on the mysterious process by which a child forms in the womb, and it offers assurance of love and connection to a child yet unborn. That is, the poet has given his audience a pair of spectacles to look on their own experiences, to apply them by analogy. (I do not even know how much or little Cockburn’s own inner life embodied these fine sentiments—nor would it affect the way the song functions.)

Table 1.1 sets out the psalms with historical settings in their titles, with the likely text from the historical books that describes each incident.

TABLE 1.1: Psalms with Historical Settings in Their Titles

Psalm	Incident	References
3	David flees from and battles Absalom	2 Samuel 15–17
7	Cush, Benjaminite (persecution by Saul?)	unknown
18	David delivered from enemies and from Saul	2 Samuel 22
30	Dedication of the temple	Nothing in David’s life; cf. 1 Kings 8:63
34	David delivered from danger by feigning madness in the presence of king Achish of Gath	1 Sam. 21:12–22:1
51	Nathan confronts David about his adultery with Bathsheba	2 Sam. 11–12:23
52	Doeg the Edomite tells Saul that David went to the house of Ahimelech	1 Sam. 22:9–19
54	Ziphites tell Saul that David is hiding among them	1 Sam. 23:19
56	The Philistines seize David in Gath	1 Sam. 21:10–11
57	David flees from Saul into a cave	1 Sam. 22:1 or 24:3
59	Saul sends men to watch David’s house in order to kill him	1 Sam. 19:11
60	David’s Transjordan victories	2 Sam. 8:1–14
63	David in the Desert of Judah	2 Samuel 15–17? 1 Sam. 23:14–15?
142	David flees from Saul into a cave	Same as Psalm 57

A few psalms seem to have originally been written for a particular occasion, and the individual expositions will discuss that possibility (e.g., Psalms 24; 68; 118). Perhaps they came to be used in specific festivals commemorating the original events. Some scholars have suggested that the liturgical calendar found in Leviticus is a late invention and that the early period of Israel (when some of

the psalms were first written) included annual festivals analogous to those found in other cultures; hence they try to associate particular psalms with places in these hypothetical festivals. Further, some scholars have tried to show that there was an annual festival in Israel whose purpose was to renew God's kingship, to renew the covenant between God and Israel, or to celebrate God's choice of Zion. Sometimes these hypothetical festivals are coordinated with the three festivals of the Pentateuch; sometimes they are not. The evidence from the OT itself for these hypothetical festivals, however, is weak. And while it is possible that certain psalms are suited to specific annual occasions, it seems clear that most psalms are suitable year round and could be used as needed.

Those leading the various worship services would choose the psalms that fit the requirements of the occasion and the needs of the worshipping congregation. In addition to the authorized sacrificial services of the central sanctuary, the Mosaic law also establishes the weekly Sabbath as a day of "holy convocation" (Lev. 23:3). It is unclear what kind of meeting is expected in the villages week by week, but it seems to be some kind of worship as a supplement to that of the central sanctuary.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Psalm 92 is a thanksgiving for the weekly Sabbath worship.<sup>6</sup> The Bible itself gives very little description of the worship life of Israel before the Babylonian Exile, and many scholars suspect that the portrait of the annual cycle of festivals (e.g., in Leviticus 23; Deut. 16:1–17) is an idealization, a projection backward of later customs. This is not the place to argue the question of the Pentateuch's antiquity; it is enough for our needs to observe that the "priestly" material, which includes the relevant portions of Leviticus, reflects a *preexilic* setting, and therefore *preexilic* practice.<sup>7</sup>

The individual psalms claim to have come from diverse periods of Israel's history: from the time of Moses (15th or 13th century BC), to that of David and Solomon (10th century), and down to exilic and postexilic times (e.g., Psalm 137). Roger Beckwith has argued persuasively that "the Psalms are old, and that the Psalter is a relatively old collection of them."<sup>8</sup> Beckwith suggests that the Psalter was originally three books, which were then redivided into five; this, he thinks, was done in imitation of the five books of the Pentateuch, which contain the law for tabernacle worship. A number of factors clearly indicate that the book of Psalms as we have it today is the product of a process of collecting and editing from a variety of sources:

- the division into five books and the affinity groupings, e.g., Psalms 1–2; 113–118 (the Egyptian Hallel); 120–134 (the Songs of Ascents); and the final "hallelujah" of Psalms 146–150;
- the existence of the almost identical Psalms 14 and 53;
- the notice in 72:20 about the end of David's prayers (while there are still plenty of Davidic psalms to follow).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Roger T. Beckwith, "The Daily and Weekly Worship of the Primitive Church in Relation to Its Jewish Antecedents: Part I," *EvQ* 56/2 (1984): 68.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 48–49.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. C. John Collins, *Numbers*, ZECOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Roger T. Beckwith, "The Early History of the Psalter," *TynBul* 46/1 (1995): 23.

In this commentary, based as it is on the ESV, “the Psalter” is specifically the Hebrew Masoretic Text of the Psalms; the occasional resort to a different textual reading does not undermine that fact. Many researchers have concluded that the text and arrangement of the Psalms at Qumran are different and represent a “fluid” text and canon (i.e., one still developing).<sup>9</sup> The nature of this commentary forbids a proper assessment of this conclusion.<sup>10</sup> I will simply note that the MT represents the canon of mainstream Judaism; it is not demonstrably very different from the general texts of the Second Temple era,<sup>11</sup> and something like it underlies the early translations (e.g., LXX, Syriac, and Vulgate). The Qumran community is certainly of historical interest in its own right, but it was out of the mainstream and contributed little to either Judaism or Christianity (which both arose from the mainstream Pharisaic party).

Having mentioned the LXX, we should note that, while it does presuppose a Hebrew fairly close to the MT, it also has its own peculiarities. The most significant is that it combines Psalms 9 and 10 as its Psalm 9, and thus its psalm numbers are off by one until Psalms 114–115 (MT), which are combined as 113 (LXX). Then Psalm 116 (MT) is divided in two (114–115 LXX), and Psalm 147 (MT) is divided as well (146–147 LXX). Both editions have 150 psalms. Many manuscripts of the LXX include Psalm 151, seven verses briefly recounting David’s battle with Goliath; the Greek explicitly marks the song as “outside the number” (i.e., outside the canonical 150).<sup>12</sup>

There is no way to tell what kind of editing the collectors might have done as they incorporated a composition into the developing Psalter; recognized scribal practices include minor things such as updating spelling and grammar and clarifying place names. It is conceivable that many of the psalms began as intensely personal poems that were then adapted for congregational use (cf. Section Overview of Psalm 51), possibly even by the original author. It is also likely that some psalms were composed by stitching together preexisting material (e.g., Psalm 108). But, for the faithful, it is the final form that is canonical (and that has empirical existence), and such is the focus of this commentary.

Topics that arise from this discussion include the relationship of a psalm’s authorship to its “meaning” or, better, proper use; and, similarly, the place of David as author. Sections below will address these matters.

### *Genre and Literary Features*

The word *genre*, though in common use, generates enough difficulties that it will be better to use other words. Among other problems, many think of genre largely

9 E.g., Dwight D. Swanson, “Qumran and the Psalms,” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. David Firth and Philip S. Johnston (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 247–261.

10 I will remark, however, that Swanson dismisses the work of such researchers as Beckwith and Shemaryahu Talmon far too readily.

11 Cf. Peter J. Gentry and John D. Meade, “MasPs<sup>a</sup> and the Early History of the Hebrew Psalter,” in *From Scribal Error to Rewriting: How Ancient Texts Could and Could Not Be Changed*, ed. Anneli Aejmelaeus, Drew Longacre, and Natia Mirotdadze (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 113–145.

12 For more information cf. J. H. Charlesworth and J. A. Sanders, “More Psalms of David,” *OTP*, 2:609–624.

as a matter of literary form, when in fact there are so many other relevant factors as well.<sup>13</sup> Discussions in genre theory from linguists and rhetoricians will help us here. Carolyn Miller argues, “A rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish.”<sup>14</sup> Thinking more specifically of things such as literary structure and style, language level, social setting of use, and intended effects on the audience will offer far more insight. Indeed, C. S. Lewis anticipated this when he declared: “The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know what it is—what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used.”<sup>15</sup>

This commentary agrees with most scholars—despite a few dissenters—that the psalms have the corporate worship of Israel as their primary life setting.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, even when commentators might agree that the psalms were collected as public hymnody, their expositions of individual psalms do not always account fully for the worship setting for which the psalms were collected;<sup>17</sup> the expositions here aim to employ the social setting more consistently.

This recognized social function of the Psalms will play such a large part in the expositions, then, that it is worth grounding it solidly. It is fairly easy to establish that *some* of the psalms were used in worship occasions of ancient Israel, and most scholars will allow for that. Not every scholar agrees that this is the case for *all* of the Psalms, and it will take a little more effort to show that.

In 1 Chronicles 16:4–6; 25:1–7 we read of how David appointed various men of Levitical descent to minister in song at the tabernacle. Among them are some to whom several psalms are ascribed—namely, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, who directed their sons (named in 1 Chron. 25:2–5). One of the songs Asaph was to sing (1 Chron. 16:7–36) includes bits of Psalms 105, 96, and 106. In addition many psalms themselves indicate their place in public worship (e.g., the frequent expression in the titles “for the choirmaster,” who seems to be a liturgical leader of some sort<sup>18</sup>). The musical directions in the titles of some psalms point in the same direction.<sup>19</sup> Further,

13 For further discussion cf. C. John Collins, *Reading Genesis Well: Navigating History, Poetry, Science, and Truth in Genesis 1–11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 48–50.

14 Carolyn Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” *QJS* 70 (1984): 151–167.

15 C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942), 1. For Lewis the literary critic, “judging” includes “interpreting.”

16 For a dissenter see E. J. Young: “We are mistaken when we regard the entire Psalter as designed for the usage of the Temple. . . . The Psalter, rather, is primarily a manual and guide and model for the devotional needs of the individual believer.” *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 309. This position is endorsed by Mark D. Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2007), 68–69.

17 A ready example is Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003). They acknowledge that the psalms were for use in worship (210) but then offer individualistic ways of “applying” them (215–222). A major aspect of their difficulty is how to relate the particular person to the whole congregation. A good start toward a better approach can be found in John Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 1; Psalms 1–41*, BCOTWP 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 58–60.

18 The Hebrew word translated “choirmaster” is a participle. The verb appears in 1 Chronicles 15:21, where liturgical persons “lead” with lyres. Elsewhere the verb indicates supervising, overseeing, directing, and having charge of sacred work (1 Chron. 23:24; 2 Chron. 2:1, 18; 34:12–13; Ezra 3:8–9). As Beckwith observes, “It would seem, therefore, that the chief musician/choirmaster was not a subsequent collector of psalms, as has often been supposed, but the original performer of them.” Beckwith, “Early History of the Psalter,” 12.

19 E.g., Psalm 4 is directed to the “stringed instruments.” Other terms are of unknown meaning, such as “selah” (Ps. 3:2), “sheminith” (Psalm 6 title), “shiggaion” (Psalm 7 title), which the ESV suggests are probably musical or liturgical terms (ESV mg.).

we find the mention of coming to the Lord's house (e.g., Pss. 5:7; 63:2–3; 66:13–14), the “aware[ness] of an encircling company of exultant fellow-worshippers” (Ps. 32:7),<sup>20</sup> and the title of Psalm 92 “for the Sabbath,” followed by the expression of delight in both morning and evening Sabbath worship (v. 2).<sup>21</sup> Even more, many psalms address other worshippers, typically with plural imperatives. For example, the familiar “Hallelujah” transliterates the Hebrew *halelu-yah* (“praise ye Yah!”).<sup>22</sup> The antiphonies of Psalm 24:7–10 imply that the psalm was composed for a liturgical usage, perhaps a particular occasion. Psalm 18 is almost the same as 2 Samuel 22 but with a key difference: Psalm 18 has a title addressing the choirmaster, while 2 Samuel 22 does not, which suggests that the private song (2 Samuel 22) has been adapted for corporate usage (Psalm 18). Likewise Psalm 51, whose title describes the intensely private occasion that brought it about, nevertheless shows signs of being fitted out for the whole body to sing (vv. 18–19).

So much for individual psalms; but what of the Psalter as a whole? After all, it contains compositions based on “wisdom” themes (commonly taken to be from individual meditation and instruction),<sup>23</sup> as well as highly personal supplications and thanksgivings. Many of these make us wonder whether they were ever intended for congregational use. What entitles us to call the *whole* Psalter a hymnbook? Maybe the author wrote a private meditation, which was then included in a multipurpose Psalter?

In order to answer these questions, we first observe that if we ask about the process that went into producing a particular psalm, we must acknowledge that we know very little of it.<sup>24</sup> What we do know is that each of the psalms is *now* a part of the Psalter, and that is how we should judge them.

The evidence from the Hebrew Bible supports the conclusion that the Psalter was, from the earliest times, connected with both the local and the centralized worship among the people of God; further, later records continue this same connection. The intertestamental book of Ben Sira (or *Ecclesiasticus*; c. 196–175 BC)<sup>25</sup> describes in its chapter 50 how Simon, son of Onias, would lead temple worship while he was high priest (c. 219–196 BC). He tells us, “And all the people of the land *shouted for joy* in prayer before the Merciful One” (*Sir.* 50:19).<sup>26</sup> The Hebrew

20 Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 134.

21 That is, the activities “give thanks . . . sing praises . . . declare” are carried out in a worship service, as is clear from the mention of musical instruments (92:3) and the Lord's house (v. 13).

22 The form *hal(l)elu* is the plural imperative of the verb *h-ala-l*, while *yah* is a shortened form of the divine name (*yhwh*).

23 For some who prefer to “relegate a WISDOM PSALM into the private sphere” cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part 1, with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry*, FOTL 14 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 42–43. Gerstenberger himself does not accept the relegation.

24 Sigmund Mowinckel supposes that, for example, the wisdom psalms were “a newer, private, learned psalmography” that was added “to the ancient cultic poetry,” a supposition that goes beyond our evidence. However, he does acknowledge that “such private poetry came to be included in the present collection of cult psalms, and was even used in the official worship of the Temple.” *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (1964; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 2:106, 2:114.

25 Jesus Ben Sira was a scribe and wisdom teacher in Jerusalem in the late third and early second centuries BC. His grandson translated the book into Greek around 132 BC, giving us the book called *Ecclesiasticus* (or *Sirach*, or *Ben Sira*). The Hebrew text had long been lost; starting in 1896, parts of the Hebrew text have been discovered, but many textual difficulties still remain.

26 Based on the Hebrew text; cf. NAB. The rendering in the *English Standard Version Bible with Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) is based on the Greek, which has as its first line, “And the people earnestly prayed to the Lord Most High.”

verb translated “shout for joy” occurs often in the Psalms to denote an activity of public praise, as “sing or shout for joy” (e.g., Pss. 5:11; 20:5; 32:11). It makes sense to suppose that these were selections from the Psalter.<sup>27</sup>

In the same way Josephus recounted David’s artistic accomplishments:

And now David being freed from wars and dangers . . . composed songs and hymns to God, of several sorts of meter. . . He also made instruments of music, and taught the Levites to sing hymns to God, both on that called the Sabbath-day, and on other festivals. (*Antiquities* 7.305)<sup>28</sup>

David’s productions were used in public worship, both in the weekly forms (including the local assemblies, presumably) and in the forms for special days.

So the whole collection of the psalms provided material for the corporate worship of Israel. This means that it is proper to consider how even those psalms that do not at first *appear* to be hymnlike nevertheless function as songs for corporate worship—we know them by the company they keep. Of course, this may require us to expand our vision of what people should sing, pray, or chant together in worship!

All these factors strongly support Tremper Longman’s conclusion:

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the Psalms were used in the public and private worship of devout Israelites. We might even go a step further and, while affirming that the Psalms were used in private worship, say that most of the evidence for their primary use points to public worship.<sup>29</sup>

Scholars have tended to classify psalms according to their types (praise, lament, etc.). Unfortunately, scholars vary in their list of types, and it is easy to multiply categories to account for the particularities of each psalm—and soon one can end up with 150 categories!<sup>30</sup> Further, classification into these types, often called “forms,” has tended to assume an actual literary structure to which a psalm must conform. This leads to difficulty when a psalm has more than one element (e.g., Psalm 34 is a thanksgiving psalm with a wisdom section), which leads some scholars to divide the troublesome psalms up.

It is better to recall Miller’s point about social function and to apply it here. A particular psalm might, say, celebrate the deeds and character of God, or confess sins, or lay out a request for help. Nothing prevents any psalm from performing more than one function. In fact, no one has ever shown that any psalm author actually set out to write a particular form of psalm; the categories

27 Cf. *Sirach* 47:9–10. David “placed singers before the altar, to make sweet melody with their voices. He gave beauty to the feasts, and arranged their times throughout the year, while they praised God’s holy name, and the sanctuary resounded from early morning,” surely referring to his work of providing psalms (cf. 1 Chron. 16:4–7; 25:1–7).

28 Cf. Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.38–40. Josephus lists among the twenty-two books of the Jewish canon a book of “hymns to God.”

29 Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, 46–47.

30 E.g., Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, WBC 19 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 71. Craigie acknowledges the “individual lament” form of Psalm 3 but goes on to prefer to call it a “protective psalm,” a category with very few members.

are *extrinsic*, not *intrinsic*. Ernst Wendland recognizes the extrinsic nature of the conventional forms and proposes to classify the various psalms according to their basic speech-acts, particularly “eulogy,” “lament,” “homily,” or a combination of these.<sup>31</sup> Wendland’s emphasis on the speech-acts that psalms perform is a salutary one, but that still allows for a grouping of major and minor functions, which results in a list that resembles the conventional “forms” (as Wendland himself acknowledges).

In this light, used reasonably and humbly, this classification approach can provide us with a heuristic, an intuitive help to appreciate the different purposes of the various psalms, and thus can guide our interpretation in light of these purposes. I prefer the term *function* rather than *form*. The basic functions include the following.<sup>32</sup>

(1) Laments, whose primary function is to lay a troubled situation before the Lord, asking him for help. We find community laments, dealing with trouble faced by the people of God as a whole (e.g., Psalm 12), and individual laments, in which the troubles face a particular member of the people (e.g., Psalm 13). This latter category is the largest by far, including as much as a third of the whole Psalter. Comments on individual psalms will explore the differing ways in which these psalms work—especially, how can an *individual* lament be a part of the *community’s* worship when not everyone is in trouble? Further, some laments contain confessions of sin, some have professions of innocence, and some are neutral. How do these apply to differing situations?

(2) Hymns of praise, whose primary goal is to call and enable God’s people to admire his great attributes and deeds. These can focus, for example, on a particular set of attributes (e.g., Psalm 145 on God’s benevolence), on God’s universal kingship over his creation (e.g., Psalm 93), or on his works of creation (e.g., Psalm 8).

(3) Hymns of thanksgiving, which thank God for his answer to petition (which perhaps had been expressed in a lament). Like laments, we find both community (e.g., Psalm 9) and individual (e.g., Psalm 30) thanksgiving psalms.

(4) Hymns celebrating God’s law, which speak of the wonders of the Torah (divine instruction) and help worshipers to aspire to obey it more fully (e.g., Psalm 119). Although one might expect the Torah to be specifically the Law of Moses, some suggest that the term has a wider reach in the Psalms, encompassing the whole of the canon.

(5) Wisdom psalms, which take themes from the wisdom books (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon) and make them the topic of song (e.g., Psalms 1; 37). The category of “wisdom psalms” presents a challenge, since there is no agreement on what constitutes criteria by which we may call them that; there is no specific

31 Cf. Ernst R. Wendland, “Genre Criticism and the Psalms,” in *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics*, ed. Robert D. Bergen (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1994), 374–414; Wendland, *Analyzing the Psalms* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1998), 32–60.

32 Cf. Philip S. Johnston, “Appendix 1: Index of Form-Critical Categorizations,” in Firth and Johnston, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 295–300. Johnston charts some of the leading attempts to classify each psalm according to a particular form.

literary “form.”<sup>33</sup> By attending to the social action of the song, however, we can recognize that a number of psalms incorporate subject matter that is common in the wisdom books, such as Proverbs (e.g., Ps. 34:11–14); and some psalms are wholly given over to such subject matter (e.g., Psalms 127–128). The significance of these points lies in the fact that a “wisdom theme,” by appearing in the Psalms, has become part of the liturgical life of Israel, a song sung in public worship.<sup>34</sup> This supports the way that biblical wisdom reflects a strongly communitarian and covenantal set of likes—that is, the persons it commends are constructive members of the community of God’s people, valuing and serving its physical and spiritual well-being. This is not surprising, given the covenantal orientation of Proverbs, but it is often overlooked in the literature in favor of more individualistic, and even self-serving, readings.<sup>35</sup> Wisdom is, after all, “skill in the art of godly living,” and what better place than a worship service to foster such skill?

(6) Songs of confidence, which enable worshipers to deepen their trust in God through all manner of difficult circumstances (e.g., Psalm 23) while being realistic about the inevitability of such difficulties.

(7) Royal psalms, which are concerned with the Davidic monarchy as the vehicle of blessing for the people of God. Some of these are prayers (e.g., Psalm 20); some are thanksgivings (e.g., Psalm 21). All to some extent relate to the Messiah, the ultimate heir of David, either by setting a pattern that he will fulfill (e.g., Psalms 20–21), by portraying the king’s reign in such a way that only the Messiah can fulfill it completely (e.g., Psalms 2; 72), or by focusing primarily on its future aspect (e.g., Psalm 110).<sup>36</sup> These psalms are to be distinguished from the psalms of divine kingship (though not separated from them; cf. comments on Psalms 93; 98).

(8) Historical psalms, which take a lesson from the history of God’s dealings with his people. These are generally corporate in their focus (e.g., Psalm 78).

(9) Prophetic hymns, which echo themes found in the prophets, especially calling the people to covenant faithfulness (e.g., Psalm 81). Although prophets in the Hebrew Bible do foretell the future, they do so in the context of inviting the people to live faithfully to the story of God’s redemptive work in the world through his people—the story has a past, a present, and a future. These psalms generally focus more on the present.

There are other elements in the psalms, such as penitence (cf. Psalms 6; 25; 32; 38; 51; 130; 143), claims of innocence (e.g. Psalm 26), yearning for God (e.g.,

33 E.g., James L. Crenshaw, “Wisdom Psalms?” *CurBS* 8 (2000): 9–17; J. Kenneth Kuntz, “Reclaiming Biblical Wisdom Psalms: A Response to Crenshaw,” *CurBR* 1/2 (2003): 145–154; Crenshaw, “Gold Dust or Nuggets? A Brief Response to J. Kenneth Kuntz,” *CurBR* 1/2 (2003): 155–158.

34 As noted earlier, Mowinckel supposed that the wisdom psalms were “private poetry” that “came to be included in the present collection of cult psalms, and was even used in the official worship of the Temple.” *Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, 2:106, 2:114. Cf. Michael LeFebvre, “Torah-Meditation and the Psalms: The Invitation of Psalm 1,” in Firth and Johnston, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 213–225. LeFebvre supposes that “a wisdom text is supposed to deal with issues outside the cultus” and thus prefers to describe Psalm 1 as a “Torah meditation psalm” if it is to be suited to liturgical usage. I consider this reclassification unnecessary.

35 For discussion of this last point cf. C. John Collins, “Proverbs and the Levitical System,” *Presbyterion* 35/1 (Spring 2009): 9–34.

36 On the place of the Davidic kingship in the unfolding story cf. Theology of the Psalms.

Psalm 27), curses or imprecations (cf. Interpretive Challenges: Curses). Some psalms seem to have been written for specific liturgical occasions (e.g., Psalm 24; possibly 68 and 118). Groups of psalms can be found, such as the Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113–118) and Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120–134), on which see the comments on the individual psalms. Further, a psalm may fit mostly in one category, but, as noted, that does not mean that elements of another category cannot also appear.

### *Theology of the Psalms*

The Psalter is fundamentally the *hymnbook of the people of God at worship*. The Psalms take the basic themes of OT theology and turn them into song. Thus themes common throughout the OT reappear in the Psalms.

#### MONOTHEISM

The one true God, maker of heaven and earth and ruler of all things, will vindicate his own goodness and justice in his own time. Every human being needs to know and love this God, whose spotless moral purity, magnificent power and wisdom, steadfast faithfulness, and unceasing love are breathtakingly beautiful. The same God who made the world rules it for his own purposes, especially in order to pursue relationship with his people. One way in which the psalms evoke these themes is through the psalms' celebrating the "kingship of God" (Psalms 29; 93; 95–100), that is, the Lord's kingly rule over all his creation (cf. Ex. 15:18). We find another, separate, sense of God's kingship as well—namely, the realm of his acknowledged rule over his people (cf. 1 Sam. 8:7; 12:12; Isa. 33:22; 44:6), which lies behind some of our texts (e.g., Pss. 5:2; 44:4; 47:6; 68:24; 74:12; 84:3; 145:1; 149:2). (The NT expression "kingdom of God" focuses on the way God ministers to and governs his people, particularly through the heir of David.) Even though it is important to distinguish these, one should not separate them. It ought to lead the faithful in Israel to marvel at how the God who rules over this people is at the same time the universal Creator and Lord, who one day will rule all nations.

#### CREATION AND FALL

Although God made man with dignity and purpose, all people since the fall are beset with sins and weaknesses that only God's grace can heal. This comes to the fore in places such as Psalm 8—a reflection based primarily on the creation story of Genesis 1, but one that also includes the mention of "foes" (Ps. 8:2)—or in penitential psalms, which celebrate God's freely-given forgiveness. It is also reflected in passages about the Gentiles (e.g., 2:10–12), whose estrangement from God can be healed only through their submission to the light that comes to them from Israel (as in the call of Abraham; Gen. 12:2–3).

#### ELECTION AND COVENANT

The one true God chose a people for himself and bound himself to them by his covenant. In Genesis 1 the deity is uniformly called "God," a title that stresses his

transcendence and power. But then the title shifts to “the LORD God” (Gen. 2:4), which stresses that the universal Creator is in fact Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, who enters into relationships with human communities and persons. Many texts in the Psalms follow this identification. For example, texts that reflect primarily on Genesis 1 nevertheless use the express name “the LORD” (Psalms 8; 33; 104; 136); also, observe how “the LORD” is “God of gods” (136:1–2). This is further seen in the “kingship of God” psalms (cf. Theology of Psalms: Monotheism): the universal, transcendent deity is “the LORD.”

This covenant expressed God’s intention to save his people and through them to bring light to the rest of the world. In saving a people, the Lord intended to shape them into a community whose social and religious environment would allow the imitation of God to flourish among its members.

#### COVENANT MEMBERSHIP

Throughout history God has been fashioning a people for himself who will love and obey him and will express and nourish their corporate life in gathered worship. This corporate worship should nurture the community’s shared values of faithfulness to the Lord and to one another and should support the members as they learn to practice virtue. That community life will ideally accord honor to those who are exemplary in their faithfulness and side with them in their struggles against sin and opposition.

The covenant invites the members of God’s people to lay hold of his covenantal grace from the heart. These faithful, as distinct from the unfaithful among God’s people, enjoy the full benefits of his love and find boundless delight in knowing him. Each of the faithful is a member of a people, a corporate entity; the members have a mutual participation in the life of the whole people. Often in the Bible the faithful are called “righteous” or “godly” because of their share in this corporate life, which brings them close to the righteous God. Sometimes these terms refer especially to the exemplary faithful members. On the other hand terms such as “wicked” and “evildoer” refer to the unfaithful and especially to those unfaithful who take the lead in harming the faithful or mocking God.

In this arrangement the spiritual and moral well-being of the whole affects the well-being of each of the members, and each member contributes to the others by his own spiritual and moral life. Thus each shares the joys and sorrows of the others and of the whole. The faithful will suffer in this life, often at the hands of the unfaithful and sometimes from those outside God’s people. The right response to this suffering is not personal revenge but believing prayer, confident that God will make all things right in his own time.

#### DAVID’S KINGSHIP

The Psalter assumes throughout (Psalm 90 being the exception) the special place of David and his dynasty in God’s dealings with his people.

Some have suggested that the historical books are “ambivalent” toward the instituting of human kingship in Israel to begin with,<sup>37</sup> but there is no strong reason for reading the accounts in this way.<sup>38</sup> The constitution of Israel (Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11; 49:10; Deut. 17:14–20) anticipates these kings and sets out both their tasks and their obligations. Hence the Lord’s kingship over his people and a human king’s reign are not at odds with each other; they are not a zero-sum game. When Israel asks for a human king (1 Sam. 8:5–9), the Lord’s response indicates that the people *do* want a human king who will transgress his proper bounds, which will then challenge the Lord’s supreme rule over them. A major function of the account in 1–2 Samuel is to show how the first king, Saul, proves himself to be unsuited to the divine requirements and how, therefore, his dynasty is not the fulfillment of the Pentateuch’s expectations. David, a man after the Lord’s own heart (1 Sam. 13:14), succeeds Saul—not by usurping his rule but by awaiting God’s good timing and the popular recognition of his role.

When the Lord establishes David as king, he promises him an everlasting dynasty (2 Sam. 7:4–17). This initiates a new stage in the ongoing story of Israel, in which the Lord’s rule over his people is properly administered by way of a human king—so much so that, after the kingdom is split apart after Solomon’s death, prophets to the northern kingdom speak of that kingdom’s eventual return to David (Hos. 3:5; Amos 9:11–15). At the same time, the Davidic kings are expected to be faithful (2 Sam. 7:14; 1 Kings 2:3–4); though the dynasty will last, the particular kings might or might not be worthy of their office.

The Davidic king has three basic elements in his job description. First, he is to represent and embody the people. God will take him to be his “son” (2 Sam. 7:14), a title that earlier belonged to the whole people (Ex. 4:22–23).<sup>39</sup> In this arrangement the Lord counts the king’s faithfulness for the sake of the people’s well-being. Second, he must lead the people in carrying out their calling—that is, he must govern in such a way that the corporate life of the people really does reflect the character of God (cf. *Theology of Psalms: Election and Covenant*) and must also lead them in bringing blessing to the Gentiles by treating them well (even when expanding the empire, the king should aim higher than mere exploitation or subjugation). Third, he is to exemplify faithful covenant life for the sake of the people’s edification.<sup>40</sup> One way of describing the relationship between king and people is “solidarity”; the people are “in” the king (2 Sam. 19:43; 20:1; 1 Kings 12:16//2 Chron. 10:16).

All of this lies in the background for the Psalms. For example, Psalm 20 prays for success for the Davidic king (as in a military endeavor); it does not need to spell out the wish that the king himself be a worthy occupant of the throne, for that is

37 Cf. Jamie A. Grant, “The Psalms and the King,” in Firth and Johnston, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 102.

38 Cf. David M. Howard Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1993), 158–163.

39 This phenomenon, by which the king is described with a title that applies to the people as a whole but is now applied to a particular member of the people, illuminates the “firstborn” (Ps. 89:27), “servant of the Lord” (compare Isa. 41:8 with Pss. 78:70; 89:3, 20; 132:10; 144:10; titles of Psalm 18 and Psalm 36), and Jesus as the “vine” (John 15:1; cf. Ps. 80:8, 14; Jer. 2:21; Ezek. 17:6–8; Hos. 10:1).

40 So too Grant, “Psalms and the King,” 115.

implicit in the prayer. Psalm 2 anticipates the eventual success of the Davidic king in ruling over all peoples, and therefore it invites Gentile kings to submit gladly—this, too, implicitly expects the heirs of David to be faithful to their calling.

This also clarifies what we are to do with the attribution to David of so many psalms. In each case we must ascertain which aspect of the Davidic king's job is most in view. In most cases he is serving in the third capacity: exemplary member. After all, half the psalms are attributed *not* to David but rather to various other figures who are not Davidic (such as the sons of Korah).<sup>41</sup> The prayers and praises, then, provide examples for the ordinary members in their own crises and victories. At the same time, they help to foster among the whole community the aspiration that the Davidic king would be worthy of the respect, admiration, and imitation of the people.

This understanding will also clarify the stance of the Psalms toward the messianic hope, which the next section covers.

#### ESCHATOLOGY

The OT presents the story of God's work of making the world and of pursuing his relationship with his people. This story has a past and present; it is also headed toward a glorious future, in which the Gentiles will come to know the Lord and join his people. The OT seeks to instill in the faithful the deep conviction that they are heirs of this story and therefore under obligation to learn its lessons; they are also participants in it. It is part of the dignity of God's people that, in God's mysterious wisdom, their personal faithfulness contributes to the story reaching its goal.

The future of the story is tied up with the person of the Messiah. This English word is transliterated from the Hebrew word *mashiakh* ("anointed one"); in the OT it applies to David and his heirs because they were anointed (1 Sam. 16:13; Ps. 2:2). But the story has a future: the prospect of a lasting dynasty for David (2 Sam. 7:16) serves to nurture the hope for an everlasting person to fulfill the dynasty's purpose. The term "messiah" is not generally used as a technical term for this person in the OT itself;<sup>42</sup> that usage seems to have developed in the intertestamental period. When Jews translated their concepts into Greek, they used the word *christos* ("anointed one, Christ") to mean the same thing.

Some of the psalms (e.g., Psalm 110) deal explicitly with the Messiah; some pave the way for him (e.g., Psalms 2; 72). Some, in praying for the Davidic king, lay the groundwork for the Messiah's tasks (e.g., 20–21). But the matter of the

<sup>41</sup> This is a strong reason for concluding that Bruce Waltke is mistaken when he argues that "the human subject of the psalms—whether it be the blessed man of Psalm 1, the suffering petitioner in Psalms 3–7, the son of man in Psalm 8—is Jesus Christ." "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of C. L. Feinberg*, ed. J. S. Feinberg and P. D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 7. Certainly the king should aspire to embody the blessedness of Psalm 1—but so should every other member of the community! Waltke has noted one aspect of David's kingly role, namely, embodying the whole people and representing them before God, but he has not accounted for David's responsibility to exemplify faithful covenant life for the people. Cf. Gert Kwakkel, *'According to My Righteousness': Upright Behaviour as Grounds for Deliverance in Psalms 7, 17, 18, 26 and 44* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 283–289. Kwakkel likewise rejects this approach.

<sup>42</sup> Possible exceptions include Psalm 2:2 (but cf. comment on 2:1–3); Daniel 9:25.

kingship made a great change in 587 BC when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and the house of David was deposed from kingship. Even so, a slight element of hope was found in Jehoiachin's elevation in the Babylonian court (Jer. 52:31–34//2 Kings 25:27–30): the house of David was not finished. Further, prophets of the exile and later nurture the hope for David's ultimate heir (e.g., Jer. 23:5–6; Ezek. 34:23–24; Hag. 2:23; Zech. 6:12–14; 13:1). Psalm 89 deals with the anxiety the faithful should feel with the eclipse of David's dynasty, and all the psalms dealing with David's house would thereafter lead the faithful to hope for "great David's greater Son." Those psalms that were previously oriented toward the historical kings in the Davidic line (e.g., Psalms 20–21) then contributed to this future hope and set the pattern for the final heir of David to fulfill. This Messiah, then, will govern his people well and lead them in the great task of bringing light to the Gentiles.

### *The Psalms as Christian Scripture*

The Hebrew Bible certainly presents the Psalms as God's own words. For example, 1 Chronicles 25:1–6 says that a number of sanctuary personnel "prophesied" and that one was a "seer" (a synonym for "prophet"); some of these men appear as authors of canonical psalms. The chief task of the "prophet" or "seer" is to reveal God's words for his people. It is not enough, however, to say *that* the Psalms are Scripture; we must clarify just *how* the Psalms are to function for the people of God. This discussion aims to do justice both to the ancient usage and to the Christian appropriation of the Psalter, in the hopes that Jewish readers will see why I count the Christian revelation as the organic outgrowth of the earlier stages of the story.

The Psalter's primary function has already been mentioned: it is the songbook of the people of God in their gathered worship. Reflecting on the theological topics and the variety of psalm functions above, we can see that the Psalms enable the faithful worshiper to bring the full range of life experiences before God in praise and prayer. At the same time, the psalms do not simply *express* emotions but when sung in faith they actually *shape* the emotions of the godly.

Hence the Psalms endorse the notion that the affections have a role to play in the everyday living of the faithful. A person's emotions are not in themselves a problem to be solved but are rather part of the raw material of our now-fallen humanity that must be shaped to good and noble ends. C. S. Lewis described the "chest" as "emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments."<sup>43</sup> Now, these stable sentiments may be noble or base, depending on who does the training and by what means and on how much the trainee cooperates. Good moral training, which is part of a proper education, enables people to like and dislike the right things.<sup>44</sup> This system of likes and dislikes is in fact what the Bible often means when it refers to the "heart"; we might think of it as the "affective side of the worldview" (one's basic heartfelt stance toward God, the world, and life). We

<sup>43</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1943), 21.

<sup>44</sup> As Aristotle affirms in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (2.3.2).

can further recognize how crucial it is if the people of God are to exhibit in their lives the beauty of God's will.

The Psalms employ *rhetoric* to achieve their end. Rhetoric is the way someone presents his thoughts in a way that moves people to feel the way he wants them to and to take action. In the hands of the unscrupulous, rhetoric can be a tool for manipulating. But in the service of virtue, it can move its audience to do what they know to be right. As Lewis noted,

The proper use [of rhetoric that shapes the emotions] is lawful and necessary because, as Aristotle points out, intellect of itself “moves nothing”: the transition from thinking to doing, in nearly all men at nearly all moments, needs to be assisted by appropriate states of feeling.<sup>45</sup>

We may think of the psalms' rhetoric in two directions: on the one hand they address God, and on the other they shape the inner life of faithful worshipers.<sup>46</sup> The psalms are clear about the conditions for answered prayer (e.g., 50:12–23; 51:15–19), and this contrasts with the beliefs of the nations, who use extravagant sacrifices to get the gods feeling favorably or resort to magic to overcome the gods' will. For faithful worshipers, singing the Psalms shapes their likes and dislikes, their practices and virtues, and the community's shared values. *Singing* a composition takes it much further into the heart than merely reading it aloud, and the psalms, as hymns, are to be *sung*. Thus a good exposition of a psalm will consider how the rhetoric shapes the hearts of those who sing it.

It is not “natural” to trust in God amid hardship, and yet the Psalms provide a way of doing just that, enabling the singers to trust better as a result of singing them. A person staring at the night sky might not know quite what to do with the mixed fear and wonder he finds in himself, but singing Psalm 8 will enrich his ability to respond. A faithful person, when he recognizes the sins he commits, might be tempted to wallow in guilt and self-loathing, or else downplay the evil of his deeds; the psalms' confessions of sin provide the right way to own up to the guilt and receive the precious gift of forgiveness, with its promise of God's help for moral improvement. That is, it is not enough to say that the psalms *express* emotion, since they do much more: when sung in faith, they actually *shape* the emotions of the godly.

The Psalms also provide guidance in the approach to worship; at times they offer matter difficult to digest, calling on God's people to use their minds as well as their hearts and voices. They show profound respect for God as well as uninhibited delight in him. By making *individual* laments, thanksgivings, and confessions of sin matters of *corporate* song, they enable the whole congregation to take upon

<sup>45</sup> Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost*, 52, alluding to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (6.2.5).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Ryan Cook, “Prayers That Form Us,” *JSOT* 39/4 (2015): 451–467. For an earlier effort cf. J. Harold Ellens, “Communication Theory and Petitionary Prayer,” *JPT* 5/1 (Winter 1977): 48–54. Unfortunately, Ellens thinks of the prayers as affecting only the people praying; he does not allow for human “influence” with God for the course of events. For a brief discussion of prayer (drawing on C. S. Lewis) cf. C. John Collins, *The God of Miracles: An Exegetical Examination of God's Action in the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 134–138.

itself, as its own, the troubles and victories of the individual members, so that everyone can “rejoice with those who rejoice” and “weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). In other words the psalms refuse to countenance an antithesis, one we easily assume without argument, between the personal and the liturgical. The psalms enable God’s people more fully to enjoy being under his care and to want more keenly to be pure and holy, seeing purity and holiness as part of God’s fatherly gift rather than as a burden.

This commentary reflects the conviction that Christians are the heirs of the ancient people of God. Much has changed: the final heir of David has arrived and taken his throne (Rom. 1:4), and the people of God are no longer defined as a particular nation. The sacrifice of Jesus has radically altered the way that Christians look at the Levitical system. The psalms anticipate the Gentiles’ eventual faith (e.g., Psalms 113; 117). They even foresee a day in which Gentiles can claim a kind of birthright in Jerusalem (87:4–7)—which anticipates how Paul describes the church of believing Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:19; 3:6). Hence Paul includes Gentile Christians as heirs of Abraham (Rom. 4:11–12), describes them as having been grafted into the olive tree of God’s ancient people (Rom. 11:17, 24),<sup>47</sup> and asks Gentile Christians to think of the OT people as their “fathers” (1 Cor. 10:1). The idea is that Gentiles are now to be full partakers in privileges that were primarily for the physical descendants of Abraham in the earlier era. For this reason the expositions here include suggestions as to how Christians might employ the Psalms, making the necessary changes.

The worship of the early Christians, with its participating in the Lord’s Supper, singing, praying, and preaching, was a sort of blending together of the synagogue’s locality and intimacy with the temple’s “sacramental” worship.<sup>48</sup> Their services included the Psalms (cf. Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).<sup>49</sup> Christians have not agreed on whether they may use *only* canonical psalms. That topic goes far beyond this discussion; it will be enough to say that all Christians would profit from a more deliberate effort to use the Psalms in their worship.

The Psalms, properly taken in, will not allow us to retain a privatized or individualized faith; they help us to yearn to see God’s lordship enjoyed in all of his world. This was true in the earlier era, and it is true for Christians as well. John Stott put it well:

No one can emerge from a careful reading of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians with a privatized gospel. For Ephesians is the gospel of the church. It sets forth God’s eternal purpose to create through Jesus Christ a new society which stands out in bright relief against the somber background of the old

<sup>47</sup> The olive tree with its branches is an image for the people of God in the Hebrew Bible (Jer. 11:16).

<sup>48</sup> For more on the pattern of early Christian worship cf. Roger T. Beckwith, “The Daily and Weekly Worship of the Primitive Church: Part II,” *EvQ* 56/3 (1984): 139–158. For early Christians’ view of their Eucharistic celebration as a kind of peace offering, with the scattered assemblies throughout the Roman world fulfilling Malachi 1:11, cf. C. John Collins, “The Eucharist as Christian Sacrifice: How Patristic Authors Can Help Us Read the Bible,” *WTJ* 66/1 (2004): 1–23.

<sup>49</sup> For the argument that these passages refer to worship cf. C. John Collins, “Ephesians 5:18: What Does πλῆρουσθε ἐν πνεύματι Mean?” *Presbyterian* 33/1 (2007): 22–23.

world. . . . To be “in Christ” is to be personally and vitally united to Christ, as branches are to the vine and members to the body, and thereby also to Christ’s people. For it is impossible to be part of the Body without being related to both the Head and the members.<sup>50</sup>

### *Preaching from the Psalms*

Ideally, preaching from any passage of Scripture means enabling a community of God’s people to lay hold of the message of that passage. This is done by situating the congregants in their proper relationship to the subject matter of the passage. Perhaps the biggest challenge is to bridge the gap between the strange and ancient world of the biblical writers and the time and culture of the worshipers in each new era and cultural setting. For the Christian, that begins with considering how to adapt the reading of the Hebrew Bible to its new setting as the Scripture of the church. But it does not end there; we must practice faithful appropriation in our own communities—recognizing that the biblical writers wrote *for* our communities but not *to* them (since we were not there).

#### THE PSALMS IN REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

The NT authors saw themselves as heirs of the OT story and as authorized to describe its proper completion in the death and resurrection of Jesus and the messianic era that this ushered in. These authors appropriated the OT as Christian Scripture, and they urged their audiences (many of whom were *Gentile* Christians) to do the same. The simplest summary of the NT authors’ approach would be to say that they treated the OT as constituting the earlier chapters of the story in which Christians are now participating.

Therefore, after we make the necessary adaptations for the new situation, the psalms serve contemporary Christians analogously to how they served ancient Israel. That is, Christians need corporate songs that shape their inner life to love God and treasure what he treasures. Christians, both as individuals and as a body, still face hardships, and even persecutions, and must bring these to God in public prayer. Christians must give public thanks to God for his goodness; they offer praise to, and trust in, the same God—the God who has revealed even more of his purpose in the death and resurrection of Jesus, in opening the door wide for the Gentiles, and in preserving a people for himself in spite of all opposition. They still must learn to be faithful to God, they still struggle to conform their lives to the good moral instruction of their Creator, and they still—sadly—commit sins they must confess. The Davidic monarchy is still the vehicle of blessing for the people of God—only now, with the sinless and perfectly faithful Jesus installed as the final heir of David, the prospects are bright for a successful outcome to the mission of bringing God’s light to the whole world. The psalms raise the eyes of believing people to this bigger picture into which all of their little stories fit.

<sup>50</sup> John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 9, 22.

## THE PSALMS AS POETRY

Faithful preaching of the Psalms requires the preacher to be mindful of the observation of C. S. Lewis with which we began: the Psalms “are poems, and poems intended to be sung: not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons.” In fact, the book is an anthology of individual poems. Because the content of these songs is expressed in a poetic idiom, we must be ready to interpret such staples of poetry as image, metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, and apostrophe. The psalms, like Hebrew poetry in general, make use of parallelism, a topic on which there are many studies. The simplest way to describe how Hebrew parallelism works is that we usually have two lines of poetry, and sometimes three. The second line in some way echoes the first, either by restating it, intensifying it, contrasting with it, or adding to it (as in a narrative). We do not know ahead of time which is most likely, and we have to take each case on its own.<sup>51</sup> All these factors contribute to the rhetoric of a psalm, the way it enables the singers to own the psalm’s view of the world, and how it shapes their emotional structure so that they can lean into the world in a godly manner.

In addition to the poetic idiom, we should always be mindful that the psalms are suited for a variety of circumstances; hence a psalm with a confession of sin ought not be set at odds with one that professes innocence (cf. Expository Questions: What kind of situation does the psalm most suit?).<sup>52</sup>

## EXPOSITIONAL QUESTIONS

A good way to get oneself into any passage of Scripture is by using well-crafted questions, geared toward the specific kind of text. For the Psalms, these questions have proven useful, and they inform the comments on individual psalms. Ascertaining the Godward aspect of each psalm’s rhetoric is often the easier part; these questions especially focus on how the manward rhetoric of each psalm works.

*(1) What is the stanza structure of this psalm?*

The stanzas are the way the author has structured his presentation; if we want to cooperate with him, we will aim to discern his structure. We should also pay attention to any repeated words in the psalm. Each Section Overview and Section Outline aims to apply a disciplined methodology in discerning the stanzas.

*(2) What kind of psalm is this?*

What is the chief function of this psalm—and what are some ways in which it is distinctive from other psalms with a similar function? (For the list of psalm functions cf. Genre and Literary Features.)

<sup>51</sup> A concise, clear, and helpful summary of linguistic and literary work on parallelism appears in Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reyburn, *Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Psalms* (New York: UBS, 1993), 3–9.

<sup>52</sup> These considerations relieve us of the contradictions—or at least “polyphonic” features—some find in the psalms due to an unduly literalistic reading; e.g., Marc Zvi Brettler, “Jewish Theology of the Psalms,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 485–498.

(3) *What interpretive background (theology and history of Israel, picture of the world, etc.) does this psalm presuppose?*

This comes in several forms. First, what is the psalm's place in the unfolding story? How are the people of God administered at this point (e.g., Sinai and Davidic covenants), and which aspects of that are brought into play? (This is often done by using key words from the previous Scriptures, such as Ps. 32:1–5 does with its sin vocabulary, echoing Ex. 34:6–7.) Second, if the psalm has a title with historical information, how does that serve as the backcloth for the psalm itself?

(4) *Who are the participants?*

That is, can we discern to whom the various pronouns and parties refer? We have to discern these, taking each psalm for itself, but here are some general patterns:

- (a) *I/we* (members of God's people): "I" is usually each person singing, while "we" usually refers to the whole congregation.
- (b) *You*: Commonly "you" (singular) is God (as in Ps. 138:1)—but not always. "You" (plural) might be the fellow members of the singing congregation (e.g., Ps. 146:3; cf. Eph. 5:19, "addressing one another") or a specific class of worshipers (e.g., Ps. 134:1; the worship leaders). But they might be the Gentiles who have not yet received God's light (e.g., Psalm 117) or the enemies (whether Israelite or Gentile).
- (c) *They*: Often these are "enemies." The enemies might be Gentile oppressors of Israel or the faithless members of Israel who oppress the faithful, and sometimes the terms are applicable in either case.

(5) *What kind of situation does the psalm most suit?*

This is a matter of pastoral judgment on the part of the person planning and leading the worship, who must discern the needs of the members. Sometimes, for example, when a person's own sins have brought about his or her trouble, it may be necessary to use a lament with a confession of sin. In other cases, a lament *without* such confession is more suitable. Sometimes a person needs to profess innocence in the face of oppression, and sometimes that would damage his soul or the community's moral well-being. The individual in the congregation is often not the best judge of his own situation; that is why he depends on the worshipping body, and especially its leadership.

(6) *How does singing this in corporate worship shape the hearts of the covenant people?*

What does this psalm do for the people who sing it? How does it shape their place in the community, their way of leaning into the world, their loyalty to God? To answer these we must go beyond the cognitive (good things we think about) to include affective dimensions as well.

## STORY

A great gain in biblical studies has been the awareness of the role of the “big story,” which glues the entire Bible together. We would make a mistake if we read all the Bible *as* a story, since not all its parts are narrative. Nevertheless, we can read all of the parts *in relation to* the overarching story, discerning where they fit in and how they convey their meaning. One of the main functions of Scripture is to instill in the people of God a proper grasp of the world’s true story. Here is a summary of that story and what it does:

The OT is thus the story of the one true Creator God, who called the family of Abraham to be his remedy for the defilement that came into the world through the sin of Adam and Eve. God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt in fulfillment of this plan, and established them as a theocracy for the sake of displaying his existence and character to the rest of the world. God sent his blessings and curses upon Israel in order to pursue that purpose. God never desisted from that purpose, even in the face of the most grievous unfaithfulness in Israel.

This overarching story serves as a grand narrative or worldview story for Israel: each member of the people was to see himself or herself as an *heir* of this story, with all its glory and shame; as a *steward* of the story, responsible to pass it on to the next generation; and as a *participant*, whose faithfulness could play a role, in God’s mysterious wisdom, in the story’s progress.<sup>53</sup>

The proper response to the privileged calling of Israel was personal faith in the gracious God who revealed himself in the covenant, obedience to his will, and faithful participation in the life of the people of God. The comments on individual psalms will keep this in mind.

## MORAL FORMATION

As indicated, the goal of redemption is a community whose social and religious flavor will allow the imitation of God to flourish among the members. God seeks to foster a people whose members love and obey him and who love his purposes for their community. This certainly requires explicit rules (e.g., “You shall not steal”), and it also includes instilling in the members the right set of likes and dislikes to admire what is worthy, to show honor to members who are exemplary for their faithfulness, and to avoid placing unfaithful members in positions of prestige. The faithful are to be so oriented that they “hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate” (Amos 5:15), and Paul says the same: “Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good” (Rom. 12:9).

<sup>53</sup> C. John Collins, “The Theology of the Old Testament,” in *ESV Study Bible*, 30. For the same general perspective cf. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004).

The Psalms, like the Bible in general, reflects a value system something like what the psychologist Jonathan Haidt has called “conservative” (or traditional).<sup>54</sup> The value system includes elements such as regard for what is sacred; loyalty to one’s family, friends, and community; respect for proper authority and protection of freedom from the tyranny of improper authority; insistence on fairness in interpersonal dealings; and the practice of caring for the weak and vulnerable. All of these are evident in the Psalms, but a particular community might, because of its cultural setting, downplay one or more of them.<sup>55</sup> Faithful preaching will redress the imbalance, seeking to make all these values operational. That faithful ministry will aim to help the members appreciate and approve these values, to see them as beautiful and true and as worthy of our best efforts to embody. In all of this the value system is strongly communitarian, yearning for a well-functioning web of relationships among God’s people.

The Response sections of the psalm expositions will show how the “self-involving language of worship”<sup>56</sup> works in each psalm. For example, professions of innocence allow the community to support members who are unjustly oppressed, and they also enable the faithful to admire virtues (e.g., judicious speech; Ps. 17:3–4) and abhor vices (e.g., defrauding one’s neighbor; 7:4). These psalms should foster the desire on the part of those with authority to use it faithfully, for the protection of the weaker members. They should also foster a deep revulsion toward connivance with any exploitative misuse of power. Further, as Wenham puts it, “Those who rejoice in the fact that God will dash the wicked in pieces like a potter’s vessel are implicitly putting themselves firmly on God’s side and committing themselves not to do anything that would put them in the class of the wicked.”<sup>57</sup>

### *Interpretive Challenges*

A number of the usual interpretive challenges for the Psalms have already been covered. For example, what shall we do with the titles of the psalms—do they attribute authorship, and if so, what should we make of these attributions? How should the handful of historical occasions guide our interpretation, or may we ignore them? Another challenge is how to discern the identity of the “I” that is speaking—is it the king, the worshiper, someone else, or do we take them on a case-by-case basis (my conclusion).

54 Cf. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2012). Haidt is a social psychologist, with a focus on moral reasoning and behavior. Coming from a basically secular Jewish and progressive background, he set out to answer the question in the subtitle—but he has done much, much more. He has articulated a moral foundations theory, which I find to be the main contribution. There are things to criticize in his arguments (his evolutionary framework seems to deny a divine origin of moral values, he makes no place for failures in moral performance, and he offers no way to adjudicate between competing conceptions of particular moral foundations, nor does he consider prophetic challenge of a community’s performance), but that should not prevent us from finding plenty of help.

55 According to Haidt’s analysis the first three items of the list tend to be undervalued in “progressive” cultures.

56 Gordon Wenham, “The Ethics of the Psalms,” in Firth and Johnston, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 175–194.

57 Wenham, “Ethics of the Psalms,” 192. Cf. W. Derek Suderman, “The Cost of Losing Lament for the Community of Faith: On Brueggemann, Ecclesiology, and the Social Audience of Prayer,” *JTI* 6/2 (2012): 201–218. Suderman recognizes the way that laments call the rest of the community to take a stance.

In this section we will take up several more challenges. For most people the greatest difficulty lies in the passages that call down God's judgment on various parties. Before we tackle that, we will need to address the identity of the enemies who appear again and again, as well as the question of the apparent self-righteousness found in certain psalms.

#### ENEMIES

Various enemies appear throughout the Psalms. There is no reason, however, to suppose that these are always the same people; a songbook is meant to be used in a variety of situations and crises.

Recall the discussion of covenant membership in the Psalms (cf. *Theology of the Psalms: Covenant Membership*). The Hebrew Bible takes for granted that God moves graciously toward his people in his covenant and invites each member to lay hold of that grace with heartfelt trust (Deut. 6:5). Alas, not everyone has done so. The Hebrew Bible recognizes the distinction between those who "believe" in the Lord and those who do not (e.g., Num. 14:11, 22–24, 38). Far too often, those who reject the Lord's grace have the places of power in Israel and use that power to oppose and even oppress the faithful (e.g., Isa. 1:23). A common expression for the unfaithful—especially for those who take the lead in harming the faithful—is "the wicked," while the faithful can be called "the righteous." This threat of harm figures in a number of the psalms (e.g., Psalm 37:12, 32), with assurance of God's watchful eye and eventual vindication of his faithful ones.

At other times Gentile powers might also pose a threat to the people of Israel through conquest, the levying of tribute, or restrictions on Israelite worship and practice. The powerful unfaithful persons might find ways to collaborate with their overlords (e.g., 2 Kings 16:10–16), while the faithful could find their lives much harder (2 Kings 21:16)—even when they remained respectful of the foreign power (e.g., Dan. 1:8–16; 3:8–12; 6:5).

The "enemies" in the Psalms come from these groups; the "everyday" sort of enemy—the fellow Israelite with whom one is in constant conflict—does not come into view. For this latter category the principles of finding ways to make peace are straightforwardly set out (e.g., Ex. 23:4–5; Lev. 19:17–18; Prov. 16:7; 24:17; 25:21). Some psalms are especially suited to the context of oppressive Israelites as the enemies, and others more for the context of Gentile threats. Some psalms are stated generally enough that they can be used either way. The person leading worship must make a pastoral judgment, discerning which kind of psalm suits the particular needs of the worshipers. He must also ensure that the distinction between the various kinds of enemies is clear to those in his charge and that the prayers are not used to settle personal scores.

#### THE APPARENTLY "SELF-RIGHTEOUS" PASSAGES

A number of psalms include professions of innocence, and these professions are not casual but prominent in the songs. The allegedly innocent party is the particular

worshiper (Psalms 7; 17; 26), the king (Psalm 18), and the whole community (Psalm 44). These passages can strike the reader as silly (“I am a victim of circumstance!”), as self-deceiving (contrary to Prov. 20:9; Eccles. 7:20, 29), as portraying an unattainable level of perfection, or as something more sinister—a kind of repulsive bombast and self-promotion (e.g., Luke 18:9–14).<sup>58</sup>

A better approach is to begin with the meaning of such words as “righteous” in the Psalter, building on the previous discussion (cf. Interpretive Challenges: Enemies). When applied to members of Israel, the terms “righteous” and “righteousness” can be used in several ways.<sup>59</sup> First, the terms can be applied to the whole people, who have the covenantal revelation of the righteous Creator (Hab. 1:13), as opposed to the Gentiles, who do not. Second, it can be applied to those members of the people who embrace the covenant from the heart, who have sincere faith and seek to please the Lord in their conduct and character (Deut. 6:25; 24:13; Isa. 1:21, 26; 5:7; Hab. 2:4; Zeph. 2:3; Mal. 3:3). This second usage appears often in the Psalms (e.g., Pss. 7:8; 37:16–17), which also make clear that these “righteous” are people who readily confess their sins (32:11). A third usage is for persons among the faithful who are especially noteworthy for their healthy role in the community and are therefore worthy of honor and imitation (a good king, 18:20, 24; ordinary folk, 37:30; 112:3–4, 6, 9). And finally, the words can be applied to the innocent party in a dispute (e.g., Gen. 38:26; 44:16 [“clear” = “make righteous”]; Ex. 23:7; Deut. 25:1) and hardly claims moral perfection.

We can also find the complementary phenomenon with negative terms, such as “wicked,” “sinner,” and “fool.” These words can denote those who are not God’s people, the unfaithful within Israel, or those whose impiety leads to distinctively evil behavior.

We discern which sense is present in a given text by way of the contrasts in view. As C. S. Lewis put it, “The best clue is to ask oneself in each instance what is the implied opposite.”<sup>60</sup> Further, different psalms focus on different oppositions. For example, some of these are individual laments, well suited for a worshipping congregation with a member under threat from “enemies” using false accusations to harm the faithful person (Psalms 7; 17; 26). In these cases “we need therefore by no means assume that the Psalmists are deceived or lying when they assert that, as against their particular enemies at some particular moment, they are completely in the right.”<sup>61</sup> To use these psalms in such instances allows the congregation to rally around its unjustly accused brethren and also reinforces its commitment to love the virtues and hate the vices depicted in these texts and to honor those who display these virtues.

Psalm 18, by contrast, is especially about the ideal for the Davidic kingship. A congregation could use it to foster the community’s shared yearning that its

58 A helpful resource is Kwakkel, *‘According to My Righteousness.’*

59 I leave out “righteousness” as “deserving” (Deut. 9:4–6) as having no bearing on this discussion.

60 C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 43.

61 C. S. Lewis, *Reflection on the Psalms*, 18. Unfortunately Lewis, lacking the kind of social analysis given here (and not following his own principle about the Psalms as hymnody), attributes a kind of self-righteousness not simply to *abuse* of these psalms but even to the psalms themselves.

king would embody these ideals, which would lead to prayer that the current king would indeed embody them. Christians profess that Jesus, as the ultimate heir of David, does in fact embody the ideals and is therefore worthy of admiration and imitation (John 13:15–16; 1 Cor. 11:1; Eph. 5:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; Phil. 2:5).

Finally, Psalm 44 is a community lament and is suited for an occasion in which the people as a whole are suffering, without their rampant corporate unfaithfulness being the clear cause. It provides a vehicle for the suffering community to present its prayers and perplexity to God in trust. It also fosters among the people the craving to be more truly the kind of community in which its innocence is more fully manifest.

It bears repeating: to use these psalms well requires careful and bold pastoral leadership. *Self-identification as an innocent sufferer is neither healthy nor invited!*

#### CURSES

Many psalms call on God for help as the faithful are threatened with harm from enemies (cf. Interpretive Challenges: Enemies). In a number of places, the form of the requested help is God's punishment of these enemies. Christians, with the teaching and example of Jesus (e.g., Matt. 5:38–48; Luke 23:34; 1 Pet. 2:19–23; cf. Acts 7:6), wonder what to make of such curses. How can it possibly be right for God's people to pray in this way?<sup>62</sup>

Some have supposed that this is an area in which the ethics of the NT improve upon and supersede the OT.<sup>63</sup> Others suggest that these apply only to the church's warfare with its ultimate enemy, Satan.<sup>64</sup> Others have reckoned these psalms to be filled with sinful hate, recorded for our admonishment.<sup>65</sup> None of these is fully satisfying, both because the NT authors portray themselves as heirs of OT ethics (cf. Matt. 22:34–40) and because the NT has some curses of its own (e.g., 1 Cor. 16:22; Gal. 1:8–9; Rev. 6:9–10), even finding instruction in some of the curses in the Psalms (e.g., Acts 1:20; Rom. 11:9–10, using Psalms 69; 109).

Each of the psalm passages must be taken on its own, and the comments address these questions (e.g., comments on 5:9–10; 35:4–8; 58:6–9; 59:11–17; 69:22–28; 109:6–20; cf. the Overview and Outline of Psalm 137, which contains the most striking curse of all). At the same time, it will be helpful to gather some principles together in one place.

First, one must be clear that the people being cursed are not enemies over trivial matters; they are people who hate the faithful precisely for their faith. They mock God and use ruthless and deceitful means to suppress the godly (cf. 5:4–6, 9–10;

<sup>62</sup> A helpful resource is Daniel Simango and P. Paul Krüger, "An Overview of the Study of Imprecatory Psalms: Reformed and Evangelical Approaches to the Interpretation of Imprecatory Psalms," *OTE* 29/2 (2016): 581–600. Cf. Daniel Simango, "An Exegetical Study of Imprecatory Psalms in the Old Testament" (PhD diss., North-West University, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 25–32. I find many steps along the way insightful, and I do not think they lead to Kidner's conclusion.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, 138–140.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 20–33. Since Lewis is finding an edifying purpose in the recording of these sentiments, he is not necessarily denying biblical inspiration: after all, the Bible also records the speeches of Job's three friends and then condemns them (Job 42:7).

42:3; 94:2–7). Second, it is worth remembering that these curses are poetry and thus can employ extravagant and vigorous expressions. (Hence, the exact fulfillment is left to God.) Third, these curses are expressions of moral indignation, not personal vengeance. For someone who knows God, it is unbearably wrong that those who persecute the faithful should not only get away with it but even seem to prosper. Zion is the apple of God’s eye, and it is unthinkable that God himself could tolerate cruel men’s taking delight in destroying it. Thus these psalms are prayers for God to vindicate himself, displaying his righteousness for all the world to see in this life’s arena (cf. 10:17–18). Further, these are prayers for God to do what he said he will do: for example, 35:5 looks back to 1:4, and even 137:9 has Isaiah 13:16 as its backcloth. How could any reader of, say, *The Lord of the Rings* not rejoice when Sauron is defeated and his tower falls?

Most of these prayers assume that the persecutors will not repent; in one place the prayer actually looks to the punishment as leading to their conversion (Ps. 83:17–18). This enables us to suppose that the wish for the enemies’ repentance is implicit in the other places. Kidner observes that Paul applies some of these curses in his argument (Rom. 11:9–10) in a context in which he expects his fellow Jews eventually to turn from resisting the messianic message to embracing it. Paul, he says,

clearly regards the clause “forever” as revocable if they will repent, as indeed he expects them to do. So we gain the additional insight into these maledictions, that for all their appearance of implacability they are to be taken as conditional, as indeed the prophets’ oracles were. Their full force was for the obdurate; upon repentance they would become “a curse that is causeless”, which, as Proverbs 26:2 assures us, “does not alight.”<sup>66</sup>

This implied revocability for the penitent can also serve any of the would-be oppressors who might happen to be present at the worship by inviting them to consider their ways.

Fourth, the OT ethical system forbids personal revenge (e.g., Lev. 19:17–18; Prov. 24:17; 25:21–22), a prohibition the NT inherits (cf. Rom. 12:19–21). Hence this is not a likely avenue for interpreting these passages, and certainly not a viable way of applying them. As Kidner puts it, these are instead “the plea that justice shall be done, and the right vindicated.”<sup>67</sup>

Finally, these psalms give Christians in all lands the opportunity to express their solidarity with their brethren across the globe, especially those who are persecuted. Persecution is on the rise in many parts of the world, and those who live in relative safety ought to pray on behalf of those in danger for their faith.

Thus, when the NT writers employ these curses or formulate their own (as above), they are following the OT pattern. After all, any prayer for the Lord to hasten his coming must mean disaster for the impenitent (2 Thess. 1:5–10). As Franz Delitzsch puts it,

<sup>66</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 30.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

As to the so-called imprecatory psalms, in the position occupied by the Christian and by the church towards the enemies of Christ, the desire for their removal is certainly outweighed by the desire for their conversion: but assuming, that they will not be converted and will not anticipate their punishment by penitence, the transition from a feeling of love to a feeling of wrath is warranted in the New Testament (e.g. Gal. v. 12), and assuming their absolute Satanic hardness of heart the Christian even may not shrink from praying for their final overthrow.<sup>68</sup>

It is therefore possible that the faithful today might use them if they do so in a service of worship, under wise leadership, for the good of the whole people of God.

### *Outline*

The most basic structure of the Psalter is the easiest to see: it is a collection of 150 separate songs. It is possible that Psalms 42–43 are really two parts of one combined song, and that Psalms 9–10 are companions (though not part of the same psalm, cf. Section Overview of Psalm 9).

A number of factors clearly indicate that the book of Psalms as we have it today is the product of a process of collecting (and possibly of editing) from a variety of sources, with a deliberate purpose. For example, the standard Hebrew text divides the Psalter into five “books,” perhaps in imitation of the five books of the Pentateuch. The psalm that finishes each of the first four books ends with a doxology (41:13; 72:18–20; 89:52; 106:48),<sup>69</sup> and Psalm 150 as a whole is the conclusion both of book five and of the entire Psalter. Other evidences of editorial arrangement include Psalms 1–2 forming the doorway into the whole Psalter; Psalms 111–112 put together in order to illuminate each other; and other “affinity groupings,” such as psalms celebrating God’s universal kingship (Psalms 93, 95–99), historical psalms (Psalms 104–107), the Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113–118), the Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120–134), and the final Hallelujah Psalms (Psalms 146–150).<sup>70</sup>

A recurring topic in scholarly discussion is whether there is an overarching scheme that governs all 150 psalms. Although there are older discussions along these lines,<sup>71</sup> the contemporary discussion largely stems from the work of Gerald Wilson.<sup>72</sup> Wilson argued that the book of Psalms reflects an editorial arrangement highlighting the tension between the promises to David and the exile, with

<sup>68</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1886), 1:44.

<sup>69</sup> It is not always clear whether and how the “doxology” is joined to the psalm that precedes it; cf. comments on individual psalms.

<sup>70</sup> The comments on individual psalms will occasionally suggest patterns for various other psalms in proximity to each other.

<sup>71</sup> E.g., Franz Delitzsch supposed that one could discern a tendency to place psalms next to each other based on similarities in content and form. Strictly speaking, this only notices what I have called “affinity groupings” and does not contend for an overall plan oriented toward consecutive reading. Cf. Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:19–23.

<sup>72</sup> Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985). This book was originally his 1981 Yale PhD thesis. For an update cf. Wilson, “The Structure of the Psalter,” in Firth and Johnston, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 229–246. Wilson died untimely of a heart attack in 2005 at the age of sixty. For a tribute cf. David C. Mitchell, “Lord, Remember David: G. H. Wilson and the Message of the Psalter,” *VT* 56/4 (2006): 526–548.

an overall message that God is still King. Now it is common to propose various “canonical readings” based on the perceived editorial arrangement.

It is certainly possible that those who compiled the Psalter into its current form arranged the individual psalms to address the concerns of their age. The difficulty is that many structural schemes have been proposed but none has won universal agreement, nor does any of them seem fully persuasive, since each has to glide over so many details.<sup>73</sup> Further, the absence of an overall structural scheme is no surprise when dealing with a songbook! That is, the canonical reading approach has changed the assumed manner by which an ancient Israelite would use the Psalter from a songbook he would encounter in regular worship (under the leadership of liturgical functionaries) to a book one would read (privately?) from cover to cover.<sup>74</sup> Each psalm can serve on its own as a corporate song or prayer, and thus we expect the individual psalms to be intelligible by “linear processing,” that is, as one sings or chants it. That does not rule out, however, the possibility of increased insights with repeated use. The affinity groupings will shed light on the psalms within these groups, and each psalm is, after all, a part of the whole book of songs celebrating the story of God’s people.<sup>75</sup> Whereas I do not deny that many proposals for canonical reading are worthy of discussion, I nevertheless simply recognize that the evidence—certainly in the postexilic era, and likely in the preexilic era—is that the Psalter functioned as a songbook.<sup>76</sup>

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73 Compare the conclusions of John Goldingay: “The Psalter as a whole does not have a structure that helps us get a handle on its contents. . . . The Psalter does not work like Genesis or Isaiah” (*Psalms*, 36–37). Likewise Tremper Longman III, *Psalms*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 34–35. On the other hand cf. David M. Howard, Jr., “The Psalms and Current Study,” in Firth and Johnston, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 28. Howard insists that the major proposals differ less than alleged. Cf. Kevin Gary Smith and Bill Domeris, “A Brief History of Psalms Studies,” *Conspectus: The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary* 6 (September 2008): 97–122.

74 Cf. Bruce Waltke, “Psalms: Theology of,” *NIDOTTE*, 4:1100–1115. Waltke is explicit about this, based on the presence of Psalm 1 (1110). But the Psalter was the songbook of the Second Temple era, and we need a strong reason for overturning that usage. Cf. Outline for the place of Psalm 1 as a part of Israel’s hymnody.

75 Most of those who, like me, find the proposed canonical readings unpersuasive, nevertheless recognize “affinity groupings” in the Psalms, such as we have here. Hence Jamie Grant, in posing the alternatives as *either* a haphazard arrangement *or* a purposeful arrangement that a canonical reading can recover, sets an invalid antithesis. Cf. Grant, “The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy’s Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms” (PhD diss., University of Gloucestershire, 2002), 13.

76 Cf. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015). Robertson offers another scheme, which suffers from the same difficulties that I find in others. He begins by recognizing the Psalms’ place in worship, but proceeds to treat it as a book that one reads. Indeed, he places his overall stress on the cognitive content of the Psalms as a cumulative doctrinal instruction and does not have any place for the aspect of prayers as moral formation.