

The Shape of the Psalter: an introduction

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The aim of this presentation is to provide a brief overview of basic issues related to current scholarly dialog on the nature of the Psalter's arrangement: the "Shape" of the MT Psalter. This field of study — the shape of the Psalter — is both innately complex by nature, and it is also complicated by the variety of theories scholars have brought to the table. The simplicity of the following outline will, I trust, provide an adequate *introduction* to the subject, but this presentation should not be mistaken as a truly adequate *treatment* on so vast a topic.

In this presentation, the following issues will be sketched:

1. The idea of a "shaped" Psalter
2. The (main) evidence for a "shaped" Psalter
3. The dating of the (final) shaping of the Psalter
4. The "message" of the Psalter's (final) shape
5. Some questions needing answers

The Idea of a "Shaped" Psalter

In his paper for the Psalms Group workshop of the 1989 Society of Biblical Literature conference, Roland Murphy began:

In biblical studies it is almost unheard of that exegesis should operate without the context of the book in which a passage is found. In the past, exceptions were made for psalms and proverbs; these were considered to be independent compositions with little, if any, relationship to the 'book' in which they were found. Slowly this has changed....¹

The prose works contained in the Hebrew Bible, though themselves subjected to rigorous questions of various original sources and earlier forms, are nonetheless understood to exist in their present arrangements according to a deliberate theological purpose. The Pentateuch, for example, whatever its earlier sources may have been,

¹ Roland E. Murphy, "Reflections on Contextual Interpretation of the Psalms"; in: J. Clinton McCann, ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (JSOTSup 159; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 41.

exists now in five-books, deliberately arranged in a special order to convey specific concerns to the reader. One of the aims of Pentateuch-scholarship is to identify what those concerns are reflected in the final arrangement of the Mosaic materials. Modern scholarship has recognized the validity of analyzing the prose works contained in the Scriptures either according to perceived units within the text or according to the final arrangement and the message of that arrangement.

Certain of the poetical collections, however, have not been so treated — in particular the Psalter. Although interest in the final arrangement of the 150 Psalms can be identified in the *background* of scholarly discussions throughout the modern era, the overwhelming force of Psalms scholarship in the past two centuries has focused on the units within the Psalter (i.e.: individual psalms or sub-collections of psalms, like the “Psalms of Ascent”). Only passing reference has been made to any possible overarching arrangement for the whole.² Particularly influential in individual psalms studies has been the dominance of Hermann Gunkel’s form criticism of the Psalms and Sigmund Mowinckel’s efforts to discover the order in which psalms were originally used (i.e.: a *previous* [cultic] order of the psalms as opposed to the current [literary] order).

In 1950, C. Th. Niemeyer suggested the need to examine the Psalter as a whole to determine whether the operating assumption — that the Psalter is an essentially random arrangement of independent units — is correct. In his dissertation,³ Niemeyer studied the organization of the Talmud, the Mishnah, the Qur’an, and certain Biblical materials to see if he could deduce organizational schemes to shed light on a possible scheme underlying the MT Psalter. His conclusion, however, was doubtful: he concluded that no single arrangement can be identified in the MT Psalter.

It was not until the work of Gerald H. Wilson in 1981 that major impetus for the positive identification of a single shape defining the Psalter was put forward. A student of Brevard Childs (and influenced by Childs’ canon criticism), Wilson devoted his PhD dissertation⁴ to the examination of organizational arrangement behind Mesopotamian,

² See, for example, Delitzche, who dismissed the *investigation* of a single arrangement of the Psalter as an “unattainable” effort while nonetheless acknowledging *evidence* of such arrangement: “... down to the most recent times attempts have been made to trace in the five books [of Psalms] a gradation of principal thoughts, which influence and run through the whole collection. We fear that in this direction, investigation has set before itself an unattainable end. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the collection bears the impress of one ordering mind....” (Franz Delitzche, *Psalms* [James Martin, trans., *Commentary on the Old Testament* 5; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 19.)

³ C. Th. Niemeyer, *Hat Probleem van de rangschikking der Psalmen* (Leiden: Luctor et Emergo, 1950).

⁴ Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

Qumran, and MT hymnic material, with the ultimate focus on the arrangement of the MT Psalter. In his examination of the MT Psalter, Wilson demonstrated the presence of redactional re-arrangement in how the superscriptions of the Psalter are placed as well as, what he perceived as, significance to the “seam” psalms (i.e.: the psalms placed at the divisions between books).

Although Wilson’s work by no means settled the question, nor persuasively identified “the” message of the Psalter, his work has persuaded many scholars that redactional intent *does* underlie the final arrangement of the Psalter, and his work has helped to fuel a growing interest in the study of the Psalms, not merely as units, but as a canonical book.

The (Main) Evidence for a “Shaped” Psalter

Many pieces of evidence have been proposed to support the thesis of a single, redactional shape to the final MT Psalter. The main evidences generally recognized among Psalm scholars as potentially indicating such a final redaction include:

1. Psalm Superscriptions
2. The 5-Book Division of the Psalter
3. “Seam” Psalms
4. Psalms 1 and 150 (i.e.: their function as introductory and concluding announcements for the whole)

Each of these will be examined briefly.

Psalm Superscriptions

The superscriptions of the Psalms have (at least as far back as the Patristic fathers) been generally regarded as secondary: they are not perceived to be original to the Psalms they introduce. It is probably the implausibility of the many historical claims (i.e., that certain psalms were written by David during certain historical events as stated in the “titles”) that has largely influenced this conclusion. Modern Psalms scholarship has generally given little credence to the superscriptions.

Shape studies, however, have questioned that assumption. Although most canonical-Psalms scholars do *not* regard the superscriptions as necessarily original to the psalms,

evidence seems increasingly to support their ancient provenance and, consequently, the seriousness with which they ought to be considered for examination of the *final* arrangement of the Psalms. The superscriptions may be of minimal help for study of the *individual* psalms they accompany, but they are of great importance in our examination of the Psalter *as a whole*.

Both Biblical and extra-biblical evidences have pointed to the importance of the superscriptions. For example, excavations at Ras Shamra have uncovered a Hurian cult song with the following notations directly appended to the song: identification of the text as a song; its genre (*hymn*); the tuning or scale for its singing; and the name of the scribe or copyist.⁵ Also, certain narrative Biblical texts (i.e.: 2Sam 22.1, Is 38.9, and Hab 3.1, 19) record songs *with* superscription information directly appended to the texts in those settings, and one psalm (Ps 72) includes a *subscriptional* notation within the body of the psalm: כָּלֵי תַפְלוֹת דָּוִד בֶּן־יֵשׁוּעַ ("the prayers of David, son of Jesse, are ended"). Furthermore, the fact that many of the musical terms used in the Psalm superscriptions are *mistranslated* in the 2nd century B.C. LXX has been seen as indicating, not only that the Psalms possessed these superscriptions prior to the 2nd century B.C., but some scholars interpret the evident confusion of the LXX translators over certain musical terminology as indicating some significant gap of time between the coining of the superscriptions and the translation of the LXX.⁶

It is information of this nature that has been identified as supporting the ancient character of the Psalm superscriptions and the importance of their witness to the final redaction of the MT Psalter.

I have attached (see appendix) a display of the MT Psalter's superscription information. In the MT Psalter, 116 of the 150 psalms have a superscription, and they seem to follow a fairly regular formula. That is, there are four⁷ basic pieces of information which superscriptions can contain (some having more or less of these), and these kinds of

⁵ RS 15.30+15:49+17.387; E. Laroche, "Documents en langue Hourrite provenant de Ras Shamra," *Ugaritica* V, 463-87; cited from Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50 (Word Biblical Commentary 19)*; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 32.

⁶ See Roger Beckwith's discussion of this problem in: Roger T. Beckwith, "The Early History of the Psalter," *Tyndale Bulletin* 46.1 (1995), 10-17. Beckwith identifies at least 16 points of misunderstanding in the LXX translation of the superscriptions.

⁷ Some scholars divide the superscriptional material more rigorously. For example, Craigie identifies five kinds of superscriptional information, essentially following the scheme I have given, but treating liturgical use as a separate category from historical setting. Craigie, 32.

information are generally presented in the same order (with numbers 2 and 3 occasionally inverted):

1. Musical instructions
2. Type of composition
3. Attribution
4. Setting (i.e.: Historical connection or liturgical use)

The last of these — the (historical) settings — are generally regarded as late midrashic additions to the psalm superscriptions.⁸ They are probably not meant to indicate the actual origin of the psalms to which they are attached, but rather to provide an exegetical clue regarding the use of the psalm.⁹ That they are consistently last in the superscription formula seems to support the possibility of their being later additions.¹⁰

It is in examination of the other principle parts of the Psalm superscriptions that Gerald Wilson's work has proved especially helpful. In his study of Mesopotamian hymnic collections, Wilson noted a tendency in the ANE to group cultic songs according to genre (or, in some cases, other categorical interests) and to conclude grouped collections with doxologies. He also noted the "fixation" of ascriptional information which, appended to a song tended to be maintained with that song even when the collection in which it belonged was rearranged.¹¹ These features led Wilson to suggest that the Psalm superscriptions also reflect early psalm-arrangement schemes, which superscriptions were then maintained through subsequent arrangement(s).

Operating with this hypothesis, Wilson proposed that the Psalter redactors in some places maintained previous psalm groupings (like the *שיר המעלות* ["songs of ascent"] in Pss 120–134), while in other places they creatively *used* pre-existing superscriptions to support their own arrangement scheme. It is his demonstrating consistent patterns to support this second theory that has particularly marked Wilson's work.

⁸ Brevard S. Childs, "Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis," *JSS* 16 (1971) 137-50.

⁹ Wilson believes the David-history superscriptions are meant to change the psalms from their original cultic, corporate use into psalms of individual, personal identity: i.e., to aid readers in seeing the psalms as relevant to personal circumstances through identification with David *as a man*. (Wilson, *Editing*, 172-3.)

¹⁰ See Beckwith, 17-20.

¹¹ Wilson, *Editing*, 23-24, 54-60.

In particular, Wilson shows how the final redactors of the MT150 used the genre and author ascriptions to smooth together or emphasize breaks within the collection. For example, Wilson notes that a strong of Davidic *mizmor* psalms (Pss 38–41) give way to a series of Korahite *maskil* psalms (42–45) at the same point where Book I is closed with a doxology (Ps 41.14). According to Wilson, this would illustrate the use of a doxology to end a collection (as he observed in various Sumarian collections) and the use of the superscription material to emphasize that break:

Ps 38	39	40	41	42/43	44	45
<i>mizmor</i>	<i>mizmor</i>	<i>mizmor</i>	<i>mizmor</i>	<i>maskil</i>	<i>maskil</i>	<i>maskil</i>
David	David	David	David	Korah	Korah	Korah

On the other hand, Wilson notes how the consistent string of *genre* superscriptions from Psalms 47–51 function to bridge a change in the *author* attributions, thereby smoothing over the author-change and holding the book in which it belongs together:

Ps 47	48	49	50	51
<i>mizmor</i>	<i>mizmor</i>	<i>mizmor</i>	<i>mizmor</i>	<i>mizmor</i>
Korah	Korah	Korah	Asaph	David

According to Wilson, these two kinds of use of pre-existent superscriptions demonstrate the hand of the final redactors and show their interest in adapting previous collections for their own arrangement scheme.¹²

Although this kind of pattern does not seem to contribute much to our understanding of what that scheme means to communicate, this kind of pattern (especially seen as consistently applied as Wilson has shown) does seem to indicate that there is a deliberate plan at work in the MT Psalter’s final compilation.

For clues as to the *message* of that arrangement, Wilson would have us pay special notice to the “seam” psalms. Prior to looking at the “seam” psalms (i.e., those psalms located along the breaks in the 5-book Psalter), we will look at the 5-book division, itself.

¹² Wilson, *Editing*, 163-7.

The 5-Book Division of the Psalter

Scholars are unclear concerning the importance of the fact that the Psalter divides into *five* books or how to interpret this division. Two theories which I will summarize below, although by no means the only suppositions, are as follow: that the five books reflect an analogy between the Psalter and the Pentateuch; or that the five books reflect “growth rings” in the Psalter (i.e., conclusion points which were later appended).

The supposition that the Psalter is divided into five books on the analogy of the Pentateuch has a long history. According to the *Midrash Tehillim* on Psalm 1.1:

As Moses gave five books of laws to Israel, so David gave five Books of Psalms to Israel, the Book of Psalms entitled *Blessed is the man* (Ps 1:1), the Book entitled *For the Leader: Maschil* (Ps 42:1), the Book, *A Psalm of Asaph* (Ps 73:1), the Book, *A Prayer of Moses* (Ps 90:1), and the Book, *Let the redeemed of the Lord say* (Ps 107:2).¹³

Whether the Psalter’s arrangement in five books reflects an original attempt on the part of the redactors to establish an analogy between the MT150 and the Pentateuch, or whether this parallel was a later observation that provided a “nice” midrashic insight, is, however, debated. Furthermore, among those scholars who do recognize the potential validity of this analogy, there are two ways of interpreting it. Some see the analogy as simply underscoring the *torah* interest also reflected in key psalms like Psalm 1 (at the introduction) and Psalm 119. Others have gone beyond this simple comparison and have endeavored to show an actual, passage-for-passage correspondence between the order of the Pentateuch’s five books and the order of the Psalter’s five books.

Efforts to demonstrate an *actual* parallel between the MT Psalter and the Pentateuch predate the current revival of Psalter shape theories. In 1935, for example, Dr. J. Rabinowitz published an article, “Does Midrash Tehillim Reflect the Triennial Cycle?” where he stated:

There is a certain amount of evidence in the Talmud which points to the fact that there existed at one time in Palestine the custom of reading the book of Psalms in a triennial cycle on sabbath afternoons corresponding to the triennial cycle of the Pentateuch which

¹³ William G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 1.5; cited in: Wilson, *Editing*, 200. Mitchell Dahood also mentions an obscure Qumran witness (1Q30) which *might* reflect an even earlier recognition of the five-fold intention of the Psalter: Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I (The Anchor Bible)*; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), xxxi (note Dahood’s further citations).

is mentioned definitely in the Talmud and which has been established by the brilliant researches of Theodor and Büchler.¹⁴

Following Rabinowitz' proposal, at least as recently as into the 1960's,¹⁵ other scholars have endeavored to explore possible liturgical correspondence between the order of the Psalms and that of the Pentateuch. However, scholars today do not take such liturgical parallels very seriously. Efforts to show such detailed correspondences have always required emendation, straining of minor details in texts, and so forth, beyond what can be regarded as a natural reading of the material.¹⁶ There may be significance to the *five* books of the Psalter (as analogy to the Pentateuch and reflection of the elsewhere expressed *torah* interest of the Psalter); however, the idea of a book-for-book Psalter-Pentateuch correspondence is doubtful.

Another theory — that the doxologies at the close of the various books reflect “growth rings” in the Psalter's gradual expansion — has also proven unlikely on the whole, but nonetheless useful in part. For instance, Book II ends with the previously noted statement, “the prayers of David son of Jesse are ended.” This could indicate an ending point for an original, Davidic Psalter (and, indeed, the psalms of Books I-II are Davidically ascribed).¹⁷ However, disturbing the idea of a period when the Psalter ended with Book II is the fact that Psalms 42-83 obviously share a common pre-MT arrangement together due to their Elohist character (that is, Psalms 42-83 show a strong tendency to use *Elohim* and a shying away from the tetragrammaton). That this “Elohistic Psalter” (Pss 42-83) crosses the boundary of Books II and III makes it unlikely that Psalms I-II ever stood alone — at least in its present form.

However, there is a large number of scholars (perhaps a majority) that believe that at least Books I-III once stood as a complete Psalter, and that Books IV-V were added later. In addition to Qumran evidence seen to support this theory (which will be discussed further under the question of Psalter dating), Gerald Wilson has demonstrated a significant change in the method of redaction between Books I-III and

¹⁴ J. Rabinowitz, “Does Midrash Tehillim Reflect the Triennial Cycle?” *JQR* 26 (1935-36) 349-68; cited in: Aileen Guilding, “Some Obscured Rubrics and Lectionary Allusions in the Psalter,” *JTS* NS-3 (1952), 41.

¹⁵ Anton Arens, *Die Psalmen in Gottesdienst das Altes Bundes* (Trier: Paulinus-Verlag, 1968).

¹⁶ For an interesting example of an effort to support a lectionary correspondence between Psalter and Pentateuch, see Aileen Guilding, “Some Obscured Rubrics and Lectionary Allusions in the Psalter,” *JTS* NS-3 (1952), 41-55. For a recent examination (with citations) of various Pentateuch/Psalter liturgical arguments, see Wilson, *Editing*, 199-205.

¹⁷ So Gerald H. Wilson, “The Use of Royal Psalms at the ‘Seams’ of the Hebrew Psalter”, *JSOT* 35 (1986), 91-92.

IV–V, which he interprets as indicating different editors at work at different times. On a previous page, I showed examples of the way in which Wilson saw superscriptions being employed by the redactors to emphasize breaks between books and smooth over superscription changes within books. That method of redactional arrangement is particularly characteristic of Books I–III. In Books IV–V, there is marked lack of superscriptions. (Twenty-eight out of 61 psalms in Books IV–V lack titles compared to only 6 untitled psalms in the 89 psalms of Books I–III.)

According to Wilson’s analysis, the final two books of the Psalter are arranged using a scheme of praise and thanksgiving according to patterns discernable in some of the Sumerian literature he examined and especially in Qumran materials. According to Wilson, as doxologies (praises) have been found to be a normal, ANE method for concluding a cultic collection, so הַלְלוּ־יְיָ (“hallelujah”) was used at Qumran (11QPs^a) to group together psalms at a point of *conclusion*, while הוֹדוּ (“give thanks”) psalms seem to be used to indicate *beginning* points.¹⁸ In Wilson’s view, this same method is at work in Books IV–V of the Psalter. For example, confirming the doxologically marked division between Psalms 106–107, Wilson gives the following schematic¹⁹:

Ps 104		—————	<i>hllwyh</i>
Ps 105		—————	<i>hllwyh</i>
Ps 106	<i>hllwyh -hwdw</i>	—————	<i>hllwyh</i>
Ps 107	<i>hwdw</i>	—————	

According to Wilson, Books I–III were redacted by a different group using different organizational methods from Books IV–V.

There is no consensus, yet, on the actual significance indicated by the five-book division of the Psalter. All that is generally agreed is that there is redactional importance to this arrangement. While some would still hold that the doxologies at 42.14; 72.19; 89.53; and 106.48 are coincidental and were only later *interpreted* as

¹⁸ Wilson, *Editing*, 126-31.

¹⁹ Wilson, *Editing*, 126

reflecting importance,²⁰ most Psalm scholars today recognize the five-fold division as redactionally important. How important and in what way, however, remains debatable.

“Seam” Psalms

One of the features of the Psalter which lends significance to the five-fold division is the somewhat consistent way in which royal psalms are assembled along the “seams” of these division points. I say “*somewhat* consistent” because, of six framing points, only three actually present royal psalms. This is, nonetheless, a significant enough proportion to attract attention (especially when the fewness of royal psalms in other parts of the Psalter is considered).

We will draw again upon Wilson’s groundwork.²¹ In Wilson’s view (a view shared by many), Psalm 1 is not actually part of Book I but properly introduces the whole Psalter. Consequently, in Wilson’s theory of Books I-III serving as a proto-MT Psalter, it is specifically Psalms 2–89 (not 1–89) in view. Psalm 1 was added when the entire 150 were compiled to reflect the last redactors’ theological purpose. (More will be said on this in the following section.)

In any case, this would mean that Psalm 2 would be the opening frame for Book I: a royal psalm. Book I ends with Psalm 42 which is not generally viewed as a royal psalm (an absence Wilson sees as indicating the redactors’ effort to closely link Books I and II together). Book II, however, does end with a royal Psalm (Ps 72), as does Book III (Ps 89). Furthermore, these royal psalms reflect a progression within the Davidic covenant: Psalm 2 *introduces* the Davidic covenant; Psalm 72 evidently “*transfers*” the covenant to *the Davidic heirs*; Psalm 89 *mourns the collapse* of the Davidic throne and, in Wilson’s view, the “*failure*” of the Davidic covenant. Consequently, the proto-MT Psalter consisting of Psalms 2–89 would have been a Psalter organized around a concern for the “*failed*” Davidic covenant.

In Books IV and V, where royal psalms occur (e.g., 110, 132) but *not* along the seams, a different organizational scheme is, again, thereby perceived.

²⁰ Dahood represents this view (Dahood, xxx-xxxii). See also Sigmund Mowinckel who seems ambiguous on this point: Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship* (D.R. Ap-Thomas, trans.; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 193, 197.

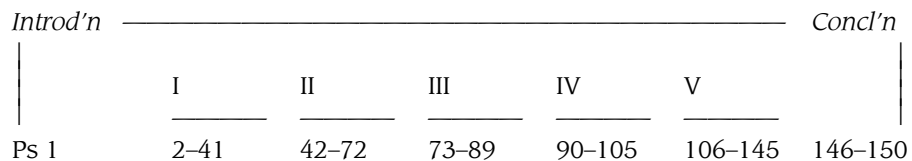
²¹ See especially: Wilson, *Editing*, 209-214; Wilson, “Seams,” 85-94.

The message(s) deduced by various scholars from their examination of the “seam” psalms will be further discussed later — and different scholars vary on how they interpret the evidence. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that the psalms located at the “seams” of the Psalter are important clues to redactional intent behind the arrangement of the MT150.

Psalms 1 and 150

The last of the main evidences for the Psalter’s shape to be considered in this overview is the presence of an introductory and concluding set of psalms. Psalm 1, it is widely admitted, functions as an introduction to the Psalter. Some scholars go so far as to say that Psalm 1 is not really a song at all, but actually a prose introduction. However, most scholars recognize it as being a psalm, but one that serves in a special, introductory fashion.

On the other end of the Psalter, Psalm 150 appears to serve as a doxology closing the entire Psalter. In fact, many scholars believe that Book V properly consists of only Psalms 107–145; Psalms 146–150 are seen as an extended conclusion of praise for the whole collection. Thus, the Psalter in its final form would appear to stand in the final arrangement:



Some scholars perceive Psalms 1 and 2 as *together* forming an introduction to the Psalter, so that the above schematic would be modified to show Book I as containing Psalms 3–41. This position is taken based on certain verbal similarities between Psalms 1 and 2: Ps 1 opens with a blessing (אֲשֶׁרִי) and Ps 2 closes with a blessing (אֲשֶׁרִי); both Pss share an interest in the דֶּרֶךְ (“way” [1.1, 6; 2.12]), הִנְיָה (“pondering” [1.2; 2.1]), אָבַד (“perishing” [1.6; 2.12]), and יָשַׁב (“sitting” [1.1; 2.4]). Identifying these connections, some scholars believe these two psalms function together to announce the dual themes of *torah* and kingship for the Psalter.²² It seems that the general body of

²² Nancy DeClaissé-Walford, for example, defends the unity of Pss 1-2 in: Nancy L. DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 37-41.

scholars, however, see the two Psalms as essentially separate units and only similar in ways that all the Psalms are similar (i.e., any two Psalms placed beside one another will evoke certain similarities, simply because of the common themes that trace through the whole collection). Perhaps the most thorough demonstration of Psalm 1's position as a stand-alone introduction to the Psalter is a 1979 article by John T. Willis: "Psalm 1 — An Entity."²³

The primary question among scholars is what manner of function this introduction and conclusion are meant to provide for the whole collection. Especially troubling is that Psalm 1 seems to present a non-cultic, book-focused, late-Judaic wisdom interest — an interest profoundly different than the cultically-rich, Temple-focused, First-and-Second-Temple aura of the content of the Psalter. Gerald T. Sheppard, in a widely-cited work on *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct*,²⁴ sees Psalm 1 as indicating the love for God's Law which produced the psalms and therefore the validity of the Psalms as guides for morality and wisdom. Brevard Childs sees Psalm 1 as serving a transformational function for the Psalter: taking what once were cultic prayers offered in a man-to-God direction and now designating them as part of holy writ to be studied as from a God-to-man direction.²⁵ Wilson shares Childs' view, further noting that Psalm 1 transforms the Psalms from being *corporately* used to a book now intended primarily for *private*, individual reading.²⁶

These theories are by no means exhaustive, but they illustrate the difficulty in knowing how to explain the nature of Psalm 1's introduction. It is not enough to identify it as being introductory, one must then determine what it means and how it introduces the Psalms that follow. The problem with the above theories, as Norman Whybray has discussed,²⁷ is that one would expect the redactors who intended to place any such "transformation" on the Psalter to have made other redactional moves upon the psalms themselves to complete that shift in focus.

²³ John T. Willis, "Psalm 1 — An Entity," ZAW 91.3 (1979), 381-401.

²⁴ Gerald T. Sheppard, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct: A Study in the Sapientializing of the Old Testament* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 136-44.

²⁵ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 513-4.

²⁶ Wilson, *Editing*, 143.

²⁷ Norman Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book* (JSOTSup 222; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

Many questions regarding the nature of Psalm 1 and Psalms 146–150 as “frames” for the final collection still need to be answered. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of these psalms does seem to suggest their suitability for their placement as introduction and conclusion, and so their witness would seem to be important for understanding the redactional system behind the MT150.

These four features — the headings, the 5-book divisions, the “seam” psalms, and the “framing” psalms — are key pieces of evidence which invite serious contemplation of a redactional scheme behind the Psalter’s final form. They are also four foci for investigation and analysis to uncover how that scheme works.

Dating the (Final) Shaping of the Psalter

A further issue of importance in identifying the editorial shape of the Psalter is the *date* of its *final* redaction. As with most areas of literary analysis, an understanding of the period in which the materials were edited into the present form is held to be an important window into the theological interests which brought it about.

Relevant to this issue is, of course, the history of the individual psalms and the history of earlier collections still evident within the Psalter (like the Asaphic collection and the Davidic collections and the so-called Egyptian Hallel). However, what is particularly at issue is determining who and when the MT Psalter came to its *final* form.

There are two major sets of material cited for dating the Psalter’s final redaction, and used independently each yields widely different results from the other. Gerald Wilson, for example, uses a careful analysis of Qumran evidence to help in dating the Psalter’s final arrangement. In the Qumran Psalm scrolls (which are admittedly fragmentary but nonetheless important), it appears that Books I–III of the Qumran Psalter were essentially like the MT Psalter, while Books IV–V had many similarities but also included numerous differences in order and inclusion of hymns not in the MT. This evidence has been cited by many to demonstrate the earlier redaction of Books I–III of the Psalter, and the gradual development of Books IV–V over several centuries, finally reaching a stable shape by the 1st century A.D.²⁸

²⁸ Wilson, *Editing*, 63-92; Gerald H. Wilson, “The Qumran Psalms Manuscripts and the Consecutive Arrangement of Psalms in the Hebrew Psalter,” *CBQ* 45 (1983) 377-88.

Other scholars, however, point to the Septuagint, which contains a Greek Psalter almost identical to the MT Psalter. The LXX was (evidently) translated around the 2nd century B.C., thereby indicating that although Qumran may have had a variant form of the Psalter for some yet to be identified reason, the MT150 had come into shape sometime prior to the 2nd century. (A recent summary of the LXX argument for dating the Psalter can be found in Tyler F. Williams', "Toward a Date for the Old Greek Psalter."²⁹)

Dating the final redaction of the Psalter (and identifying the theological situation which undergirds it) continues to be an open issue in canonical Psalm studies.

The "Message" of the Psalter's (Final) Shape

Presumably, the reason identification of the Psalter's editorial shape is important is because, once identified, it provides a basis for making conclusive statements about the meaning of the Psalms, the theological interests of the redacting community, and "the" message(s) which the Psalter was compiled to communicate.

Gerald Wilson, based on his research, believes that Books I-III were compiled during the exile or shortly after the exile as a questioning of the failure of the Davidic throne. He then supposes that Books IV-V were developed to answer that concern, giving the message that *God* is Israel's King: even though the Davidic line has failed, Yahweh still reigns over his people. For Wilson, Psalm 89 (the collapse of the Davidic throne followed in Ps 90 by the "Mosaic" Psalm: "God has been our refuge in ages past") is the pivot point of the Psalter's message.³⁰

Walter Brueggemann, who views Psalm 73 as the pivot point of the Psalter's message, places less stress on the "seam" psalms than Wilson and more emphasis on the opening and closing psalms. Brueggemann perceives in the Psalter a gradual movement from obedience (the *torah* devotion of Ps 1) to praise (the doxological sequence of 146-150). Noting the preponderance of lament psalms in the first part of the Psalter, Brueggemann proposes that the Psalter's shape is designed to take the reader/worshiper through a sequence of orientation, to disorientation, to re-

²⁹ Tyler F. Williams, "Toward a Date for the Old Greek Psalter," in: Robert J.V. Hiebert, *et al*, eds., *The Old Greek Psalter* (JSOTSup 332; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 248-76.

³⁰ Wilson, *Editing*, 213-4, 219, 227-8.

orientation. The message of the Psalter, then, for Brueggemann is one of re-orienting life around the faithfulness of Yahweh.³¹

David C. Mitchell, through his doctoral research at New College, Edinburgh, outlined what he perceives as an eschatological message undergirding the Psalter's final form.³² According to Mitchell, the Psalter was organized as a post-exilic predictive document, anticipating:

the appearing of a messianic superhero, the ingathering of Israel, the attack of the nations, the hero's suffering, the scattering of Israel in the wilderness, their ingathering and further imperilment, the appearance of a superhero from the heavens to rescue them, the establishment of his *malikut* from Zion, the prosperity of Israel and the homage of the nations.³³

Mark Smith of Yale University represents a slightly less ambitious eschatological reading of the Psalter than Mitchell. Agreeing with Wilson's analysis of Books I–III — that this first section of the Psalter is concerned with the historical David and the collapse of his dynasty — Smith nonetheless disagrees with the “answer” Wilson posits in Books IV–V. Arguing that there is no evidence to suggest that the post-exilic Jews ever gave up on the Davidic hope, but rather that the Jews continued to expect a Davidic king to be restored, Smith suggests that Books IV–V answer the distress of I–III with a message about the way to bring back the Davidic king. Smith sees the MT150 as a book about the anointed ruler of Israel (*Messiah*), with Books I–III relating to the historical David and IV–V to the eschatological David.³⁴

Jerome Creach, endeavoring to move beyond the structural examinations of Wilson and others, proposed to examine the way the individual psalms were arranged. He approached this study through a detailed examination of the מִבְּטָח (“refuge”) semantic field in the Psalter in an effort to show that the message of God as refuge undergirds the way the individual psalms are organized.³⁵

³¹ Walter Brueggemann, “Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon,” *JSOT* 50 (1991) 63-92. Note also Kenneth Share's recent comparison of Wilson's and Brueggemann's “pivot points” in: Kenneth Share, “The Pivot Point in the Psalter: An Exegetical Contribution to the Current Canonical Debate (Gerald Wilson, Walter Brueggemann)” (PhD dissertation; New York: Fordham University, 2002).

³² David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms* (JSOTSup 252; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

³³ Mitchell, 15.

³⁴ Mark S. Smith, “The Theology of the Redaction of the Psalter: Some Observations,” *ZAW* 104.3 (1992), 408-12. See also, Mark S. Smith, “The Psalms as a Book for Pilgrims,” *Interpretation* 46 (1992), 156-66.

³⁵ Jerome F.D. Creach, *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (JSOTSup 217; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

John Walton of Moody Bible Institute demonstrated a similar interest in taking the structural insights of Wilson and attempting to work them out in a coherent examination of the actual, individual psalms and their order within the various Books. In a 1991 article, "Psalms: A cantata About the Davidic Covenant,"³⁶ Walton sought to demonstrate an overarching Davidic interest in the Psalter by tracing its development, psalm-by-psalm, Book-by-Book, through the collection.

As can be seen by the above examples, the abiding questions about the Psalter's canonical features provide ample room for scholars to develop numerous theories about the Psalm redactors' primary interests. There is, obviously, much work still needing to be done to determine the demonstrable significance of various shape-giving features of the MT150 in order to thereby provide some idea of the primary theme(s) with which the present Psalter is intended to be read.

Some Questions Needing Answers

In this closing section, I propose to somewhat arbitrarily list ten questions arising from all that has been reviewed above. I have not developed these questions with any great investment of thought, but perhaps they will provide some food for contemplation and spur some possible avenues for further exploration.

1. When we speak of "reading the Psalter as a book," should we assume that its message will be similar to that of a narrative book, or ought we to draw some distinction between the nature of a *poetical* canon and a *prose* canon? (For example, a prose book generally follows a chronological arrangement in which every paragraph builds sequentially in some manner. What *kinds* of arrangements are likely to be used in a *poetical* book?)
2. A few, vague texts in the OT historical books seem to indicate the presence of a pre-monarchic book of national hymns called סֵפֶר הַיָּשָׁר ("The Book of Jashar" [Josh 10.13; 1Sam 10.18; see also 1Ki 8.12–13 LXX]). Does evidence concerning the nature of this collection and how it was used/compiled provide any insight into the way in which the Davidic Psalter (which evidently replaced it) was inaugurated (and perhaps compiled)?

³⁶ John H. Walton, "Psalms: A Cantata About the Davidic Covenant," *JETS* 34.1 (1991), 21-31. Note also Wilson's critique of Walton's effort – Gerald H. Wilson, "Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of Psalms in the Psalter: Pitfalls and Promise," in: McCann, 43-45.

3. Psalm 137 speaks of the exilic Hebrews “hanging their harps” and their “inability” to sing the Songs of Zion in a foreign land. Are there conditions Israel regarded as necessary to be intact for the Psalms to be usable? Does the necessity of these conditions being present provide any insight into the theological/cultic interest undergirding the Psalter’s arrangement?
4. Psalm 1 speaks of “meditation on *torah* day and night.” The meaning of this phrase seems important to our understanding how Psalm 1 might function as introductory to the Psalter as a whole. What does it mean to “meditate on *torah* day and night,” especially in the context of the Psalms?
5. How do literary theories concerning the formation of the Pentateuch enlighten possible interpretations of the Psalter’s 5-book arrangement?
6. If Gerald Wilson’s theory about the royal psalms at the “seams” of Books I–III is correct, why is there not a royal psalm at the “seam” between Books I and II?
7. Why are the *historical* superscriptions so widely scattered about, and why do they focus primarily (but not exclusively) in Books I–II? Is there any organizational or theological significance to the historical superscriptions, or are they simply midrashic additions to certain psalms?
8. What more can be uncovered about the relationship between the MT Psalter, the LXX Psalter, and the Qumran Psalter?
9. If there is a different program behind Books IV–V than Books I–III (whether viewed as the work of different redactors or one effort employing a dual system of redaction), does Qumran’s agreement with the MT in Books I–III and disagreement in features of IV–V reflect theological agreement between Qumran and mainstream Judaism in the theology behind Books I–III but variance over the construction communicated in Books IV–V?
10. To what extent does discernment of the shape of the Psalter as a whole govern the way individual psalms are to be interpreted, if at all?

Appendix: Superscription Display

*The normal superscription order is the order given in this display. However, this order is not followed strictly throughout the Psalter. Those superscriptions marked with an asterisk introduce some conflict with the “normal” order. Psalm 88 is especially troublesome, as it actually gives two superscriptions for the one psalm. (Some scholars think the first is an accidental reuse of the title from the preceding psalm. Although the content is the same, the word order is different in 87 and 88.)

PS	MUSICAL DIRECTION	GENRE	ATTRIBUTION	OCCASION
1	---	---	---	---
2	---	---	---	---
3	---	<i>mizmor</i>	David	when he fled from Absalom his son
4	to the chief; on strings	---	David	---
5	to the chief; on <i>nehilah</i>	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
6	to the chief; on strings; upon eighth	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
7	---	<i>shiggaion</i>	David	which he sang ... about Cush, a Benjamite
8	to the chief; on <i>Gittith</i>	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
9	to the chief; on “death to the son”	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
10	---	---	---	---
11	to the chief	---	David	---
12	to the chief; upon eighth	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
13	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
14	to the chief	---	David	---
15	---	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
16	---	<i>mikhtam</i>	David	---
17	---	prayer	David	---
18	to the chief	---	David, servant of <i>Yhwh</i>	who spoke ... this song in the day ... delivered from all his enemies ...
19	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
20	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
21	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
22	to the chief; on “hind of the morning”	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
23	---	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
*24	---	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
25	---	---	David	---
26	---	---	David	---
27	---	---	David	---
28	---	---	David	---
29	---	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
*30	---	<i>mizmor</i>	David	a song at the dedication of the house
31	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
*32	---	<i>maskil</i>	David	---
33	---	---	---	---
34	---	---	David	when he feigned madness before Abimelech, who drove him away ...

35	---	---	David	---
36	to the chief	---	David, servant of Yhwh	---
37	---	---	David	---
38	---	<i>mizmor</i>	David	for a memorial
39	to the chief; to Jeduthun	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
*40	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
41	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
42	to the chief	<i>maskil</i>	sons of Korah	---
43	---	---	---	---
*44	to the chief	<i>maskil</i>	sons of Korah	---
*45	to the chief; upon "lilies"	<i>maskil</i>	sons of Korah	a song of lovers
*46	to the chief; upon alamothe	song	sons of Korah	---
47	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	sons of Korah	---
48	---	song; <i>mizmor</i>	sons of Korah	---
*49	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	sons of Korah	---
50	---	<i>mizmor</i>	Asaph	---
51	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	David	when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba
52	to the chief	<i>maskil</i>	David	when Doeg the Edomite ... told Saul ... "David has come to ... Ahimelech"
53	to the chief; upon <i>mahalath</i>	<i>maskil</i>	David	---
54	to the chief; on strings	<i>maskil</i>	David	when the Ziphites came and said to Saul "Is not David hiding among us?"
55	to the chief; on strings	<i>maskil</i>	David	---
56	to the chief; upon "silent dove of those distant"	<i>mikhtam</i>	David	when the Philistines siezed him in Gath
57	to the chief; upon "do not destroy"	<i>mikhtam</i>	David	when he fled from Saul in the cave
*58	to the chief; upon "do not destroy"	<i>mikhtam</i>	David	---
*59	to the chief; upon "do not destroy"	<i>mikhtam</i>	David	when Saul sent men and they watched the house in order to kill him
60	to the chief; upon "lily of testimony"	<i>mikhtam</i>	David	to teach; when he struggled ... and Joab ... smote 12,000 of Edom ...
61	to the chief; on strings	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
62	to the chief; upon Jeduthun	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
63	---	<i>mizmor</i>	David	when he was in the wilderness of Judah
64	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
*65	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i> ; song	David	---
66	to the chief	song; <i>mizmor</i>	---	---
67	to the chief; on strings	<i>mizmor</i> ; song	---	---
*68	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i> ; song	David	---
69	to the chief; upon "lilies"	---	David	---
70	to the chief	---	David	for a memorial
71	---	---	---	---
72	---	---	Solomon	---
73	---	<i>mizmor</i>	Asaph	---
74	---	<i>maskil</i>	Asaph	---

*75	to the chief; upon "do not destroy"	<i>maskil</i> ; song	Asaph	---
*76	to the chief; on strings	<i>mizmor</i> ; song	Asaph	---
*77	to the chief; upon Jeduthun	<i>mizmor</i>	Asaph	---
78	---	<i>maskil</i>	Asaph	---
79	---	<i>mizmor</i>	Asaph	---
*80	to the chief; unto "lilies of testimony"	<i>mizmor</i>	Asaph	---
81	to the chief; upon the <i>Gittith</i>	---	Asaph	---
82	---	<i>mizmor</i>	Asaph	---
83	---	song; <i>mizmor</i>	Asaph	---
*84	to the chief; upon the <i>Gittith</i>	<i>mizmor</i>	sons of Korah	---
*85	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	sons of Korah	---
86	---	prayer	David	---
*87	---	<i>mizmor</i> ; song	sons of Korah	---
*88	---	song; <i>mizmor</i>	sons of Korah	---
	to the chief; upon "anguish of the afflicted"	<i>maskil</i>	Heman the Ezrahite	---
89	---	<i>maskil</i>	Ethan the Ezrahite	---
90	---	prayer	Moses the man of God	---
91	---	---	---	---
92	---	<i>mizmor</i> ; song	---	for the Sabbath day
93	---	---	---	---
94	---	---	---	---
95	---	---	---	---
96	---	---	---	---
97	---	---	---	---
98	---	<i>mizmor</i>	---	---
99	---	---	---	---
100	---	thanks- <i>mizmor</i>	---	---
*101	---	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
102	---	prayer	---	for the afflicted when he is faint and pours out his complaint before <i>Yhwh</i>
103	---	---	David	---
104	---	---	---	---
105	---	---	---	---
106	---	---	---	---
107	---	---	---	---
108	---	song; <i>mizmor</i>	David	---
*109	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
*110	---	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
111	---	---	---	---
112	---	---	---	---
113	---	---	---	---
114	---	---	---	---
115	---	---	---	---
116	---	---	---	---

117	---	---	---	---
118	---	---	---	---
119	---	---	---	---
120	---	song of ascents	---	---
121	---	song of ascents	---	---
122	---	song of ascents	David	---
123	---	song of ascents	---	---
124	---	song of ascents	David	---
125	---	song of ascents	---	---
126	---	song of ascents	---	---
127	---	song of ascents	Solomon	---
128	---	song of ascents	---	---
129	---	song of ascents	---	---
130	---	song of ascents	---	---
131	---	song of ascents	David	---
132	---	song of ascents	---	---
133	---	song of ascents	David	---
134	---	song of ascents	---	---
135	---	---	---	---
136	---	---	---	---
137	---	---	---	---
138	---	---	David	---
*139	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
140	to the chief	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
141	---	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
*142	---	<i>maskil</i> ; prayer	David	when he was in the cave
143	---	<i>mizmor</i>	David	---
144	---	---	David	---
145	---	praise	David	---
146	---	---	---	---
147	---	---	---	---
148	---	---	---	---
149	---	---	---	---
150	---	---	---	---

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