I. Introduction

When people of faith gather around the Hebrew scriptures, the focus is often the book of Psalms. This collection of songs has powerfully influenced worship, theology, ethics, and piety for centuries.[1] The book continues to influence contemporary readers with its eloquent poetic language, which communicates directly to the life circumstances of contemporary readers even though the language originated from the ancient Near East. The book undercuts private and simplistic forms of piety and yet it has been appropriately labeled the "Prayer Book of the Bible."[2] Luther has even given it the title of the "little Bible" because it encapsulates so much of the message of the Scriptures. He says the Psalter "might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible … so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book."[3] This central biblical book continues to capture the imaginations of readers today as they seek to pray and live faithfully.

MATTERS OF ORGANIZATION

The context of the book of Psalms can provide clues for readers, and so it may be helpful to discuss a number of introductory matters. The title "Psalms," which indicates songs accompanied by stringed instruments, comes from the title of the book in the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures. The title "Psalter" in the Latin version refers to the stringed instrument. The Hebrew title aptly categorizes the book as "praises." The book is structured in five sections, or books, each of which concludes

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1   See Susan Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries: Volume One* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).
2   Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, 2nd edition, trans. J. H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979).
3   Martin Luther, "Preface to the Psalter," in Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, trans. C. M. Jacobs and Rev. E. T. Bachman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 254.

with a benediction (Pss 41:13; 72:18–20; 89:52; 106:48; 145:21). Psalms 146–150 con-
clude the Psalter with a fivefold doxology. Psalms 1 and 2 introduce the collection.

Five Books of Psalms

Book I	Psalms 1–41
Book II	Psalms 42–72
Book III	Psalms 73–89
Book IV	Psalms 90–106
Book V	Psalms 107–150

The Psalter is a collection of collections that have come together to make up the
five books. A number of these collections are related to the titles or superscriptions
written as headings to many of the psalms (usually verse 1 in the Hebrew text but
written as a heading in English translations).

Collections in the Psalter

Davidic Collections	Psalms 3–41; 51–72; 138–145
Korahite Collections	Psalms 42–49; 84–85; 87–88
Elohistic Collection	Psalms 42–83
Asaphite Collection	Psalms 73–83
Songs of Ascents	Psalms 120–134

The most common label is associated with David. Through the centuries a num-
ber of readers have taken those references to David as indications of authorship,
but the preposition used with the famous royal name carries a wide variety of
meanings, such as "dedicated to," "on behalf of," or "belonging to." It is best to take
these references and other texts in the Hebrew scriptures that connect David with
the Psalms in terms of a tradition of David as the patron or primary sponsor of
psalmody in ancient Israel and the royal figure who authorized worship and its
use of psalms in Jerusalem. A helpful analogy is the connection of King James I to
the King James Version of the Bible. Some of the Davidic psalms are also part of
the Elohistic Psalter (Psalms 42–83), given that title because of the preference for
Elohim (God) rather than *YHWH* (Lord) when referring to the deity. Some psalms
occur twice in the Psalter – once in the Elohistic Psalter and once elsewhere – and
highlight the difference in divine name:

Ps 14:2: *The Lord (YHWH)* looks down from heaven on humankind …
Ps 53:2: *God (Elohim)* looks down from heaven on humankind …

The overlapping of collections in the Psalter indicates something of the process of its compilation. We do not know the whole story of how the Psalter came together, and we will return to this issue later in the Introduction, but it is fair to say that the Davidic collections form the core of the book of Psalms, and these psalms are primarily prayers of individuals. The psalms of the Korahites and of Asaph add community prayers and begin the move toward more psalms of praise, a move that continues in Books IV and V. The Psalter apparently arose from a lengthy process that shaped the book in a purposeful way.

Most of the psalms (116 out of 150 in the Hebrew Psalter) include superscriptions. Most interpreters agree that the superscriptions were added later, during the process of the compilation of the Psalter, but they are still part of the text and provide helpful clues to readers.[4] These headings often include three elements:

1. *Liturgical Collections*. Psalms of David or psalms of Asaph, for example, indicate the liturgical collection from which the psalm derived.
2. *Worship Terms*. Some of these terms are obscure, but "with stringed instruments" in Psalm 67 refers to the performance of the text in worship. "According to the lilies" in Psalm 69 apparently indicates the hymn tune to be used for this text in worship.
3. *Historical Notes*. The superscription of Psalm 57 includes the following: "Of David. A Miktam [golden poem], when he fled from Saul in the cave." In a heuristic move, the compilers of the Psalter suggest that readers consider Psalm 57 along with the narrative in 1 Samuel 22 where Saul pursues David as a competitor for the throne and in particular along with 1 Sam 22:1.

Psalm 59 includes all three of these elements: "To the leader: Do Not Destroy [worship terms]. Of David [liturgical collection]. A Miktam, when Saul ordered his house to be watched in order to kill him [historical note]."

MATTERS OF POETRY

The Psalms take the form of Hebrew poetry. The poetic form is somewhat different from traditional English poetry. Although a kind of meter may have characterized Hebrew poetry, we know little about that. What interpreters do often discern is the central presence of parallel structures – in words, poetic lines, and groups of

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4   See, for example, B. S. Childs, "Psalms Titles and Midrashic Exegesis," *JSS* 16 (1971): 137–150; John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 461–462; and James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1994), 11–13, 53–54.

poetic lines. Parallel relations between lines of Hebrew poetry often come across in English translations as echoes. At times the echo suggests similarity of meaning:

> The heavens are telling the glory of God;
> and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. (Ps 19:1)

At other times, the echo is one of contrast:

> For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
> but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1:6)

The nature of the echo between lines varies, but readers are well advised to note the relationships between the lines of verses in the Psalms.[5]

Poetry is highly structured and complex language that demands much of its readers. In addition to the parallel structures already mentioned, the Psalms also make use of repetition and poetic images. The particular vocabulary used also carries much freight; note the use of "righteous" and "wicked" in Psalm 1 quoted earlier. Scholars have begun to pay closer attention to these characteristics of the poetry in the Psalter. When readers follow the poetic sequencing and relationships in a psalm and pay close attention to the metaphors and language used, it becomes possible to plot the psalm's movement and to sense the text's poetic structure and purpose.[6]

MATTERS OF METHOD

This commentary will approach the Psalms by way of several of the methods of modern scholarship on the Psalter.

First, attention to matters of genre will be important. The inventor of the modern study of the Psalms is Hermann Gunkel, and his central contribution has to do with analyzing the Psalms according to type. Gunkel thought previous interpretations of the Psalms that centered on questions of authorship and historical events behind the texts did not take sufficient account of the poetic language of the Psalms themselves. He considered psalms found in texts from ancient Near Eastern peoples surrounding Israel and psalms that are found in the Bible in places other than the Psalter (for example, Exod 15:1–18; Jgs 5:1–31; 1 Sam 2:1–10; Jer 20:7–18). He carefully compared all these songs and those in the Hebrew Psalter and categorized

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5   For helpful treatments of Hebrew poetry, see J. L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); and A. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

6   See W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984). Particularly helpful in envisioning the poetic imagery of the Psalms is William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

them into literary groupings. Vocabulary, poetic structure, and religious tone were the criteria he used. Gunkel's work was widely influential in the twentieth century and continues to bear important fruit in the study of the Psalms.[7] Gunkel's work provides a way to organize one's study of the Psalter and a comparative basis for studying individual psalms as part of a category. Most works on the Psalms in the twentieth century began with a classification of the Psalms in the tradition of Gunkel's method. Questions of genre continue to carry import in Psalms study. Attention to genre can help readers follow the poetic sequence and see connections with other psalms.

The treatments of psalms in this commentary will pay attention to questions of genre. It may be helpful to list the primary types of psalms that will be discussed.

1. *Individual and Community Laments*. These psalms derive from a crisis either of a person of faith (such as illness or false accusation) or of the community of faith (such as war or famine). The prayers address Israel's God and portray the crisis and call for help. Most often the prayers come to a positive conclusion.

2. *Hymns of Praise*. These psalms offer adoration and praise to God as creator and redeemer. They begin with a call to the congregation to offer praise and often conclude with a very similar renewed call. The body of the psalm articulates reasons why the community should offer praise to God.

3. *Individual and Community Thanksgiving Psalms*. These texts narrate the story of how a person of faith or the community has been delivered from a crisis, put in the context of praise and gratitude to the God who delivers. Westermann understands these texts to be a particular kind of psalm of praise.[8]

4. *Royal Psalms*. These texts find their origin in various events in the life of the Davidic King in Jerusalem, such as battle or a royal coronation. This group of psalms is distinguished by that background more than by literary characteristics.

5. *Wisdom Psalms*. A number of interpreters identify some psalms as deriving from the wisdom circles in ancient Israel and reflecting their perspectives as seen in the book of Proverbs.

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7 See H. Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction* (Facet Books, Biblical Series 19; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967); and H. Gunkel with Joachim Begrich, *An Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James D. Nogalski (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998) [German original, 1933]. R. E. Clements, *One Hundred Years of Old Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 76–98, provides a helpful account of the form-critical approach to the Psalms.

8 Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

Second, attention to matters of cultic setting will come to the fore in some of the psalm treatments. Ancient Israel's cult – their organized worship primarily in the Jerusalem temple – provides the religious and social setting from which many of the psalms derive. Gunkel began the emphasis on worship as the background of the Psalms, but it was his student Sigmund Mowinckel who took the matter to its logical conclusion.[9] For Mowinckel, the Psalms and their categories were tied to their use in worship. The language of the Psalms is liturgical language, reflecting actual worship practice. Leaders associated with the cultic establishment composed many of the texts for liturgical settings. Mowinckel understood that in ancient Israel the personal religion often sensed by readers of the Psalms and the religion of corporate worship are not mutually exclusive but are two dimensions of ancient Israel's religion. So the central interpretive question for Mowinckel is the function of the psalm in worship, in particular the identification of a festival or ritual setting that gave birth to the psalm. For Mowinckel, worship was a dramatic event that included sights and sounds as it brought to expression the relationship between the congregation and its deity. Processions and rituals with a variety of movements and offerings provide the context in which the Psalms were performed. The dramatic event of worship in Jerusalem was also tied to ancient Israel's faith narrative. In worship, the community reenacted its story of faith so that each generation might participate in the story and envision its great events. The reenactment of the Exodus from Egypt or of the kingship of the creator YHWH would have been part of the festival worship celebrations. Prayer rituals for healing or for pleas for deliverance were also important worship events. Such liturgical settings had implications for theology and ethics. For Mowinckel, the cult was central to ancient Israel's religion, and the Psalms were the songs set in that worship. So attention to this background provided the most basic information for interpreters.

Not all interpreters today would emphasize the cultic setting of the Psalms in the totalizing way Mowinckel did, especially the tie to the preexilic Jerusalem cult he extols. The understanding of setting is broader and more flexible. Still, most interpreters would agree that cult stands in the background of many psalms, and often this generative cult relates to the Jerusalem temple. The temple was sacred space for ancient Israel because it was seen to be a special place of the life-giving presence of YHWH.[10] A number of the psalms appear to relate to rituals and festivals in that context and, where warranted, this commentary will explore how those settings can inform interpretation.

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9   See Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (2 vols., Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1962).
10 See Fredrik Lindström, *Suffering and Sin: Interpretations of Illness in the Individual Complaint Psalms* (Coniectanea Biblica; Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1994), 192–193.

Third, the matter of a psalm's relationship to societal issues as part of its broader setting can provide interpretive clues. Claus Westermann's interaction with Gunkel's emphasis on genre provides a helpful starting point.[11] He has seen that the Psalms move from plea to praise and that lament is resolved into thanksgiving. Lament psalms often end positively with praise, and thanksgiving psalms fulfill the vow to offer gratitude upon the occasion of deliverance from the crisis. These thanksgiving psalms are related to the powerful hymnic praise in the Psalter. Walter Brueggemann has translated this perspective into relational terms: "In these psalms, Israel moves from *articulation* of hurt and anger, to *submission* of them to God, and finally to *relinquishment*.... Only when there is relinquishment can there be praise and acts of generosity."[12] Also relevant is Erhard Gerstenberger's understanding of the lament psalms as important pastoral texts related not to the cult of the Jerusalem temple but to extended family settings in which life crises from birth to death become part of prayer rituals.[13] What Brueggemann has seen from these studies of genre and setting is that the faith to which the Psalms bear witness is concerned with the dynamics of power. Petitioners in the Psalms plead with God to redress societal and relational wrongs as the covenant God who brings justice, and so the portrayal of YHWH in these texts is of a God who is engaged with this community – a God in the fray. Petitioners in the Psalms boldly address YHWH; such prayer speech is taken seriously and preserved as central to the covenant faith in the Psalter. These psalms also often seek a redress of human power relations. Forceful enemies attack the speakers in these psalms, and the speakers complain to the deity with the expectation that God will deal with such unjust attacks. The treatment of many of the psalms in this commentary will explore ways that these prayers reflect social oppression and seek a redress of power.

Fourth, a psalm's context in the Psalter carries import. The interpretive approaches described earlier most often deal with each psalm as a discrete text, but many recent interpreters suggest that the shape of the Hebrew Psalter as a whole

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11 C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (1981).
12 W. Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," in Patrick D. Miller (ed.), *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 100; see also W. Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988). Brueggemann's influential faith typology of the Psalms in terms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation also connects to the relational dimension of psalmody; see W. Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function," in P. D. Miller (ed.), *Psalms and the Life of Faith* (1995), 3–32.
13 See Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 1, with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (Forms of the Old Testament Literature; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988); and Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (Forms of the Old Testament Literature; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

can give helpful clues to readers. Gerald Wilson's work provides important starting points.[14] He argues that Books I–III of the Psalter have a different editorial history than Books IV–V. The first three books reflect the experience of the Davidic kingdom, initiated with the coronation of the king in Psalm 2 and concluding with the demise of Jerusalem at the end of Psalm 89. Books IV–V respond to the exile that originated from this crisis by reasserting the reign of YHWH as a basis for the community's future. Some have questioned this articulation of the macrostructure of the Hebrew Psalter because of the presence of Davidic elements in Books IV–V, but a number of scholars emphasize the centrality of divine kingship for the book.[15] This commentary will on occasion explore a particular psalm's place in the Psalter as a whole or its place in a collection of psalms. The other dimension of these recent interpretations of the Psalms has to do with microstructures; that is, the connections between individual psalms.[16] Most readers of Psalm 23, for example, do not account for its position and relationship with Psalms 22 and 24. The commentary will at times explore such relationships. Scholarship of recent decades has made it clear that there is a purposeful shape to the Hebrew Psalter, and readers can gain much by attending to this dimension of Psalms study.

The commentary will also attend to ancient Near Eastern connections to the Psalms and to the poetic dimensions already noted, though the dominant approaches are the four articulated here.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary readers continue to find the Psalms to be vibrant expressions of prayer and faith as well as vibrant portrayals of the divine and human encounter for faith communities. This commentary seeks to give context and color for those readers of the text in the hope that interpretive communities will interact with the Psalms, be formed by them, and embrace their life-giving impact.

14 G. H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBLDS 76; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985); see also B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 504–525. See James L. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), as an illustration of the shift from beginning with genre in studying the Psalms to beginning with the compilation of the Psalter.
15 See, for example, James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994); and J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993). For a different view, see David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms* (JSOTSup; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997).
16 See David M. Howard, *The Structure of Psalms 93–100* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997); and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

PSALM COLLECTIONS AND PSALM TYPES

1	Book 1		Wisdom
2	1–41		Royal
3		David	Individual Lament
4		3–41	Individual Lament
5			Individual Lament
6			Individual Lament
7			Individual Lament
8			Creation
9			Individual Lament
10			Individual Lament
11			Individual Lament
12			Community Lament
13			Individual Lament
14			Community Lament
15			Entrance Liturgy
16			Individual Lament
17			Individual Lament
18			Royal
19			Creation
20			Royal
21			Royal
22			Individual Lament
23			Trust Psalm
24			Entrance Liturgy
25			Individual Lament
26			Individual Lament
27			Individual Lament
28			Individual Lament
29			General Hymn
30			Individual Psalm of Thanksgiving
31			Individual Lament
32			Wisdom
33			General Hymn
34			Individual Psalm of Thanksgiving
35			Individual Lament
36			Individual Lament
37			Wisdom
38			Individual Lament
39			Individual Lament
40			Individual Lament
41			Individual Psalm of Thanksgiving

42	Book 2	Korah	Elohistic	Individual Lament
43	42–72	42–49	42–83	Individual Lament
44				Community Lament
45				Royal
46				Zion Psalm
47				Enthronement
48				Zion Psalm
49				Wisdom
50		Psalm of Asaph		Hymn with Prophetic Warning
51		David		Individual Lament
52		51–72		Individual Lament
53				Community Lament
54				Individual Lament
55				Individual Lament
56				Individual Lament
57				Individual Lament
58				Community Lament
59				Individual Lament
60				Community Lament
61		Of Solomon		Individual Lament
62				Individual Lament
63				Individual Lament
64				Individual Lament
65				Creation
66				Individual Psalm of Thanksgiving
67				Community Psalm of Thanksgiving
68				General Hymn
69				Individual Lament
70				Individual Lament
71				Individual Lament
72				Royal
73	Book 3	Asaph		Wisdom
74	73–89	73–83		Community Lament
75				Community Psalm of Thanksgiving
76				Zion Psalm
77				Individual Lament
78				Wisdom
79				Community Lament
80				Community Lament
81				Hymn with Prophetic Warning
82				Hymn with Prophetic Warning
83				Community Lament