The Shape of the Book of Psalms

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The Psalter exhibits a complex literary structure that not only determines its shape but also provides the reader with interpretive clues for reading both the whole and its parts.

Let us begin with the fact that the Psalter does have a shape. The one hundred fifty canonical psalms have come down to us in a particular arrangement that is traditional, if nothing else. This arrangement can be found in the versions (e.g., Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Aramaic) and, with the exception of some of the Qumran psalms manuscripts, dominates the Hebrew tradition as well. So, the question that confronts the student of the Psalter is not whether it has a shape but what the indicators of this shape are. Further, one must also ask what the significance of this shape is.

In dealing with these two questions concerning "indicators" and "significance," one must take care not to confuse them. The reason is that the assumptions regarding the significance of the arrangement of the Book of Psalms can influence what one takes to be indicators of shape. For example, an early assumption that the book is arranged accidentally long prevented scholars from identifying any indicators of shape. In recognition of this, I shall begin with the indicators of the shape of the Psalter and discuss how each one relates to the central issue of whether this shape is purposeful or accidental in origin. Only then shall I proceed to discuss the significance of these indicators for a theological assessment of the shape of the Psalter.

INDICATORS OF SHAPE.

The Five-Book Division. It has long been recognized that certain psalms conclude with doxologies that are strikingly similar in content to one another. The rabbis early decided that these doxologies marked the conclusion of internal divisions within the Psalter and that the five books so delineated stood in purposeful imitation of the five books of Moses (the Torah, Genesis through Deuteronomy). Later, this decision led to attempts to correlate the five books of the Psalter and the individual psalms within them with the consecutive segments of the Torah read weekly according to the synagogue lectionary system. These attempts of correlation, however, remain unconvincing for a variety of reasons. First, there is no general agreement as to the number and extent of Torah-passages that were read. In addition, there is in all reconstructions a lack of correspondence between the number of psalms in the individual books and the supposed number of Torah-readings. Indeed, in an attempt to overcome the greatest difficulty in this regard—the small number of psalms in the fourth book (Pss. 90—106)—some even attempt to shift the conclusion of this book from the end of Psalm 106 to the end of Psalm 118. There is, however, no persuasive evidence for such an emendation. The difficulty of correlation and the tenuous parallels suggested between psalms and Torah-readings raise questions about the reality of any connection between the Psalter divisions and those of the Torah.

The lack of a convincing explanation of the purpose of the fivefold division of the Psalter has led some to deny that the doxologies have any significance beyond the immediate context of the individual psalms in which they appear. In fact, the claim is made that the fivefold division leads one to misunderstand the function that the psalms serve. For several reasons, however, such extreme pessimism seems unwarranted. The use of doxology to conclude compositions and segments of compositions is well known in the ancient Near East—especially in hymnic collections. One such collection of forty-two Sumerian temple hymns ends with a final doxological hymn serving as the conclusion to the whole. Another collection from Abu Salabikh

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2 The first four doxologies are found at Psalms 41 13, 72 18–19, 89 52, 104 48. The final doxology is usually associated with Psalm 150, which is thought to conclude both the fifth book of the Psalter and the whole of the Psalter.

3 Consecutive segments of the Torah are read in the weekly synagogue service. Two such systems are known: one that reads through the whole Torah in a single year, and another that requires three years to complete. See Anton Arens, Die Psalmen in Gottesdienst des Altes Bundes (Trier, Paulinus-Verlag, 1968).

4 For a discussion of this issue, see Wilson, The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter, pp 199–203.


6 In The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter (pp. 16–18, 23), I discuss the use of doxology in ancient hymnic texts.
contains sixty-eight compositions each marked by a concluding doxology.\textsuperscript{7} The parallels to the Hebrew Psalter are rather striking. Division of hymnic texts by the use of doxologies is, therefore, a relatively common practice and should not be a surprising occurrence in a collection like the Psalter.

Besides this rather striking comparative information, 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” designations and genre terms are employed to bind groups of consecutive psalms together and to indicate the boundaries that separate them. “Author” designations seem to have priority, and boundaries between author groupings are clearly marked out. Within a “book,” genre terms are regularly used to soften the transition from one “author” grouping to another, with one or more common genre terms appearing in the transitional psalms at the end of one grouping and the beginning of another. See, for example, the use of the term \textit{mizmor} (“psalm”) in the six consecutive Psalms 46—51 to soften the transition from the Qorahite collection, across the single Asaphite Psalm 50, to the Davidic collection beginning in Psalm 51. At the transition points between “books,” however, this softening technique is noticeably absent, and the resulting change of genre type confirms the break between author groupings.\textsuperscript{8}

Where the fourth (Pss. 90—106) and fifth (107—150) books of psalms are to end can be determined by an alternative grouping technique. In these two books, the beginning is marked by psalms that open with the words “Give thanks to Yahweh for he is good, his mercy endures forever,” and the ending by \textit{hllwyh} (“Praise the Lord”) psalms.\textsuperscript{9} In line with this divisional scheme, the third book concludes with a series of \textit{hllwyh} psalms, while the fifth book begins with a \textit{hwdw} (“O give thanks”) psalm and ends with the \textit{hllwyh} series of Psalms 146—150. The convergence of all these indicators confirms the fivefold division of the Psalter as a real, editorially induced structure.

\textit{Two Segments Distinguished by Organizational Technique.} Yet another indicator of the shape of the Psalter is the use of contrasting organizational techniques to distinguish two segments from each other. The first two-thirds of the Psalter (Pss. 1—89) uses author and genre designations to group psalms and to indicate boundaries between groupings. In the last third (Pss.


\textsuperscript{8} A thorough discussion with examples is provided in my book \textit{The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter}, pp. 163–67.

\textsuperscript{9} Segments begun with \textit{hwdw} psalms and concluded with \textit{hllwyh} psalms include Pss. 107—117; 118—136; 137—150. In addition, the initial segment of the fourth book (Pss. 90—106) concludes with a group of \textit{hllwyh} psalms.
90—150), boundaries are marked off by groupings of hwdw and hllwyh psalms. The existence of such contrasting organizational techniques suggests that these two major segments enjoyed discrete histories of development and transmission.

Besides the distinct character of the psalms that make up the last two books of the Psalter (Pss. 90—150), two other factors suggest that they joined the Psalter at a later date than the first three books. A linguistic study of the dating of psalms concludes that the latest psalms (some of which date from the second century B.C.) are to be found in the last third of the Psalter. Further, evidence from the Qumran psalm manuscripts shows that variation in the order and content of psalms likewise occurs almost exclusively in the final third of the Psalter. By contrast, manuscripts of the first three are almost entirely free of variation. James A. Sanders interprets this to mean that the first two-thirds of the Psalter had reached stabilization at a time when the last third was still in a state of flux. Any discussion of the shape of the Psalter cannot ignore what this combination of earlier and later segments into one final form was thought to signify.

An Introduction and a Conclusion. The introductory character of Psalm 1 seems to have won general acceptance in the modern period. There is much to commend it, and little to dispute it. Manuscript evidence supports Psalm 1 as having been placed as a preface, with some manuscripts leaving it unnumbered altogether. Some New Testament manuscripts of the Western tradition refer to a quotation from Psalm 2 with the phrase “in the first psalm,” indicating either that Psalm 1 did not as yet exist or that it was still unnumbered. Indeed, the use of a thematic or programmatic composition to provide an interpretive introduction to a larger collection is undisputed, and here it does not appear inappropriate.

The lack of a concluding doxology for the whole Psalter, which is comparable to the doxologies that end the other four books has led some to assume that the final psalm (150) was meant to serve as a grand conclusion. The use of a similar concluding doxological psalm in the Sumerian Temple Hymn Collection adds weight to this conjecture. Elsewhere, however, I have argued that the whole grouping of hllwyh Psalms 146—150 constitutes the conclusion of the Psalter and that this final hallel
is set in motion by the personal and universal calls to praise that are expressed at the end of Psalm 145:21 ("My mouth will speak the praise of Yahweh, and let all flesh bless his holy name for ever and ever"). The blessing expressed in this verse is comparable to that expressed in the other concluding doxologies, and the vocabulary of the last half ("... bless his holy name for ever and ever") is also similar (cf. 72:18–19). In these factors I find support for my contention that the conclusion of Psalm 145 marks the real climax of the Psalter as we now have it.

If, then, we set aside Psalm 1 as introduction and Psalms 146—150 as conclusion, we are left with one hundred forty-four psalms (2—145) divided into two major segments (2—89 and 90—144) by contrasting organizational techniques. These two segments are further subdivided into five "books" marked out by concluding doxologies (2—41; 42—72; 73—89; 90—106; 107—145). Within these books, the organizational techniques mentioned previously call attention to further groupings. Thus, a rather complex, purposeful structure can be seen to emerge, one that gives shape to the whole Psalter.

Competing Editorial Frames. A further indicator of editorial structure and shape reveals itself when one examines the psalms standing at the "seams" of the books. If the Psalter represents the "stitching together" of collections of psalms with earlier, independent histories, as most suppose, then it seems only logical to ask whether indications of later editorial purpose cannot be found at the edges of these collections—or at the "seams," as I have chosen to call them. Looking at these seam psalms, we discover two distinct and competing editorial "frames" that are roughly contiguous with the two major segments of the Psalter but that in some senses extend and overlap one another so as to bind these two segments together.

One of these frames owes its origin to the placement of royal psalms at the seams of the first major segment (Pss. 2; 72; 89). The frame so created


16. I suppose the image that gave birth to the term in my own mind was the ancient scroll in which the individual leaves, prepared for writing, were stitched together to form a continuous writing surface of sufficient length to receive the desired contents. Many fragments of psalms scrolls from Qumran bear the traces of stitches that bound the scrolls together.

17. See Wilson, "The Use of Royal Psalms at the 'Seams' of the Hebrew Psalter," *JSOT* 35 (1986), 85–94. The absence of an apparently "royal" psalm at the end of the first book (Ps. 41) may be the consequence of the earlier joining of these two segments into a single Davidic collection, as the postscript at the end of Ps. 72:20 implies: "The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended."
focuses on the Davidic covenant: its introduction in divine grace (Ps. 2), its transmission to David's successors with hope (Ps. 72), and its collapse in the destruction and despair of the Exile (Ps. 89). This "royal covenantal frame," which is primarily associated with the first major segment of the Psalter (i.e., the first three books), was extended into the second major segment by the placement of an additional royal psalm at the end of book five (Ps. 144). This extension can be understood in one of two ways. Either the whole royal covenantal framework was imposed on the first three books at the time the last two books were appended, or a framework independently associated with the first three books was later extended to the last two as a means of binding the whole together. I shall return to this question later.

In contrast to this royal covenantal frame, the strategic placement of "wisdom" psalms provides a structuring framework in the last two books (Pss. 90 + 91; 106; 145). As the covenantal frame is extended by the placement of Psalm 144, so the wisdom frame, which is primarily associated with the last two books, is extended forward to the first three books through, respectively, the strategic placement of Psalm 73 at the beginning of book three, the wisdom shaping of the important royal Psalms 2 and 144, and the primary placement of wisdom compositions at the beginning and conclusion of the unified Psalter (Pss. 1 and 145). The impression one gets from the interplay of these competing frames is that, in the final shaping of the Psalter, "wisdom" interests clearly had the upper hand.

A Central Pivot Point. In a recent article, Walter Brueggemann has shed fresh light on the clear "shift" that takes place between the two extreme boundaries of the Psalter. Psalm 1 introduces the Psalter with a call to obedience, while Psalm 150 concludes it with a universal rehearsal of praise. How was it possible to fashion this transition so that the title of the whole ultimately and appropriately became tehilim ("praises")? Brueggemann suggests that the Psalter should be seen as a fertile paradigm for the life that Israel (and all believers) was to lead, a life that was focused on obedience because of the divine blessing and sustenance it had experienced. In this paradigm, Israel was to win its way through the troublesome counterpoint of the hiddenness of God apparent in human suffering and to emerge with a direct apprehension of God that transcends obedience and wells up in unmotivated praise for the creator.

18 For a more thorough treatment of these competing frames, see Wilson, "Shaping the Psalter 
19 "Bounded by Obedience and Praise The Psalms as Canon," JSOI 50 (1991), 63-92

Others have noted the shift within the Psalter, based on the relative distribution of psalm types, from its beginning in individual lament to its conclusion in communal praise (cf Norman K. Gottwald, The Hebrew Bible A Socio-Literary Introduction (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1985), p 535
For Brueggemann, this transition from obedience to praise is marked in the Psalter by the peculiar postscript at the end of Psalm 72. This postscript ("The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended," 72:20) is the only explicit indicator of editorial shaping in the whole of the Psalter. It follows the doxology that signals the conclusion of the second book and must, therefore, have priority over it. By its position, this postscript binds the first two books into a unified whole.

Other factors suggest that this postscript, doxology, and psalm are all "intrusions" into their present literary context. The Solomonic title of the psalm (72:1) is somewhat inappropriate in a collection of Davidic prayers—especially since it bears the concluding postscript. In addition, Psalm 72 and its doxology interrupt the flow of the collection of "Elohistic" psalms that extends from Psalm 43 to 83. These factors, combined with the circumstances that Psalm 72 participates in the royal covenantal framework delineated above, prove that Psalm 72 has been purposely placed to provide meaningful shape to the Psalter.

Brueggemann goes on to assert that the opening psalm of book three (Ps. 73) "stands distinctively and paradigmatically in the difficult, demanding pilgrimage of Israel's faith from obedience to praise . . . . [In] the canonical structuring of the Psalter, Psalm 73 stands at its center in a crucial role." Brueggemann's point is that Psalm 73 is a paradigm that Israel was called to follow and so mirrors the path described in all the psalms: a "path from obedience to praise, by way of protest, candor and communion." Whether or not Brueggemann's assessment of the theological movement of the Psalter from obedience to praise gains general acceptance, his suggestion that Psalm 73 forms a center, or "pivot point," for the whole of the Psalter is appealing. Even though this psalm does not stand, as might be expected, at the juncture between the two major segments of the Psalter that can be distinguished by organizational techniques, the presence of the only explicit statement of editorial division (the postscript of Ps. 72:20) immediately before Psalm 73 is certainly striking. If the Davidic postscript is a late intrusion into the Psalter meant to provide structure to the final form, this may explain the anomalous circumstances surrounding the inclusion of the Solomonic Psalm 72 at the end of a Davidic collection as well as the interruption of the Elohist collection by the break between the second and third books.

21. See my discussion in "Shaping the Psalter."
23. Ibid., p. 88.
24. It is also suggestive (though perhaps too tantalizing) that, assuming Ps. 145 as the end point of the Psalter and Ps. 73 as a central, pivotal psalm, the number of psalms before and after this pivot are the same (72).
As Brueggemann himself notes, the division of the Psalter he espouses accords with the findings of J. Clinton McCann, who has shown that the intention of the last two books of the Psalter—to point postexilic Israel away from reliance on human kings toward trust in Yahweh, who alone rules eternally—is already discernible in book three.\(^{25}\) Still, what the full implications of Brueggemann’s insight for our understanding of the final shaping of the Psalter might be remains to be seen.\(^{26}\)

We have now reviewed the indicators that suggest how the Psalter has been shaped. It is obvious from this review that the Psalter has been thoroughly edited and that such editing has produced a complex literary structure. It remains for us to consider what significance the shape of the Psalter holds for the task of interpretation.

**IMPLICATIONS OF SHAPING**

We have seen that the Psalter has an intricate and difficult shape. Its shape is difficult because there is no explicit discussion of it within the Psalter itself, and neither are we told what its significance might be. We are, it seems, left to our own 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.\(^{27}\)

What can one say? In what follows, I shall touch on a number of interpretive implications that are, in my opinion, clearly derived from those indicators of shaping mentioned above.

**A Matter of Life and Death.** The Psalter begins with the introductory admonition of the wisdom Psalm 1—an admonition reflective of the interests and concerns of the final shapers of the collection. Brueggemann considers this psalm a call to obedience. It is noteworthy, however, that the reader is never counseled to “keep, follow, or obey” the Torah but only to find delight

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\(^{25}\) “Book III and the Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter.” This paper was presented in the Book of Psalms Consultation at the 1990 SBL Annual Meeting in New Orleans. A more recent version will appear in *SJSOT* (in preparation). See also Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, pp. 209–14, and “Shaping the Psalter.”

\(^{26}\) Brueggemann’s theological insight into the Psalter is considerable and artfully stated. In his concern to draw out theological implications of lasting and contemporary value, he does, however, tend to generalize, focusing on certain points of structure (the position of Pss. 1 and 150), the postscript in 72:20, etc.) while passing over others (the Elohistic collection, the competing frames, the two segments of the Psalter distinguished by organizational techniques, etc.) without comment. While Brueggemann’s treatment will probably influence how I personally read and appropriate the Psalter in the future, it has thus far left me with a vague sense of incompleteness in understanding the final form of the Psalter.

\(^{27}\) I have discussed the dangers of developing a theory of the shape of the Psalter without having first investigated thoroughly the indicators of shape in “Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of Psalms in the Psalter: Pitfalls and Promise,” *SJSOT* (in preparation).
in constant meditation upon it. Certainly canonical wisdom was capable of enjoining its listeners to obedience. Ecclesiastes 12:13 clearly states that, in the final analysis, humanity's whole duty is to "fear God and keep his commandments." Perhaps such obedience is assumed here at the beginning of the Psalter, but it does not seem to me to be emphasized. 28

Psalm 1 seems rather to encourage an attitude of constant delight in, and meditation on, the Torah as the guide to life rather than to death. If Brevard Childs is correct, then the placement of Psalm 1 intends to focus the reader on the following psalms as Torah to be read with the same sense of delight and diligence. 29 Human words to God have become the revealing Word of God. The whole chiastic and antithetical structure of Psalm 1 points up the absolute seriousness with which one should approach the Psalter. It is a matter of life and death, not casual indifference. It calls for a lifetime of study, not casual acquaintance. It is the difference between being known by God and perishing. It is the entry point to the way of life that issues forth ultimately in praise.

From Performance to Meditation. The obvious encouragement to meditate on the psalms as Torah marks an interesting shift in the interpretation of these compositions. For the most part, these works began life as performance pieces in the worship of the temple. While each may find its occasion in some specific event or experience in the life of individual or community, the poetic expression (as the psalm-headings eloquently attest) has been shaped by the demands of public performance. For this reason, the Psalter is often alluded to as the "hymnbook of the second temple" — a collection of hymns to be sung in public worship.

The placement of Psalm 1 as introduction decisively explodes this view of the Psalter. The psalms are no longer to be sung as human response to God but are to be meditated upon day and night as the source of the divine word of life to us. 30 This was certainly the way in which the psalms were used

28. The strategic positioning of the massive acrostic Ps. 119 with its emphasis on torah and obedience seems to confirm an editorial interest in torah in the final shape of the Psalter. However, appearance of Ps. 119 so late in the corpus would seem to require some explanation from Brueggemann since it raises questions regarding his assumption that the shape of the Psalter is calling Israel beyond obedience to praise. Brueggemann remains silent on the significance of this psalm and its position.


30. It is difficult for me to understand how such a move from performance to meditation could have taken place during a time in which the temple was in operation and the psalms in constant use in public worship. To appropriate these performance pieces for private meditation would seem to necessitate a period of considerable time in which temple worship was interrupted and there was little hope of reestablishing it. Two such periods immediately come to mind: the aftermath of the destruction of the first temple in 587–586 B.C., and the period that extends from the destruction of Herod's temple by the Romans in A.D. 70 to the
in the life of the community of faith following the destruction of Herod's temple in the first century A.D. As cultic use of the psalms in temple worship receded into the background, many of the related terms in the psalm-headings became vague and even unintelligible. But even as cultic connections were lost, the vitality of the psalms for use by synagogue and church continued undiminished.\textsuperscript{31}

Without question, the final shape of the Psalter, with its dominant wisdom elements, suggests that the Psalter assumed final form at a time when the sages had the upper hand in restructuring the community's perception of these cultic traditions. The result is a collection of psalms loosened from their "historical moorings" and allowed to continue to speak with power in an almost unlimited series of circumstances in the lives of the reader. The context of the psalms is no longer the confines of the cult but the heart and experience of the faithful reader. If we take our clue from the literary context of the Psalter, the appropriation of the psalms is no longer to be limited by barriers of geography or of time or place, but remains free to function wherever humans read the psalms.

\textit{From Lament to Praise.} For those who know the contents of the Psalter, its Hebrew title may strike their ear as strange. At first blush \textit{tehillim} ("praises") seems an odd and inadequate description for this book that knows the whole gamut of human experience from praise to lament and thanksgiving. As Brueggemann has shown, life in the psalms never dwells long at any one level of experience, but is more often on the move from moments of orientation to those of disorientation and reorientation as well.\textsuperscript{32} So, at one level "praises" represents a rather one-sided view of the Psalter.

Other features suggest that this emphasis on praise is no distortion, but owes much to the Psalter's shaping by the final editors. It has already been noted that the distribution of recognized psalm types within the Psalter has left a significant concentration of lament psalms in the first half of the book, whereas one can observe that the last half is increasingly dominated by forms of praise. This trend reaches its climax in the concluding \textit{hallel} in Psalms 146—150, which in a sense do not end the psalter but rather catapult the reader onward into an open and unending paean of praise for Yahweh.

The final shape of the Psalter, though it acknowledges the reality and
pain of human suffering, plumbs the depths of agony in the face of the hiddenness of God, and admits to the darkness, anger, and outright evil that continue to abide even in the heart of the faithful, nevertheless still points to an alternative view of reality in which there is room in the human heart only for praise. Praise constitutes another reality in which the presence of God has become so real that anger has no point, pain has no hold, and death lacks all power to sting.

From Individual to Community. The shift from lament to praise within the Psalter is accompanied by a related shift in which the focus moves from the individual to the community. Once again the distribution of psalm types is the key. Psalms that concern the individual dominate the first half of the Psalter, whereas a communal voice is more pronounced in the last half. When combined with the shift from lament to praise, this shift from the individual to the community influences profoundly the theology of the Psalter.

Alone and isolated, Israel (and Israelites) has cause to lament. Human weakness is all too evident; the failure of nerve and power, the lack of will to obey, the successful forays of enemies—these all undermine Israel's confidence to stand before God. With Isaiah, Israel sees only the fact and the consequences of its personal and contextual uncleanness. Judgment is its only future.

Yet, within the community of faith Israel is enabled to reexperience the steadfast mercy of Yahweh, which is renewed each morning and endures forever. With Moses Israel stands in the cleft of the rock, peering through the protective fingers of God at the glory that does not destroy. Again, with Isaiah Israel experiences the searing heat of the coal that cauterizes its sinful lips and enables it to stand once more in the presence of Holy God without fear. Individual moments of weakness and failure are swallowed up in the community's collective vision of power and purpose. Moments of doubt, induced by the searing pain of suffering in the absence of God, are provided with perspective in the ongoing communal rehearsal of the mighty acts of God, past, present, and future. It is within the community of faith that the isolated individual finds identity, affirmation, renewal, restoration, and a hope for the future. That is the reason to praise—now as well as then.

Yahweh Enthroned on the Praises of His People. That praise is the final goal of the Psalter is confirmed for me by the central message of the fourth book (Pss. 90—106). In my interpretation of the Psalter, I ascribe to this book an elevated significance for at least two reasons. First, it stands at the juncture of the two major Psalter segments that can be distinguished by their organizational techniques. In fact, it comprises the first part of that segment shaped clearly by the concerns of praise (hwdw and hltvyh psalm groupings). Second, because of its position this book initiates the interpretive response
to the agonized cry of dismay voiced at the end of Psalm 89 to the effect that all the national hopes pinned on the Davidic covenant (the structural element in the first segment of the Psalter) have come crashing down into the real world of defeat and exile.

While Brueggemann’s argument that Psalm 73 represents the paradigmatic pivot point in Israel’s progress from obedience to praise remains appealing, it is equally apparent to me that the clearest articulation of the crisis of identity and faith that precipitates the theological response one finds in the final form of the Psalter comes in Psalm 89 at the end of the third book. In the eyes of the Israel that cries out in this psalm, all pain and suffering are objectified by the demise of the national kingdom in the Exile and the failure of those divine promises associated with the Davidic covenant. The issue that motivates Psalm 89 is not Israel’s obedience but theodicy. Almost Job-like, the psalmist summons Yahweh to justify the failure of his covenant promises. Yahweh is in the dock, and restoration is predicated not on Israel’s confession and repentance but on a demand that God restore his covenant loyalty and the Davidic kingship.

This is the crisis that calls forth the response of the fourth and fifth books of the Psalter. How can a people continue to live faithfully when all their former hopes are gone? How can a people reidentify themselves when all the old landmarks have been swept away? Psalm 90, and the remainder of the fourth book, begin to point Israel away from reliance on the inadequacies of human kings and kingdoms to the adequacy of Yahweh himself. Yahweh was the rock of refuge available for Israel long before the monarchy was even a glimmer in Israel’s collective eye. Yahweh is the almighty creator who founded the earth and controls the destiny of all nations.

The central psalms of book four (Pss. 93; 95—99) celebrate the kingship of Yahweh who, unlike human princes, rules forever. In praising the creative power of God, these psalms leave no doubt that the failure of the monarchy in the Exile cannot be attributed to any weakness of God: “All the gods of the peoples are idols, but Yahweh made the heavens” (96:5). Yahweh is enthroned over all and will judge all the peoples with equity and with truth (96:13; 98:9). In a fashion similar to the theophany of Job 38—42, God appears in these psalms in such majesty that all doubts as to his power and control are summarily removed. Israel is not so much called to obedience in these psalms as to surrender—complete and absolute surrender to the eternal king whom they experience anew as creator and sustainer worthy of praise even in the midst of exile.

The Exile is the result, therefore, not of Yahweh’s weakness but of Israel’s sin and disobedience (90:7–8; 106:6–42). Like Isaiah in the temple, Israel in the presence of Yahweh is forced not only to acknowledge his holiness but must also confront the reality of its own guilt. Any hope of restoration must be based on Israel’s admission of guilt and repentance before God. For this
reason, the fourth book concludes with (1) a call to integrity in Psalm 101
(“I will study the way that is blameless. When shall I attain it?”); (2) a lament
that acknowledges Yahweh’s continuing kingly power and calls for mercy on
his distressed people (Ps. 102); (3) a thanksgiving psalm that celebrates
Yahweh’s kingship and the outpouring of divine mercy in forgiveness of sin
(Ps. 103:8–14); (4) praise for Yahweh’s sustaining power (Ps. 104); (5) a
history of Yahweh’s gracious deeds in behalf of Israel (Ps. 105); and (6) a
psalm that rehearses Israel’s consistent failure to respond to Yahweh’s
gracious acts with loyalty and obedience, which is a confession of sin ("Both
we and our ancestors have sinned; we have committed iniquity, have done
wickedly,” 106:6).

The God who comes in response to Israel’s plea in Psalm 89, the God
enthroned as king over the earth in Psalm 93—99, is the God who is worthy
of praise. The enthronement psalms themselves make this abundantly clear.
They are permeated with an attitude of celebration and praise for the
creative power of God, who is king. The first group of *hillulah* psalms appears
at the conclusion of the fourth book (Pss. 105—106) and confirms the link
between praise and the kingship of Yahweh that is at the heart of this book.

Again, at the end of the fifth book God’s kingship precipitates human
praise. The acrostic Psalm 145 that concludes the final wisdom frame of the
Psalter pictures David as extolling Yahweh as the true king who alone is
worthy of praise. Yahweh is to be praised for his “wondrous works” (145:4–
7), for his gracious mercy and steadfast love (145:8–9), for the glorious
splendor of his eternal kingdom (145:10–13), and for his gracious provision
for those in need (145:13–20). The poem concludes in 145:21 with David’s
call to himself and “all flesh” to praise Yahweh forever. As I have shown
elsewhere, this call to praise draws the Psalter to an end and precipitates the
concluding *hallel* of Psalms 146—150.

As the Psalter concludes, Yahweh sits enthroned on the praises of his
people. If Yahweh is indeed experienced as king, what appeal or power can
human kings possess? In the words of Psalm 146:3–4, Israel is counseled:

Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.

The remainder of the psalm directs Israel to find its help in Yahweh, who is
creator (145:6), executor of justice (145:7), and defender of the helpless.

33. The similarity with Job who, confronted with the awesome majesty of holy Yahweh,
withdraws his case and “repents in sackcloth and ashes” is striking. In this connection,
Brueggemann also refers to Job (“Bounded by Obedience and Praise,” p. 89).
(145:7–9). By rehearsing this litany of mighty acts, the poet affirms that Yahweh is the true king, who alone is able to fulfill the responsibilities traditionally associated with kingship in the ancient Near East. Human princes can only try, but fail to emulate the power and justice of God. The poem ends with the clear affirmation that “Yahweh will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise Yahweh!”

Like Israel, the reader of the Psalter is called to encounter God as eternal king enthroned on the praises of his people. To experience God in his majestic kingship in the central enthronement psalms is to step with Moses and Isaiah into the presence of Holy God. This encounter cuts two ways. It drives us to our knees with downcast eyes to confess our own unclean lips. Yet, at the same moment, it catapults us to our feet—arms raised high—in praise of the God of grace who

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{does not deal with us according to our sins,} \\
&\text{nor repay us according to our iniquities.} \\
&\text{For as the heavens are high above the earth,} \\
&\text{so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;} \\
&\text{as far as the east is from the west,} \\
&\text{so far he removes our transgressions from us (Ps. 103:10–13).}
\end{align*}
\]

That is reason enough for praise. Hallelujah!
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