

A Brief History of Psalms Studies¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide an up-to-date review of the major periods in the history of psalms studies, with particular reference to the recent quest for the editorial shape and purpose of the Book of Psalms. The authors divide the history of interpretation into four major periods—pre-critical, historical-critical, form-critical and redaction-critical. Pre-critical interpretation (before 1820) generally considered the shape of the Psalter significant, but made no formal attempt to identify its purpose. During the historical-critical (1820-1920) and form-critical (1920-1980) periods, scholars treated the Psalter as an ad hoc collection of lyrics for use in temple worship; the focus was on the historical Sitz im Leben of the psalms. The modern interest in the editorial shaping of the Book of Psalms marks a renewed belief in the fact that the order of the psalms is significant and the first serious attempt to discern the editorial purpose or message of the Psalter as a 'book'.

1. Introduction

In recent times, the level of scholarly interest in the Book of Psalms has risen to unprecedented heights. The Psalter held pride of place amongst the books of the Old Testament in the ministry of Jesus and the early church. Throughout the

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centuries, the psalms have captured the hearts of Christians and ranked amongst the most popular of all biblical materials in the devotional life of the church. Yet in terms of biblical scholarship since the advent of critical era, they have taken a back seat to most of the other Old Testament materials. The current revival of scholarly interest in the psalms is largely due to research demonstrating that the Psalter is not a haphazard collection of psalms, but a purposefully arranged 'book', suitable for literary analysis.

In this article, we briefly review the history of psalms study from biblical times until the present. Our purpose is to place the current quest for the editorial shape and purpose of the Book of Psalms in its historical perspective. We shall begin our survey with ancient approaches to the psalms, work through the historical-critical and form-critical periods, and then devote considerable time to recent proposals regarding the overall shape and purpose of the Psalter.

2. Pre-critical interpretation

The Septuagint has appropriately been called "the first monument to Jewish exegesis" (Daniel 1971:855). In fact, the early translations of the Old Testament (e.g., Septuagint, Targums, Peshitta) suggest that the translators regarded the ordering of the Psalter as purposeful and significant. Although their numbering may differ, all the ancient translations of the Psalter follow the same order as the Masoretic Text. Furthermore, "the ancient translations endorse virtually all the internal structural markers, that is, the headings and doxologies, of the Hebrew Psalter" (Mitchell 1997:17). Since "later redactors might well have wished to reunite psalms that share common headings" (p. 18) or rearrange psalms to suit their own purposes, their retention of the order and the structural markers is evidence that they believed the ordering of the Psalter to be purposeful.

Evidence from the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls indicates that the Qumran community produced its own purposefully arranged collections of psalms, including combinations of biblical and non-biblical psalms. While scholars believe their psalm collections generally followed the ordering of the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint (see Skehan 1978; Haran 1993), several collections of psalms have been found that do not follow the Masoretic Text, apparently having been arranged for special uses in the Qumran community (see Van der Ploeg 1971; Puech 1990). This demonstrates that the Qumran interpreters were accustomed to purposefully arranged collections of psalms and would likely have viewed the biblical Psalter as a purposefully arranged collection.

The New Testament contains implicit clues that the form of the Psalter was fixed by the first century, but it never attributes exegetical significance to the order of the psalms. The allusion to ὁ βίβλος ψαλμῶν ('the Book of Psalms') in Luke 20:42 implies that the Psalter existed in a fixed form, presumably the Septuagint, the edition from which most New Testament citations are drawn. In Paul's sermon as recorded in Acts 13, the apostle alludes to "the second psalm" (Acts 13:33), a small indication that Psalm 2 was indeed the second psalm in his text.

Ancient rabbinic writings give "evidence that the rabbis regarded the Psalter's sequence of lyrics as purposefully arranged" (Mitchell 1997:29). Mitchell proceeds to cite several examples of rabbinical interpretation referring to the preceding or following psalms as the literary context for the interpretation of a psalm. Examples include the juxtaposition of Psalms 2-3, 52-54 and 110-111.

The Reformers' interpretation of the psalms emphasised (a) the value of the headings, (b) the need to understand the psalms in their historical setting and (c) the prophetic-messianic nature of the psalms, regarding David as a type of the Messiah. Calvin (1949), ever perceptive, regarded Psalm 1 as an editorial preface to the Psalter. As for the arrangement of the collection, they did not address the question of its purposeful ordering.

3. Historical criticism

The nineteenth century witnessed a paradigm shift in biblical research. Led by a myriad of revolutionary German thinkers, a movement away from traditional, conservative approaches to the Bible gained momentum, splitting biblical and theological scholars into two distinct camps—liberals and conservatives. Liberal scholars were revolutionary. They rejected out-of-hand the faith-based presuppositions about the Bible that had previously provided the framework within which the Bible was studied. Instead of treating the Bible as the inspired, inerrant Word of God, they regarded it as a book that is, like any other book, subject to scientific study. Hence was born the era of critical exegesis. Since the logical starting point for a critical analysis of the Bible lay in an analysis of the history of the text and the history in the text, the primary exegetical tool became known as historical criticism.

The Psalter certainly did not hold centre stage in the early application of historical-critical methods, but neither did it escape the pervasive tendency of critical scholars to reject all traditional views and adopt revolutionary new perspectives, especially

as regards the authorship and dating of biblical texts. Under the guidance of such towering figures as De Wette (1811), Olshausen (1853), Ewald (1866; 1899) and Wellhausen (1898), early historical critics on the psalms completely rejected the historicity of the psalm headings as very late scribal additions. Therefore, they also rejected all indications of authorship contained in the headings as well as whatever historical information the headings may have contained. They proposed that most, if not all, of the psalms were written after the exile, perhaps as late as the Maccabean period.

The demise of the headings, coupled with a pervasively sceptical approach to the psalms, left little scope or basis for treating the final form of the Psalter as a purposefully arranged collection. Mitchell (1997:43) remarks:

The idea that the Psalter was purposefully arranged was also disputed. Indeed, after the headings fell, it was defenceless, for the headings and doxologies, demarcating groups of psalms, had always been the best evidence for internal structure Thus many commentators of the period made no remark on the existence of concatenation or upon the characteristics of heading-defined internal collections, such as the Asaph or Korah Psalms.

The dominant view of the Psalter that emerged among liberal, critical scholars regarded it as a piecemeal evolution of hymns and prayers that were collected *ad hoc* for use as the hymnbook of the second temple (see Briggs and Briggs 1906). The period witnessed a complete loss of interest in exploring the relationship between adjacent psalms or between groups of psalms.

The leading conservative voice of the middle nineteenth century was Hengstenberg (1845-1848), who defended the ascriptions of authorship in the headings, the purposeful arrangement of the Psalter and the presence of messianic prophecy in the psalms. He heavily influenced Delitzsch (1887), whose work on the Psalms represents the high-water mark of nineteenth century studies. Mitchell (1997:46) summarises Delitzsch's contributions perfectly.

Delitzsch . . . achieves the best balance between criticism and tradition of all nineteenth century commentators. He generally supports the validity of the headings He notes that the order of the lyrics cannot be explained purely on the basis of chronological evolution, and indicates evidence of editorial activity in the Psalter, noting concatenation in particular. In the light of this, he detects 'the

impress of one ordering spirit'. . . . Delitzsch also maintains that a central theme is discernable in the collection, that is, concern with the Davidic covenant and its ultimate fulfilment in a future Messiah. He perceives the eschatological hope not only in the redactor's mind, but also in the mind of the individual psalmists.

In spite of the influence of Hengstenberg and Delitzsch, by the end of the nineteenth century the current of psalms studies was flowing away from the traditional view of the Psalter as a largely Davidic collection that was purposefully arranged to a critical view that it was a piecemeal collection of anonymous, post-exilic lyrics compiled for use as the hymnbook of the second temple. The great commentaries of the early twentieth century reflect the scepticism of the period (e.g., Cheyne 1904; Briggs and Briggs 1906-07; Kirkpatrick 1906).

4. Form criticism

A major change of direction occurred around 1920 under the influence of Hermann Gunkel, a towering figure in Old Testament studies during the first half of the twentieth century. Gunkel, the father of Old Testament form criticism, pioneered and popularised form critical analysis of the Psalter, the approach that dominated psalms' studies for the rest of the twentieth century and still remains a prominent field of exegesis.

Gunkel's approach had two elements. First, he categorised psalms according to literary genres (*Gattungen*). Second, he sought the original life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) that gave rise to each genre and, therefore, to each psalm within that genre. His approach was based on premise the form follows function.

- *Forms*: psalms can be grouped into categories on the basis of their tone and structure. Gunkel identified five primary forms, namely, individual laments, communal laments, praise hymns, thanksgiving psalms and royal psalms. "Within these principal categories Gunkel recongized the existence of other subsidiary classes", including songs of Zion, enthronement psalms, psalms of confidence, vows, pilgrimage songs, wisdom poems and Torah liturgies (Harrison 1969:991-992).
- *Functions*: each form can be linked to a particular kind of life setting that gave rise to it. The underlying assumption is that each life setting gave rise to stereotypical literature that was suitable for use in that setting. The life

setting is the key to understanding the origin and preservation of its literary forms.

Gunkel was by no means the first to recognise the presence of different types of psalms in the Psalter. Throughout the ages, exegetes had classified psalms into different groups on the basis their content or form, such as praise, lamentation, petition or meditation (see Harrison 1969:990). What separated Gunkel from previous interpreters, therefore, was not the use of genre groupings, but the claim that each psalm genre originated and functioned within a particular life setting in ancient Israel. The life settings for which they were written and in which they were used hold the key to identifying and understanding the forms in the Psalter. A correct reading of the psalms, therefore, requires sensitivity to the relationship between form and function, to the connection between genre and setting, between *Gattungen* and *Sitz im Leben*. Gunkel's emphasis, however, lay on the literary forms themselves.

Gunkel did not view the psalms as professional compositions created for cultic occasions. In general, although he "argued that the literary forms emerged from typical occasions within the cult, he believed that most of the psalms preserved in the Psalter were not cultic liturgies, but more personal poems based on cultic prototypes" (Broyles 1989:12).

The Scandinavian scholar Sigmund Mowinckel, a student of Gunkel's, retained his teacher's categories and premises, but laid much greater emphasis on the cultic *Sitze im Leben* of the psalms. He believed that all the psalms originated and belonged in cultic settings, especially cultic festivals. Mowinckel postulated an annual *Enthronement of Yahweh Festival* as the setting for many psalms, reconstructing this alleged festival largely by way of analogy with the Babylonian New Year Festival that included a ceremonial enthronement of Marduk, and claiming to find corroborative evidence within the psalms (see Mowinckel 1922, vol. 2; 1962). Mowinckel's hypothesis of an *Enthronement of Yahweh Festival* met with a mixed response, being enthusiastically embraced by some (e.g., Leslie 1949) and severely criticised by others (e.g., Eissfeldt 1928, quoted in Harrison 1969:994; Oesterley 1937; 1939).

The influence of Gunkel (in particular) and Mowinckel dominated psalms studies from 1920 until 1980. Major commentators of the second half of the twentieth century almost all follow either Gunkel's method of classifying psalms according to their forms (Leslie 1949; Kissane 1953; Westermann 1965; 1980; 1981; Dahood

1966; 1968; 1970; Durham 1971; Kraus 1978; 1988; 1989; Gerstenberger 1988; Allen 1998) or Mowinckel's attempt to position the psalms within their cultic settings in Israel's worship (Johnson 1951; 1979; Weiser 1962; Eaton 1967; 1986; Day 1990).⁴

Gunkel's 'forms' (*Gattungen*) are widely accepted to this day. Although scholars might modify his classifications slightly, analysing psalms according to their literary forms remains a standard and influential branch of psalms studies. Today few scholars support Mowinckel's hypothetical *Enthronement of Yahweh Festival*—Johnson (1979) and Eaton (1986) are notable exceptions—but many accept the assumption that a significant number of psalms were written for use in cultic rituals. Nevertheless, “[a]ttempts to fix specific liturgical settings for each type [of psalm] have not been very convincing” (Stek 2002:779).

Form criticism still held centre stage in major reviews of psalms studies by Ronald Clements (1976), John Hayes (1979) and Erhard Gerstenberger (1985), but by the mid 1980s two new but related approaches to the Psalms were coming to the fore—redaction criticism and literary analysis.

5. Redaction criticism

David Howard succinctly summarises the dominant view of the structure and message of the Book of Psalms towards the end of the 1970s.

[T]he Psalter was treated almost universally as a disjointed assortment of diverse compositions that happened to be collected loosely into what eventually became a canonical 'book.' The primary connections among the psalms were to have been liturgical, not literary or canonical. The original life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of most psalms was judged to have been the rituals of worship and sacrifice at the temple. The psalms came together in a haphazard way, and the setting of each psalm in the Book of Psalms (*Sitz im Text*) was not considered. The Psalter was understood to have been the hymnbook of second-temple Judaism, and it was not read in the same way in which most other canonical books were read, that is, with a coherent structure and message (Howard 1999:332-333).

⁴ Roberts (2005) has offered a recent defence of “Mowinckel's autumn festival as offering the best explanation for the ritual background of the enthronement psalms” (Williams 2006).

This state of affairs was turned upside-down by a paradigm shift in psalms studies that began in the late 1970s. There was a growing frustration among biblical scholars with the way historical criticism fragmented biblical texts rather than viewing them holistically. Influenced by the so-called *new criticism* that had been prominent among American literary critics since the 1940s (see Parsons 1991:261), Bible scholars began to experiment with literary approaches to the reading of texts. One natural consequence of the literary approaches was a tendency to read texts as literary wholes. This led to an interest in studying the theology of the final form of a biblical text, a practice that was pioneered in Old Testament studies by Brevard Childs. It later became known as *canonical criticism*.

Childs' most influential work, *An Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (1979), set the stage for a major shift in focus in psalms studies. He encouraged reading the Book of Psalms as a literary unity. He also made several striking observations about the editorial structure and message of the final form of the Psalter, such as noting the programmatic significance of Psalms 1 and 2 for the reading of the final form and observing the strategic placement of royal psalms.

Under Childs' influence, and to a lesser extent that of Brennan (1976; 1980), a new avenue of psalms study opened up. Form critics had sought to understand the *Sitze im Leben* of the psalms. In this quest, they analysed psalms almost exclusively with reference to their historical context, paying little or no attention to possible textual relationships between psalms. Redaction critics began to study the Psalter as a literary work, seeking to identify possible relationships between psalms and to discover the redactional agenda behind the Psalter's final form. They shifted the focus from the *Sitz im Leben* to the *Sitz im Text* of the psalms.

The most outstanding and influential figure in the field of redaction critical analysis of the Psalter is Gerald Wilson, a student of Brevard Childs. His seminal work, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (1985a), remains the most comprehensive and authoritative work on the final redaction of the Psalter.

The greatest contribution of Wilson's research was his convincing demonstration that the Psalter is not an *ad hoc* collection of unrelated psalms, but that it bears evidence of purposeful editorial activity. He was not the first to hypothesise that the Psalter was purposefully organised, but he was the first to devise a sound method of testing the hypothesis. He began by analysing collections of hymns from Qumran, Sumeria and Mesopotamia. Having scrutinised the inscriptions and colophons employed in these collections, he concluded that clearly identifiable editorial

techniques were employed in the arrangement of each collection. He thus deduced that collections of hymns in the Ancient Near East were not arranged in random order; it was standard practice to sort them into a purposeful arrangement.

Based on his observations of non-biblical hymn collections, Wilson turned to the Old Testament Psalter expecting to find evidence of purposeful arrangement. In the headings and doxologies he found what he called *explicit* evidence of redaction. In his view,

A careful study of the use of psalm-headings to group the psalms of the Psalter indicates that the doxologies mark real, intentional divisions rather than accidental ones. Within the first three books (Pss 1-89), 'author' descriptions and genre terms are employed to bind groups of consecutive psalms together and to indicate the boundaries that separate them (Wilson 1992:131).

Although he did not consider author designations to be "the primary organisational concern of the Hebrew Psalter" (Wilson 1984:338), he successfully demonstrated that in the first three books of the Psalter the redactors deliberately used authorship designations to bind groups of psalms together and "to mark strong disjunctions" (p. 339). Within books two and three of the Psalter, he also demonstrated conscious use of genre designations to soften changes between authorship groupings when no strong disjunction is intended.

Wilson also found what he called *tacit* evidence of purposeful redaction. In the fourth and fifth Books of the Psalter, authorship designations are too scarce to serve as indicators of organisational intent. However, in the tradition of Mesopotamian hymn collections that often use 'praise' or 'blessing' to "conclude documents or sections within documents" (Wilson 1984:349), he observed that the redactors of the fourth and fifth Books used *hallelujah* psalms, that is, psalms opening and/or closing with הַלְלֵי־יְהוָה ('praise the Lord!'), to indicate the closing "boundaries of discrete segments of the larger collection" (p. 350). Furthermore, each group of *hallelujah* psalms is followed by a psalm opening with "Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his lovingkindness is everlasting" (the so-called הוֹדוּ psalms). Wilson interpreted this as a marker of the beginning of a new subgroup of psalms. He concluded:

All these factors confirm that the conjunction of *hllwyh* and *hwdw* psalms in these texts is not coincidental, but is the result of

conscious arrangement according to accepted traditions and serves to mark the 'seams' of the Psalter as a whole (Wilson 1984:352).

Finally, Wilson found additional *tacit* evidence of purposeful editing in the strategic positioning of royal psalms at the seams of the first three Books of the Psalter. Psalm 2, the beginning of Book I, Psalm 72, the conclusion of Book II and Psalm 89, the conclusion not only of Book III, but also of the first of the two major divisions of the Psalter, are all strategically positioned royal psalms. He viewed the placement of these psalms as one of the keys to understanding the overall redactional purpose of the finished form of the Psalter.

Wilson has written extensively about the editing of the Psalter. His most notable works include 'The Use of 'Untitled' Psalms in the Hebrew Psalter' (1985b), 'The Use of Royal Psalms at the 'Seams' of the Hebrew Psalter' (1986), 'The Shape of the Book of Psalms' (1992), 'Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of Psalms in the Psalter: Pitfalls and Promise' (1993a) and 'Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalms' (1993b).

The influence that Gerald Wilson has exerted on the psalms studies since the mid 1980s is difficult to overstate. His work largely settled the question of whether or not the Psalter was purposefully arranged.⁵ The previously prevailing view, which held that the Psalter is a loose collection of individual psalms, is now scarcely tenable. David Howard (1999:329) describes the difference as follows:

Psalms studies at the end of the twentieth century are very different from what they were in 1970. There has been a paradigm shift in biblical studies, whereby texts are now read *as texts*, that is, as literary entities and canonical wholes. This has manifested in Psalms studies in several ways, the most important of which is the attention to the Psalter as a *book*, as a coherent whole. It is also manifested in many literary and structural approaches.

David Mitchell asserted that "[t]he Psalter may be regarded as a book, rather than an *ad hoc* collection, if it bears evidence of careful arrangement" (1997:15). Wilson presented compelling reasons for accepting that the Psalter may indeed be regarded as a 'book'. What followed his landmark thesis was a deluge of studies attempting to identify the editorial agenda underlying the final arrangement of the Psalter. A

⁵ The only major work I am aware of that argues against reading the Book of Psalms as a book is *Reading the Psalms as a Book* (Whybray 1996).

few such studies attempted to discover the overarching structure, purpose and message of the entire Psalter. We now turn our attention to the most significant contributions to the quest for the shape of the Psalter.

6. The shape of the Psalter

The first major contribution to the quest to discover the purpose and agenda of the final redactors of the Psalter came from Gerald Wilson himself. His seminal thesis, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Wilson 1985a), had two objectives. First, he sought to demonstrate that the Psalter was purposefully arranged. Second, he tried to uncover the significance of the arrangement, that is, the purpose of the redactors. The second objective was more subjective and illusive than the first, as Wilson (1992:136) himself admitted:

We are, it seems, left to our devices to discern and explain the final form of the Psalter. Any explanation of such significance, however, must make reference to, and be consistent with, those indicators of shape we discussed in the first half of this presentation.

Working on the assumption that the final redactors of the Psalter brought together previously existing collections, Wilson reasoned that the likeliest indicators of his/their editorial agenda would be found at the 'seams' between the five Books of the Psalter. Wisdom psalms are prominent at the seams—Psalms 1, 73, 90-91, 106 and 145 are all strategically placed wisdom psalms—indicating that wisdom interests dominate in the final shape of the Psalter. Wilson also noted that royal psalms—Psalms 2, 72 and 89—are found at three of the four seams of the first major segment of the Psalter (Books I-III, Psalms 1-89).⁶ In these he sees "an interesting progression in thought regarding kingship and the Davidic covenant" (Wilson 1985a:209). Books I-III tell the story of the rise and fall of the Davidic dynasty: (a) Psalm 2 inaugurates the Davidic covenant; (b) in Psalm 72 the covenant is transferred to David's successors; and finally (c) Psalm 89 portrays "its collapse in the destruction and despair of the Exile" (Wilson 1992:134). Thus the first major segment of the Psalter closes with the collapse of the Davidic covenant and dynasty.

⁶ Wilson first suspected that Psalm 41, at the end of Book I, may also be a royal psalm (see Wilson 1985:209-210).

Book IV focuses on the kingship of Yahweh. Wilson regarded it as the theological centre of the Book of Psalms, the redactor's response to the failure of the Davidic covenant. Trust in human kings had failed. Book IV points readers to Yahweh, the true King of Israel. "Thus, for Wilson, the Psalter is a historical retrospective (Books I-III) followed by an exhortation directing Israel's future hope to theocracy unmediated by a Davidic king. The redactor's narrative standpoint is somewhere in the middle of book IV" (Mitchell 1997:62).

Several other major enquiries into the shape and shaping of the Psalter have proceeded along similar lines to those pioneered by Gerald Wilson. Perhaps the work of Nancy deClaissé-Walford (1995; 1997; 2000; 2006) is the most notable in this category. In *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter*, DeClaissé-Walford (1997) claims that the shape of the Book of Psalms tells the story of Israel through the eyes of those who ordered the Psalter. Like Gerald Wilson, she focuses on the seam psalms—the psalms positioned at the beginning and the end of the five Books of the Psalter—for evidence of the editors' purposes in telling Israel's story. The 'story' is told with a focus on *torah* and *kingship* as key themes. These themes are prominent in the seam psalms. Psalms 1 (*torah*) and 2 (*kingship*) introduce these themes. Davidic psalms dominate Book I and, to a lesser extent, Book II. Psalm 73 laments the demise of the kingdom; it sets the tone for Book III. Similarly, Psalm 90 sets the tone for Book IV, which DeClaissé-Walford sees as looking back on the Mosaic era, the period before the monarchy when Yahweh was Israel's King. Perhaps questionably, she interprets Psalm 107 as a royal psalm and views Book V (especially Pss 146-150) as a celebration of Yahweh as King. The message of Books IV and V to the restored nation is that God and the law were sufficient for Israel before installation of the Davidic kings (Book IV) and they remain sufficient after the demise of the kingdom period.

In her own words, DeClaissé-Walford (2006:456-457) describes "the meta-narrative" of the Book of Psalms like this:

Psalms 1 and 2 introduce the major themes of the Psalter The remainder of Book One (Pss 3-41) and Book Two (Pss 42-72) recount the history of ancient Israel during the time of the kingship of David, son of Jesse; Book Three (Pss 73-89) reflects the times of Solomon, the divided kingdoms, the fall of the Northern Kingdom to the Assyrians, and the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians; Book Four (Pss 90-106) addresses the Israelites in Exile in Babylon; and Book Five (Pss 107-150) recounts the return from Exile, the

rebuilding of the Temple and life in postexilic Jerusalem—a life radically different from what it was before the Babylonian conquest.

Turning to the editorial purpose underlying this metanarrative, DeClaissé-Walford (2006:457) states:

The story of the Psalter seems to be a summons to the people of postexilic Israel to review their history, come to see that in their postexilic life setting having an earthly king of the line of David is no longer possible, and to acknowledge God as king and sovereign over Israel as a means for survival in their present circumstances and hope for the future.

Steven Parrish (2003) also analyses the canonical Psalter as conveying a narrative, namely, telling the story of Israel's survival as a nation. Books I and II tell of the establishment of the kingdom, while Book III laments its collapse. Books IV and V tell the story of the nation's re-emergence. His overall view of the Psalter builds on the view of Wilson (1985a), but with greater stress on the narrative value of all the psalms and more attention to the three dimensional interaction between Yahweh, the law and the king.

A similar view of the Psalter is presented by Marti Steussy (2004) in *Psalms*, a book written as an introduction to the Psalter for pastors and seminary students. Although she treats some aspects topically, for the most part Steussy works through the Psalter in canonical order. In the mould of Wilson and DeClaissé-Walford, she treats the five Books as telling Israel's story from the reign of King David, through the Babylonian exile, to the return and rebuilding of the Temple.

John Walton (1991, 'Psalms: A Cantata about the Davidic Covenant') made an ambitious proposal that it may be possible to read the Psalter as a cantata about the Davidic covenant. Whereas Gerald Wilson's work focused almost entirely on psalm titles and seam psalms, Walton wondered if there might have been "an editorial rationale for the placement of each psalm" (Walton 1991:23). He based his analysis on the content of each psalm, not on the editorial information provided in the headings. In fact, one of the methodological presuppositions of his cantata theory is that the rationale for the placement of psalms may have nothing to do with the information provided in the psalm headings, since the headings are tied to the original historical context or life-setting, which may have no bearing on the final redactors rationale for placing the psalm within the final Psalter. Walton (p. 24) cautiously proposed and defended the following outline:

1. Introduction	Pss 1-2
2. Book I: David's Conflict with Saul	Pss 3-41
3. Book II: David's Reign as King	Pss 42-72
4. Book III: The Assyrian Crisis	Pss 73-89
5. Book IV: The Destruction of the Temple and Exile	Pss 90-106
6. Book V: Praise/Reflection on Return and New Era	Pss 107-145
7. Conclusion	Pss 146-150

In other words, Walton views the entire Psalter as a postexilic review of the history of Israel from the inauguration of the Davidic kingdom until the restoration of the nation after the Babylonian exile.

Contrary to the historical rationales of Wilson (1985a; 1992), DeClaissé-Walford (1997; 2006) and Walton (1991), Walter Brueggemann (1991, 'Bounded by obedience and praise: the psalms as canon'; cf. Brueggemann 1984) proposed a purely sapiential explanation for the theological shape of the Psalter. He asked how one would move through the Book of Psalms from beginning to end. Psalm 1, an intentionally positioned preface, "announces the main theme of the completed Book of Psalms" (1991:64). As an introduction, it serves two functions: (a) it implies that the Book of Psalms "should be read through the prism of torah obedience" (p. 64) and (b) it presents an idealistic world, a perfectly coherent moral world in which the obedient prosper and the wicked perish. Similarly, Psalm 150 is an intentionally positioned conclusion to the Psalter. It is unique among the praise psalms, being the only one that summons to praise without offering any reasons for praise.⁷ The goal of the Psalter, therefore, is to move the reader from obedience to praise, from willing duty to utter delight, from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150.

However, the journey from the one boundary to the other is not smooth. The psalms consistently belie the idealistic world of Psalm 1. Throughout the Psalter, the psalmists struggle to come to terms with Yahweh's חֶסֶד (*hesed*) since in the trials of life he appears to have been unfaithful to his covenant. Brueggemann's thesis is that "the way from torah obedience to self-abandoning doxology is by way of *candor about suffering* and *gratitude about hope*" (1991:72, emphasis in original). Psalm 73 stands at the centre of the Psalter, both literally and

⁷ This might be a slight overstatement since Psalm 150:2, "Praise him *for his mighty deeds*; praise him *according to his excellent greatness*" (ESV, emphasis added), does contain grounds clauses. Brueggemann's point, however, was that the whole of Psalm 150, including verse 2, essentially functions as a call to praise. The psalmist does not pause to motivate praise with a catalogue of reasons.

theologically, being a microcosm of the entire Psalter and denoting the turning point from obedience to praise (see Brueggemann and Miller 1996).

Mihaila (2001) seems to build on McCann's (1987) interpretation of Psalm 73 and embrace Brueggemann's (1991) view of the Psalter as a movement from lament to praise. Mihaila argues that "in the canonical structuring of the Psalter, Psalm 73 stands at its center in a crucial role" (p. 54). He offers several reasons for its pivotal role: (a) it stands near the physical centre of the Psalter; (b) it marks the beginning of the Psalter's movement from lament (Books I-II) to hope and praise (Books IV-V); (c) it is a programmatic introduction to Book III, which functions as the transitional Book of the Psalter; and (d) it is a microcosm of the theology of the Book of Psalms and, indeed, of the entire Old Testament.

At around the same time, a number of studies appeared exploring the role of wisdom psalms in shaping the final form and purpose of the Psalter. Picking up on a thread in Wilson (1985a), Mays (1987, 'The Place of Torah-Psalms in the Psalter') led the way in further exploring the strategic placement of wisdom psalms. In the early 1990s, Kuntz (1992, 'Wisdom Psalms and the Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter'; 2000), McCann (1992, 'Psalms as Instruction'; 1993, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah*) and Crenshaw (2000, 'Wisdom Psalms?') explored the same question.

In an article entitled 'The Division and Order of the Psalms', Anderson (1994) worked his way through the Books I-V of the Psalter in canonical order discussing diverse points of interest, which ranged from authorship to ordering. He saw the compilation of the Psalter evolving Book by Book, beginning in the Davidic era (Book I and possibly also Book II) and ending around the time of Nehemiah (Books IV and V). He dates the compilation of Book III during the reign of Hezekiah. He is sceptical of high-level literary arrangement, and tends to see the development of the final form as a somewhat piecemeal evolutionary process. He draws the following conclusions:

In summation we have seen that the division of the psalter into five books is indeed not only warranted, but gives evidence of a historical development of compilation over the ages since the times of Hezekiah or earlier. This work of compilation into known and well used canonical collections was probably completed only after the exile, perhaps in the time of Nehemiah. Whilst there are indications of internal ordering here and there, there appears to be no

systematic attempt to structure the psalter internally. Given the historical development of compilation, the old interpretation of *midrash tehillim* (on Ps 1:5) that the five books reflect the five books of Moses is probably no more than a late reflection. The *Sitz im Leben* of this long process of compilation appears to have been the need to furnish recognized collections for use in the temple liturgy.

In a major study of the overall purpose and message of the Psalter, David Mitchell (1997, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms*) not only defended the view that the final form of the Psalter is a purposeful literary arrangement (a 'book') rather than a haphazard collection of psalms, but also sought to demonstrate that the final redactors intended the Psalter to be read eschatologically. He began with a comprehensive review of the history of psalms interpretation, demonstrating that until the rise of critical exegesis the psalms had always been interpreted eschatologically by both Jews and Christians. Next he offered four reasons why an eschatological agenda would have been likely:

- a) "[I]t originated within an eschatological milieu (p. 82).
- b) "[T]he figures to whom the Psalms are attributed were regarded as future-predicative prophets" (p. 83).
- c) "[C]ertain psalms . . . describe a person or event in such glowing terms that the language far exceeds the reality of any historical king or battle" (p. 85).
- d) "[T]he very inclusion of royal psalms in the Psalter suggests that the redactor understood them to refer to a future *mashiah*-king" (p. 86).

Mitchell proceeded to analyse several collections of psalms—the Psalms of Asaph (Psalms 50, 73-83), the Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120-134), and the whole of Book IV—as well as the royal psalms scattered throughout the Psalter and a few key themes within the Book of Psalms, demonstrating how the final arrangement is consistent with a prophetic, messianic, eschatological editorial agenda.⁸

Although not many would go as far as Mitchell in contending that the entire Psalter is to be read as a prophetic, eschatological 'book', a growing number of scholars now concede that the Psalter does need to be read (in some sense) eschatologically. Childs, who sparked the modern quest for the editorial agenda behind the Psalter,

⁸ Georg Braulik (2004) argues that certain psalms, especially royal and/or Davidic psalms, were reinterpreted in a messianic or christological sense very early. Unlike Mitchell, he does not argue that the entire collection was edited with the intent that it be read eschatologically.

believed that “the final form of the Psalter is highly eschatological in nature” (1979:518). Rendtor (1986:249), observing “the emphatic position of the royal psalms” and the overall movement towards the praise of God, felt that “[t]here can be no doubt that at this stage they were understood in messianic terms: the praise of God is not only directed to the past and the present, but also includes the messianic future.” Cole lists Hossfeld & Zenger, Mays and Mitchell as key scholars who read the Psalter eschatologically. He states:

Hossfeld and Zenger [1993:51] likewise detect an eschatological perspective in Psalm 2, and across the entire book. Mays [1987:10] states regarding the Psalter and its beginning, “[B]y the time the Psalter was being completed, the psalms dealing with the kingship of the Lord were understood eschatologically. . . . Psalm 2, reread as a vision of the goal of history, puts the torah piety of Psalm 1 in an eschatological context.” Mitchell [1997:87] notes that Psalms 1 and 2 together “announce that the ensuing collection is a handbook for the eschatological wars of the Lord, describing the coming events and the Yhwh-allegiance required of those who would triumph” (Cole 2005:40).

Cooper (1995:89) indicates that the recent trend is open to finding messianic allusions in the psalms, while not seeing all the psalms messianically.

Some of the early church fathers were so enamored with the hope of Messiah in the Psalms that practically all Psalms were considered Messianic. With the advent of higher criticism and rationalistic principles for the study of Scripture, the pendulum swung to the opposite extreme, and no Psalms were considered to be Messianic. Today it is generally acknowledged that while not all Psalms are Messianic, there are clear portraits of Messiah in many of them.

A recent monograph by Jamie Grant (2004) lent further weight to an eschatological reading of the Psalter. Grant notes that the editors juxtaposed torah psalms with royal psalms—Psalm 1 with Psalm 2; Psalm 19 with Psalms 18 & 20-21; and Psalm 119 with Psalm 118. He argues that the kingship law in Deuteronomy 17:14-20 lies behind the editors’ attempt to link torah and kingship. These paired psalms point to a future exemplary king, the messiah, who would be a pious ‘torah-lover’. In the case of Psalms 1 and 2, the editors intend their readers to associate the torah-

lover (Ps 1) with the anointed king (Ps 2). Thus the editors were pointing towards a future exemplary king.

Duane Christensen (1996, 'The Book of Psalms within the Canonical Process in Ancient Israel') attempted, unconvincingly in my opinion, to resurrect the Edward King's (1904) idea that the Psalter was designed to be read in a triennial cycle of Sabbaths. Supporting the old view that the five book divisions of the Psalter were patterned after the five books of the Pentateuch so as to form mirror collections of Moses and David, he posited that matching readings from the Pentateuch and the Psalter were read each Sabbath for three years.

Leslie McFall (2000, 'The Evidence for a Logical Arrangement of the Psalter') tried to show that "the Psalter has been arranged on a logical overall plan and that the superscriptions ... played an important part in the early development of the present arrangement" (p. 228). He identified four stages of sorting in the final structure of the Psalter: (a) by authors, (b) by divine names, (c) by genre and (d) by themes or key words. He did not believe that authorship was the main criterion of arrangement, but speculated that the compilers probably received author-defined collections of psalms. Then the compilers applied three stages of sorting. First, books were sorted according to the preponderance of the names Yahweh or Elohim. In the Elohistic Psalter, Psalms 42-83, not a single psalm uses the name Yahweh more than Elohim; conversely, in the two Yahwistic collections, Psalms 1-41 and 84-150, no psalm uses Yahweh more than Elohim. Therefore, McFall suggested that the first level of arrangement was to count divine names used in each psalm and group them based on the predominant name. Divine names took precedence over authorship, which explains the separation of Davidic, Korahite and Asaphite collections. Second, groups of psalms were sorted by genre. The compiler "took the Elohistic collection and grouped the Psalms into blocks according to the genre term used in the superscriptions" (McFall 2000:233). Thus, the Korahite and Davidic psalms in the Elohistic Psalter were grouped into *maskil* and *mizmor* blocks. This step was not applied to the Yahwistic collections because there were not enough psalms of each genre. Last of all, individual psalms were juxtaposed based on related topics, themes or link words.

In summary, Wilson (1985a), DeClaissé-Walford (1997) and Walton (1991) all offered historical explanations of the shape of the Psalter. Although all three view it as a commentary on the Davidic covenant, Walton's view is highly speculative and seems strained in places, whereas Wilson's (so too DeClaissé-Walford's) is more measured and methodologically sound. Brueggemann (1991) offered a purely

sapiential explanation, which accords well with the general nature of the Psalter. Neither Christensen's (1996) liturgical explanation nor McFall's (2000) three-stage sorting theory offer convincing explanations of the final editorial agenda underlying the Psalter. David Mitchell's (1997) attempt to account for the shape of the Psalter as a prophetic, eschatological, messianic collection is convincing in its treatment of certain groups of psalms, but struggles account for the shape of the entire collection. In my judgement, both Wilson's historical explanation and Brueggemann's sapiential approach offer coherent explanations of the overall shape of the Book of Psalms.

7. Conclusion

The prevailing attitude towards the Book of Psalms has come full circle. Prior to the rise of historical criticism, it was widely believed to be more than a haphazard collection of hymns and prayers, although few attempted to prove that it is purposeful arrangement or to identify the purpose of the arrangement. During the periods dominated by historical criticism (ca. 1820-1920) and form criticism (ca. 1920-1980), interest was limited to individual psalms and their historical origin and function. Today, however, there is a renewed conviction that there are purposeful literary relationships between psalms and the Psalter itself is a purposefully edited collection. Unprecedented effort is being exerted to discover the editorial agenda underlying the Psalter and the literary relationships between psalms.

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