

TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT
COMMENTARIES

VOLUMES 15–16

TOTC

PSALMS

TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUMES 15–16

SERIES EDITOR: DAVID G. FIRTH
CONSULTING EDITOR: TREMPER LONGMAN III

PSALMS

AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

TREMPER LONGMAN III



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GENERAL PREFACE

The decision completely to revise the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries is an indication of the important role that the series has played since its opening volumes were released in the mid-1960s. They represented at that time, and have continued to represent, commentary writing that was committed to both the importance of the text of the Bible as Scripture and a desire to engage with as full a range of interpretative issues as possible without being lost in the minutiae of scholarly debate. The commentaries aimed to explain the biblical text to a generation of readers confronting models of critical scholarship and new discoveries from the Ancient Near East, while remembering that the Old Testament is not simply another text from the ancient world. Although no uniform process of exegesis was required, all the original contributors were united in their conviction that the Old Testament remains the word of God for us today. That the original volumes fulfilled this role is evident from the way in which they continue to be used in so many parts of the world.

A crucial element of the original series was that it should offer an up-to-date reading of the text, and it is precisely for this reason that new volumes are required. The questions confronting readers in the first half of the twenty-first century are not necessarily those from the second half of the twentieth. Discoveries from the Ancient Near East continue to shed new light on the Old Testament, whilst emphases in exegesis have changed markedly. Whilst remaining true to the goals of the initial volumes, the need for contemporary study

of the text requires that the series as a whole be updated. This updating is not simply a matter of commissioning new volumes to replace the old. We have also taken the opportunity to update the format of the series to reflect a key emphasis from linguistics, which is that texts communicate in larger blocks rather than in shorter segments such as individual verses. Because of this, the treatment of each section of the text includes three segments. First, a short note on *Context* is offered, placing the passage under consideration in its literary setting within the book, as well as noting any historical issues crucial to interpretation. The *Comment* segment then follows the traditional structure of the commentary, offering exegesis of the various components of a passage. Finally, a brief comment is made on *Meaning*, by which is meant the message that the passage seeks to communicate within the book, highlighting its key theological themes. This section brings together the detail of the *Comment* to show how the passage under consideration seeks to communicate as a whole.

Our prayer is that these new volumes will continue the rich heritage of the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries and that they will continue to witness to the God who is made known in the text.

David G. Firth, Series Editor
Tremper Longman III, Consulting Editor

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The book of Psalms is the heart of the Old Testament. Athanasius, the important fourth-century Church Father, called the Psalms 'an epitome of the whole Scriptures'. In the same century, Basil, the Bishop of Caesarea, pointed out that this collection of poems presents 'a compendium of all theology', and Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century Reformer, called the book of Psalms 'a little Bible, and the summary of the Old Testament'.

Indeed, the Psalms are not only the heart of the Old Testament; they are a pivotal witness and anticipation of Jesus Christ, and thus a perfect illustration of Augustine's statement that 'the New Testament is in the Old concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed'. Jesus made this clear when he told his disciples that the Psalms spoke of him (Luke 24:44).

It is crucial to note that the book of Psalms is not a theological textbook, but rather the libretto of the most vibrant worship imaginable. The book of Psalms does not only want to inform our intellect, but to stimulate our imagination, arouse our emotions and stir us on to holy thoughts and actions.

I begin by acknowledging the debt that I owe to Derek Kidner (1913–2008), the author of the Psalms commentary in the first edition of the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary series. I never met him, but he was the external reader of one of my very first books, *How to Read the Psalms* (IVP, 1987), and he gave me invaluable advice on how to organize the chapters of that book. I shudder to think that my commentary will be compared with his

incisive, tightly written, insightful work, though I dare to offer it with the hope that it might help those who want to understand, teach and preach this powerful collection of poems, songs and prayers.

I also want to thank my best friend of the past forty-eight years (we met when we were thirteen), Dan Allender. Dan is a Christian psychologist who wants his counselling to be based on the Bible, and he has taught me more than anyone to read the Psalms as a ‘mirror of the soul’ (Calvin). Together we wrote *Cry of the Soul* (NavPress, 1994), a book which looks at our emotional lives through the prism of the Psalms. My work with Dan significantly prepared me to write this commentary.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to Raymond Dillard (1944–1993), my teacher, mentor, friend and colleague, whose early death happened just over twenty years ago. He taught me to be honest with the text and, most importantly, to read the Old Testament in the spirit of Luke 24, in other words, Christologically. The reader will notice that, while honouring the original meaning of the text in its Old Testament context, I also offer a Christian reading of the psalm in the *Meaning* section of the commentary.

I have taught the Psalms in many different institutions over the thirty-some years of my teaching career. Unfortunately, there are too many students, some of whom are now professors and ministers, to name, but I thank them for the influence they have had on me as we have interacted over the text of the Psalms.

I do want to thank one institution in particular, namely Westmont College, where I am the Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies. Westmont and its administration (particularly Gayle Beebe, the president, and Mark Sargent, the provost) have provided a wonderful environment for my writing and teaching. I could not be working at a better place.

David Firth, the editor of the second edition of the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, has done a masterful job helping me write this commentary. I deeply appreciate his insight and also his aiding me to make this the best commentary I can offer. Of course, any errors remain my own.

No-one loves the Psalms more than my wife Alice. She has not only memorized the entire book of Psalms, but she understands

them and appreciates them particularly as a witness to Christ. She has read my manuscript and deepened my reading of them. I dedicate this book to her.

Tremper Longman III
Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies
Westmont College
New Year's Day 2014

CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Anchor Bible Commentaries
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentaries
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
<i>DCH</i>	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> , ed. D. J. A. Clines, 6 vols. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 1993–2008)
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplementary series
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
LXX	Septuagint (pre-Christian Greek version of the Old Testament)
MT	Massoretic Text
NIBC	New International Bible Commentary
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> , ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997)
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NT	New Testament

OT	Old Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
REBC	Revised Expositor's Bible Commentary
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

Bible versions

ESV	English Standard Version, published by HarperCollins Publishers © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers
KJV	King James Version
NAB	New American Bible, copyright © 1995 by Oxford University Press, Inc. New York
NEB	New English Bible, copyright © Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1961, 1970
NET Bible	New English Translation, copyright © 1996 by Biblical Studies Press
NIV	New International Version, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica Inc.
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible, copyright © 1985 by Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd and Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group inc.
NLT	New Living Translation, copyright © 1996 [2004, 2007]. Anglicized version copyright © 2000
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA
REB	Revised English Bible, copyright © Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press 1989

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INTRODUCTION

1. Title of the book

Readers of the English Bible know the book as Psalms, which in its present form in the Protestant Bible has 150 separate poems, many of which were addressed to God (prayers) and all of which were likely sung (songs). The title ‘Psalms’ comes from the Greek via the Septuagint (*psalmos*; see also in the NT [Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20]), which is a translation of the Hebrew *mizmôr* found in over sixty psalm titles (see below). *Mizmôr* is a noun form derived from the verbal root *zâmar*, which means ‘to make music’ or ‘to sing praise’. In Jewish tradition, the book is known as Tehillim, the plural of *tēhillâ*, and thus means ‘Praises’ or ‘Hymns’. This title acknowledges that, even though laments outnumber the hymns in the book, the predominant tone is praise.

2. Titles to the individual psalms

Most psalms begin with a title. While the Hebrew text assigns a verse number (in rare cases, two) to the title, English translations do not,

but typically translate the title using italics, giving the incorrect impression that they were not a part of the canonical text.¹ The titles were certainly not written by the original composer of the text, but rather by a later editor. However, they were added to the text before the close of the canonical period, probably by the editors who were responsible for the final organization of the book. They thus, at least, represent early tradition, and interpretation of the psalms should take into account the information in the title. Indeed, these titles should be considered canonical. After all, most biblical books reached their final form under the influence of later, unnamed redactors. Furthermore, we should note that, though added later, these titles were added early enough, so that by the time of the first major Greek translation of the Psalms in the second century BC, the translators had lost knowledge of the meaning of some of the technical terms in them (e.g. *lamēnaṣṣēah*, which they took to mean ‘to the end’ rather than ‘for the director of music’).

Many psalms share similar features in their titles, so rather than treating the titles with each individual psalm, we will describe them here. We treat the titles early in the Introduction because they provide helpful information as we consider the issues of the composition, collection, organization and use of the psalms (next section).

The vast majority of psalms (116) have a title; those that do not are often referred to as ‘orphan psalms’. Some titles are short and others provide more information. The types of titles may be categorized as providing information about authorship (and more rarely, the historical event that led to the poem’s composition [historical titles]), musical titles, genre titles, titles that indicate the setting in which the psalm was used (performance titles) and liturgical titles.

We should also note that among the many questions surrounding the meaning of the titles is the issue of whether some of the editorial material that precedes the psalm is actually a colophon (an editorial note that occurs at the end of a literary composition) that goes with

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1. The lack of a verse number for the titles in English translation means that there is a difference of one or occasionally two verses between a citation of the Hebrew text and the English text. In this commentary we cite only according to the versification in the English.

the preceding psalm. In recent years, Waltke has made the strongest case for the view that any information that precedes the mention of literary genre or authorship actually goes with the previous psalm (Waltke, 1991). While this remains a possibility, it is not certain, and we will simply explain the meaning of the titles as far as we are able in what follows.

a. Authorship titles and historical titles

Many psalms name an individual or a group with a prefixed *lamed* preposition. The most common by far is *ledāvid* (almost half the psalms), but others are associated with Jeduthun (Pss 39, 62, 77), Moses (90), Solomon (72, 127), the Sons of Korah (42 [– 43], 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 84, 85, 87, 88), Asaph (50, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83), Heman the Ezrahite (88) and Ethan the Ezrahite (89).

First, we note that the Hebrew preposition *lamed* can be taken in a number of different ways. Using *ledāvid* as our example, this theoretically could be rendered:

- Of David or By David (indicating authorship)
- Concerning David
- In the tradition of David
- For David(’s use)
- Dedicated to David

The first meaning indicating authorship is the traditional way of understanding the phrase, and there are sufficient reasons to believe that the editors did intend to so attribute authorship. Certainly, the historical titles indicate that the early editors took the phrase that way.

The historical titles are titles that name the event in the composer’s life that led to the writing of the psalm in the first place. There are thirteen psalms, all connected to David, that have a historical title (Pss 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142). The title of Psalm 18 is particularly noteworthy, since it speaks explicitly of David’s writing activity: ‘Of David the servant of the LORD. He sang to the LORD the words of this song when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. He said’).

Thus, it seems likely that it was the intention of the later editors of the psalms who added the titles to use the preposition *lê* to indicate the original composer of the psalm. Various arguments have been levied against the idea that David could have written all (or any) of the psalms attributed to him. One of the strongest arguments is that sometimes ‘Davidic’ psalms mention the temple (Pss 5, 11, 18, 27, 29, 30, 68), but of course the temple was not built until the time of his son and successor Solomon. To many, the appearance of the temple in a psalm invalidates the idea that David wrote it. In response, we might suggest that, although the temple was not built during David’s reign, he certainly knew it was to be built soon afterwards. According to 1 Chronicles, he spent considerable time gathering materials and organizing the priesthood for the temple. Perhaps he also wrote some songs for use in the temple. Or perhaps psalms were later updated for use in the temple after his death.

In any case, the cautious statement by N. T. Wright takes us in the right direction:

Our knowledge of Israel’s early history is patchy at best, forming a very uneven surface on which to hit the billiard-balls of ancient evidence around the table. One cannot prove that any of the Psalms go back to King David himself, but one cannot prove, either, that none of them do. Many of them clearly reflect both the language and the setting of much later periods. As with our modern hymn-books, this may be due to subsequent editorial activity, or it may be that they were composed by writers who thought of themselves as standing within a poetic tradition they themselves believed to go back to Israel’s early monarchy.
(Wright 2013: 4)

We should also point out that the tradition that David was a musician is a well-established one in the historical and prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible (e.g. 1 Sam. 16:15–23; 2 Sam. 1:17–27; 22; 23:1–7; 1 Chr. 6:31; 15:16; 16:7–36; 25:1; 2 Chr. 29:30; Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:24–47; Ps. 18=2 Sam. 22; Amos 6:5) and supports the idea that he had a significant role in the production of songs that were used in the formal worship of Israel.

As we listed above, David was not the only person associated with the composition of the psalms; the following were as well:

Moses: The title of Psalm 90 attributes the composition of the song to Moses, the well-known lawgiver and leader of Israel out of Egyptian bondage. The debate over Moses as a writer of Scripture is much too complex to go into at this juncture.

Solomon: The titles of Psalms 72 (though see v. 20 that suggests it was a psalm of David) and 127 attribute their composition to the well-known second king of Israel.

Asaph: Twelve psalms are attributed to Asaph (50; 73 – 83). Chronicles first presents him as one of three musicians (see below on Heman and Ethan) who presented music before the Lord as the ark of the covenant was brought to Jerusalem (1 Chr. 15:16–22), and after the ark had returned David appointed these three to continue to be in charge of the music at the tabernacle, and then at the temple after Solomon had built the temple (1 Chr. 6:31–47). Asaph was remembered as a ‘seer’ at the time of Hezekiah (2 Chr. 29:30). Interestingly, some of the psalms attributed to him include divine oracles (Pss 50, 75, 81, 82). The turning point of Psalm 73 comes as the psalmist enters into the sanctuary. 1 Chronicles 16:7 implies that Asaph is the one in charge of the temple music (and the nascent book of Psalms) as he accepts a psalm written by David for use in worship. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah note the existence of descendants of Asaph (or perhaps a guild of temple musicians) who are involved with the music in the Second Temple period (Ezra 2:41; 3:10; Neh. 11:22 [where an Asaphite named Uzzi is called ‘the chief officer of the Levites’]; 12:46).

Heman the Ezrahite: The title of Psalm 88 associates the poem with Heman the Ezrahite. Note also that it is associated with the Sons of Korah, although the relationship between the two in the production of the psalm is unknown. Heman the Ezrahite is noted as a wisdom figure in 1 Kings 4:31. There is also a Levitical musician named Heman, associated with Asaph and Ethan in 1 Chronicles 6:31–48 and elsewhere dated to the time of David. Perhaps the two are the same person.

Ethan the Ezrahite: The title of Psalm 89 associates the poem with Ethan the Ezrahite. Ethan, like Heman, is called a sage in 1 Kings 4:31. He is connected to Asaph through Heman in the genealogy of tabernacle/temple musicians at the time of David and Solomon (1 Chr. 6:31–48).

Jeduthun: Three psalms are associated with Jeduthun (Pss 39 [also David], 62 [also Sons of Korah], 77 [also Sons of Korah]). Jeduthun, a musician at the sanctuary at the time of David (1 Chr. 16:38–41; 25:1–6), was also around at the time of the dedication of the temple (2 Chr. 5:12). It is possible that Jeduthun was the director of music to whom David (in the case of Ps. 62) and the Sons of Korah (in the case of Pss 62 and 77) gave their compositions. Thus, the NIV translates: ‘For Jeduthun’.

Sons of Korah: Psalms 42 (– 43) – 49, 84 – 85, 87 – 88 are attributed to the Sons of Korah. Korah was a descendant of Kohath, the son of Levi (Exod. 6:21), thus a cousin of Aaron. Korah, along with some Reubenites, rebelled against the God-given authority of Moses and Aaron and was killed by the Lord as a consequence. Nonetheless, his descendants became prominent in the service of the temple. At the time of Jehoshaphat, they are said to have ‘stood up and praised the LORD, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice’ (2 Chr. 20:19). During the post-exilic period, they are mentioned as gatekeepers and bakers (1 Chr. 9:19, 31–32).

Finally, we need to remind ourselves that, even if we are right that the authorship titles are reliable, these composers did not write for the purpose of making their own experiences public and memorable, but rather, using these experiences, they wrote songs that could be used by later worshippers who find themselves in similar, though not necessarily identical, situations (see below).

b. Genre titles

Some titles appear to be native genre designations. Some (like psalm and song) are quite general, and others that may be specific are technical terms that we do not understand well. In the latter case, it is the practice of most modern translations simply to transliterate the word. The NLT is an exception and makes the best guess possible based on the proposed meaning of verbal roots of the nouns. Sometimes the translation is a general term (*maskil* is often rendered ‘psalm’). These ancient genre designations do not conform to the ones modern researchers find helpful (see below). It should be noted that some psalms have more than one of these genre designations in their title.

Psalm (*mizmôr*): Over sixty poems have ‘psalm’ in the title. *Mizmôr* is a noun form derived from the verbal root *zamar*, which means ‘to

make music' or 'to sing praise'. Psalm 145 has the slightly longer title, 'a psalm of praise'.

Song (*šîr*): The simple designation 'a song' appears in fourteen psalms. Fifteen additional psalms have the fuller title, 'A song of ascents' (for which see the excursus before Ps. 120, p. 409). One psalm has the title, 'A wedding song' (see Ps. 45). As with the title 'psalm', this title underlines the musical nature of this collection of poems.

Prayer (*tēpillā*): The psalms are often directly addressed to God and thus are prayers, but only Psalms 17, 86, 90, 102 and 142 have 'prayer' in the title.

Petition (*lēbaškîr*): The NIV translates the Hebrew phrase *lēbaškîr* in Psalms 38 and 70 as 'a petition', although most other translations take the phrase as closer to the base meaning of the verbal root *šākar* ('to remember'). Thus, the NRSV translates 'for the memorial offering', and the NLT takes it as 'to remember him'.

Māškîl: Three psalms are designated a *māškîl* (Pss 32, 44, 45), five are a *māškîl* of David (52, 53, 54, 55, 142), one is a *māškîl* of the Sons of Korah (42 [–43]), two are designated *māškîl* of Asaph (74, 78), and one each for Heman (88) and Ethan (89). The verbal root *šākal* in the *qal* means 'to have success', and thus some take it as an 'efficacious psalm' (Brueggemann, in Longman and Enns, 2008: 618–619). In the hiphil, the root means 'to understand, to make wise, to act with insight', leading to the Greek version's translation '(a psalm) of understanding'. The contents of the psalms are too varied to make a final determination.

Šiggāyôn: Psalm 7 is the only psalm called a *šiggāyôn*, but it is also a part of the title of the poem found in Habakkuk 3 (see v. 1). *Šiggāyôn* is thought by some to derive from the verbal root *šāgab*, which means 'to stray, go astray, err, stagger' and may 'indicate a particular type of psalm with a sporadic rhythm or frenzied cadence' (*NIDOTTE* 4: 44). Others take it as a specific type of lament, connecting the word with the Akkadian *šigû*, which means 'to lament or dirge'.

Miktām: Four psalms are called *miktām* (56, 57, 58, 59); two are a *miktām* of David (16 and 60). The verbal root of this noun is *kātam*, but the verb is not attested in ancient Hebrew. An Akkadian cognate (*katāmu*) means 'to cover', but attempts to derive a meaning from that root remain unpersuasive. There is a noun *ketem* which means gold, but that does not seem relevant, though the KJV translates 'A golden psalm'. Interestingly, the ancient versions (Greek, Latin

and the Aramaic Targum) take *miktām* as a variant or a mistake for *miktāb* ('writing').

c. Musical and performance titles

For the director of music: Over fifty psalms have this title, and there is general consensus that it indicates that the psalms were entrusted to the care of the person in charge of worship at the sanctuary. Interestingly, 1 Chronicles 16:7 describes David handing a song to Asaph, the head Levitical musician.

Tunes: A number of phrases that appear in the titles are taken to refer to the tune of the song. Notice that 'To the tune of' is added to the Hebrew, which just gives what appears to be the name of the tune: 'The Death of the Son' (Ps. 9), 'The Doe of the Morning' (Ps. 22), 'Lilies' (Pss 45, 69), 'A Dove on Distant Oaks' (Ps. 56), 'Do Not Destroy' (Pss 57, 58, 59, 75), 'The Lily of the Covenant' (Ps. 60) and 'The Lilies of the Covenant' (Ps. 80). Attempts to derive significance from these names are overly speculative.²

Voices and instruments: Some of the technical terms in the titles seem to call for certain types of musical accompaniment or singing. This seems clear in the titles that the NIV translates as 'with stringed instruments' (4, 6, 54, 55, 61, 67, 76) and 'for pipes' (5). Other titles are more opaque and therefore simply transliterated in the NIV. These include the following: according to *gittit* (8, 81, 84), according to *šeminīt* (6, 12), according to 'ālāmôt (46), according to *māhālat* (53), according to *māhālat lē 'annôt* (88). The meaning of each of these has been the subject of wide-ranging speculation, but no persuasive translation has emerged.

d. Liturgical titles

Psalm 60 is said to be 'for teaching', 92 'for the Sabbath day', and 100 'for giving grateful praise'. One more title in this category needs additional explanation:

'For the dedication of the temple' (30). This title raises a whole host of concerns, beginning with its appropriateness with the

2. For a game attempt, see Brueggeman, in Longman and Enns (2008: 616–617).

content of the psalm. Psalm 30 is a thanksgiving poem of a person who has been healed from an illness. Some interpreters point to the plague that preceded David's buying of the land on which the temple would later be built (2 Sam. 24), while others suggest that this title is actually a colophon that applies to Psalm 29, which is more compatible with the dedication of the temple.

Excursus: *Selāh and Higgāyôn*

In addition to the titles with their technical terminology, we have one example of a term that occurs along with the body of the poem, although it is clearly not a part of the poem. The term *selāh* occurs a little over seventy times in the psalms (also note three instances in the poem of Hab. 3), typically at the end of a poetic line. All these occurrences are found in the first Three Books of the Psalms (Pss 1–89), with the exception of Psalms 140 and 143.

Some believe it marks some kind of interlude, although the few times when it appears in the middle of a thought argues against that interpretation (see Ps. 68:7–8 as an example). Most translations leave the term untranslated (except the NLT, which translates 'Interlude'). The NIV (2011) has placed all the occurrences of *selāh* in a footnote. In 9:16, *selāh* is preceded by the word *higgāyôn*, which is also typically untranslated. Perhaps it is connected with *higgāyôn* in Lamentations 3:62 ('whisper'), leading to a translation of *higgāyôn selāh* as 'Quiet Interlude' in the NLT.

3. Composition, collection, organization, use

The book of Psalms is a unique book in the Bible in terms of how it came to its final form and how it was used during the biblical period, although Song of Songs is similar in being a collection of poems.³

a. Composition and collection

Taking the authorship ascriptions and the historical titles seriously, psalms were written in response to the composer's experience of

3. Longman (2012: 38–44).

God's presence or absence during a specific historical episode in life. Using Psalm 51 as an example, the prayer was written by David after Nathan the prophet confronted him concerning his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. The historical title takes the reader to 2 Samuel 11 – 12 to fill out the details of the story. Reading the psalm in the light of the historical account, we immediately recognize that it fits well with David's appropriately remorseful attitude at the time.

That noted, we may also see clearly that, although the psalm fits well with the named historical incident, the psalm itself does not embed that event in its contents. Psalm 51:2 reads:

Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

Not:

Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin of adultery.

The composer wrote the psalm in this fashion intentionally, so that his prayer, born out of a particular historical moment, could be used by those who come after him who find themselves in a similar, though not necessarily identical, situation. One does not have to be an adulterer to use the psalm as a model for one's petitions. Interestingly, 1 Chronicles 16:7 and following provides support for this understanding of the composition of the psalms. Here we see David handing over a new psalm that he composed to Asaph, the lead sanctuary musician, presumably for use in Israel's worship.

Thus, we have hints that people like David (see 'Authorship titles' above) composed psalms and then handed them over to the sanctuary leaders who collected them over time. In terms of the date of composition, the authorship titles would have us believe that the earliest psalm comes from the time of Moses (Ps. 90) and, from their contents, the latest ones from the exilic (Ps. 137) and post-exilic (Ps. 126) periods, thus throughout the entire period of the production of what Christians call the Old Testament.

A close reading of some psalms indicates that additions could have been made at the end of an earlier psalm. Psalms 51 and 69 are

good examples: both are attributed to David and both are individual laments. Both, however, also end with appeals for God to remember the community, suggesting that they were added during the post-exilic period (see Pss 51:18–19; 69:35–36).

Finally, in terms of collection, we should note that there are three groups of psalms that probably came into the book at the same time. First, there are the songs of the Sons of Korah (a Levitical musician), mentioned in the titles of Psalms 42, 44–49, 84–85 and 87–88. Second, we have the songs of Asaph (another Levitical musician) in Psalms 50, 73–83. Finally, there are the songs of ascent in Psalms 120–134 (for the meaning of this title, see the excursus before Ps. 120, pp. 409–410).

b. Organization

But what can we say about the final organization or structure of the book of Psalms? Clearly, the new psalms were not simply added at the end, or at least we can be sure that, in its final form, the book of Psalms does not begin with the oldest and end with the youngest compositions. Indeed, in the one editorial note that we have, it is clear that the structure was changed during the many years that preceded its final form: ‘This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse’ (Ps. 72:20). What is particularly striking about this note is that there are a number of Davidic psalms that appear after it (Pss 138–145).

We can only guess at earlier forms of the book, so here we will occupy ourselves with the question of the final form of the book. We cannot offer a date when unnamed editors compiled the book in its present form, except to say that it was certainly in the post-exilic period.⁴

The question of the structure of the book of Psalms has been a focus of attention since the mid-1980s and the publication of G. Wilson’s *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Wilson, 1985). Wilson, encouraged by the canonical interpretation of his teacher B. Childs,

4. Perhaps as late as the first century BC. Scrolls from the Dead Sea (dated between the third century BC and the first century AD) show a different order from the one in our English Bibles (based on the Massoretic tradition), but we cannot be certain whether or not these scrolls are ordered for special liturgical reasons.

thought there might be a reason behind the present order of the psalms. He concluded that the order could be seen in the so-called ‘seam psalms’, those that occur at the beginning and end of the five Books of the Psalter. He was struck by the fact that many of them focused on the Davidic covenant. Psalm 1, he believed, was an introduction to the whole book, so Psalm 2 opened the first Book in earnest, and that psalm, with its allusion to 2 Samuel 7, celebrates the covenant of kingship conferred on David and his descendant. Psalm 41, which ends Book 1, only mentions David in the title, but when read as a psalm of David can be taken as a statement of confidence in the Davidic covenant. Psalm 72, ending Book 2, while naming Solomon as the composer in the title, is taken as a prayer for Solomon and thus is important for passing the covenant promises on from David to Solomon. Next, Book 3 ends with a psalm that for the first time speaks of David explicitly and, according to Wilson, concerns the demise of the Davidic dynasty. After this point, the final two Books of the Psalter concern God, not David or any other human, as king. Thus read, in the post-exilic period the book moves from a human king to God as King, the latter having messianic overtones.

Wilson’s analysis is unsatisfying for a variety of reasons. First, he is selective in terms of the seam psalms that he uses. It is also debatable or doubtful that Psalm 89 ought to be read as an account of the end of the Davidic dynasty. Indeed, it does acknowledge that God seems to have turned his back on his promise to David, but we do not know how God chose to respond to the psalmist’s appeal to change his attitude and come to the king’s support. Furthermore, it is not true that the last two Books abandon interest in the human king and focus totally on the divine King. Psalm 132 is not only explicitly connected to the Davidic promise, but speaks of it in positive terms. Wilson argued that the editor’s hands were tied, in that this psalm was included in a collection known as the psalms of ascent,⁵ but this reply seems inadequate.

While very few follow Wilson in his specific analysis, he inspired many to believe that there was an underlying reason for the systematic ordering of the psalms. The fact that their structures were

5. Personal communication.

significantly different from Wilson's and from each others' raises suspicions that, rather than discovering an order intended by the final editor, they are imposing a structure on the book.⁶

While not persuaded by recent attempts to discover an overarching structure to the book of Psalms, I do agree that there are some intentional placements of certain psalms, particularly at the beginning and the end of the book. Psalms 1 and 2 serve as an introduction, and Psalms 146 – 150 are a fitting conclusion to the book of Psalms conceived as a literary sanctuary. That the Psalms are a literary sanctuary is not a new insight, since Jerome described it as a 'large house' (*magna domus*), with Psalms 1 and 2 serving as an entrance to this house. More recently, Janowski rightly said that 'the Psalms . . . are something like a *templum spirituale*, a temple not of stones but of words with the proem of Ps. 1 – 2 as wide "entrance portal" and the final Hallel of Ps. 146 – 150 as a resounding "keystone"' (Janowski 2013: 348). I would further describe Psalm 1 as a gatekeeper of the literary sanctuary. The physical sanctuary had Levitical gatekeepers who would restrict access to those who are righteous (see the entrance liturgies in Pss 15 and 24), so Psalm 1, with its description of the way of the righteous person who meditates on the law of God, and the way of the wicked, requires its reader to associate with one or the other. If righteous, the reader may proceed into the literary sanctuary and first encounter the Lord and his anointed one in Psalm 2.⁷ By the time of the post-exilic period during which the book arrived in its final form, Psalm 2 would have been read eschatologically, with the hope of a future Messiah (see commentary, pp. 59–64). Thus, the first two psalms introduce the important themes of law and Messiah.

Turning to the final five psalms, we are struck by the recurrent call to praise the Lord (*halēlū yāb*), culminating in Psalm 150, which contains one *halēlū yāb* after another. Such a tremendous doxology is fitting as one leaves the literary sanctuary.

6. For other attempts, see Creach (1996); Mitchell (1997); Howard (1997); Cole (2000).

7. That Pss 1 and 2 do not have titles is an indirect indication that they are serving as introductions to the book.

Now, stepping back and looking at the movement from introduction to doxological conclusion, we might also observe that there is a general movement within the book from a predominance of laments at the beginning to a predominance of hymns at the end. Here may be the main reason why the book is called ‘Praises’ (Tehillim) in Jewish tradition. Even though there are more laments than hymns, the hymns overtake the laments so that one does have the impression when reading from beginning to end that God turns ‘wailing into dancing’ (Ps. 30:11a).

Before leaving the subject of the organization of the final form of the book, we should note that the editors divided the Psalms into five Books (Pss 1 – 41; 42 – 72; 73 – 89; 90 – 106; 107 – 150). There is some evidence in the use of the divine names that they may have gone through separate redactions. Book 1, for instance, may have been redacted at a time when Yahweh (occurring 272 times) was preferred over Elohim (occurring 15 times), while Book 2 has the opposite preference, with Elohim (207 times) more pervasive than Yahweh (74 times). Books 4 and 5 together use Yahweh 339 times and Elohim only 7 times. Book 3 uses Yahweh 13 times and Elohim 36 times. Each Book also ends with a doxology that is not a part of the psalm that ends the Book, but was added to conclude the Book itself. The division into five Books happened before the close of the Old Testament canon. The purpose may have been to draw an analogy with the Torah, which has been divided into five parts. If so, then the editors may have been making a statement that, although the psalms are prayers by people to God, they nonetheless have the same authority as word of God as the Torah. Seow points out that the connection between Torah and the Psalter is also signalled by the placement of the first psalm (see above): ‘The prominent mention of tora in Psalm 1 signals that the Psalter is to be read as tora – David’s tora to be read alongside the tora of Moses. It prompts the reader to expect tora in the rest of the Psalter and to be guided by it’ (Seow 2013: 219).

c. Use

The primary use of the book of Psalms, the literary sanctuary, during the Old Testament period was in the public corporate worship of Israel. Psalms has rightly been called the ‘Hymnbook of the Old

Testament'. Many lines of evidence come together to support this view.

We return first to 1 Chronicles 16:7 (see above), where David hands a psalm to Asaph, the chief of those Levites who were appointed 'to extol, thank, and praise the LORD, the God of Israel' (16:4). Asaph is also named as the composer of a number of psalms (50, 73 – 83). Heman and Ethan, to each of whom a psalm is ascribed (see Pss 88, 89), are likewise listed as Levitical musicians (1 Chr. 15:19).

Other aspects of the titles also point to the use of the psalms in public worship. Psalm 92 states that it is 'for the Sabbath day', and Psalms 120 – 134 are called psalms of ascent, sung while on pilgrimage to Zion (see excursus before Ps. 120, pp. 409–410).

The content of the psalms also points to a setting in public worship. Psalm 136 has a recurrent refrain which is best understood as the response of the congregation to the priest, as he sang the first part of each verse. In addition, the following are just examples of the descriptions of worship rituals that accompanied the singing of the psalms:

But I, by your great love,
 can come into your house;
 in reverence I bow down
 towards your holy temple.
 (5:7)

I wash my hands in innocence,
 and go about your altar, LORD,
 proclaiming aloud your praise
 and telling of all your wonderful deeds.
 (26:6–7)

I have seen you in the sanctuary
 and beheld your power and your glory.
 (63:2)

I will come to your temple with burnt offerings
 and fulfil my vows to you –
 (66:13)

Throughout the twentieth century, starting with the work of S. Mowinckel (1962), there have been attempts to specify a setting for the Psalms within the religious calendar of Israel. Mowinckel famously situated the Psalms within an annual New Year celebration in which Yahweh was enthroned again as King. Arthur Weiser spoke of the Psalms as a libretto of an annual covenant renewal ceremony, while Kraus believed that the book was used in conjunction with a Zion festival (Weiser, 1962; Kraus, 1988). While all three of them highlighted important themes within the Psalms, it appears wrongminded to try to identify a single setting for their use. It is better simply to affirm that the book was used in the worship of the congregation of Israel.

Of course, the primary setting of Psalms in public worship did not prevent its use in private devotion, just as people today will sing from the church's hymnbook in the privacy of their own homes. There are examples of this in Scripture as well, including Hannah's (1 Sam. 2:1–11) and Mary's (Luke 1:46–56) use of Psalm 113 to praise God in response to the news that they were pregnant.

4. Genre and types of psalms

A genre is a class of texts that share formal traits, emotional expression and/or content. From the vantage point of the interpreter, genre is important because it triggers reading strategy. Authors send signals that help the reader know how to take their message. 'Once upon a time' is a well-known example of such a signal and would communicate to the reader that the author intends the text to be read as a fairy tale.

What is the genre of the book of Psalms? Though the book consists of 150 different compositions by a number of different writers, we can still provide an answer to the question on a broad scale. Psalms is a book of poetry, and in particular, lyric poetry, which expresses the inner emotions of the composer. That Psalms is a book of poetry triggers a reading strategy. However, since the topic deserves significant discussion, we will explore Hebrew poetry in the following section of the Introduction.

In this section, we will consider genre in the Psalms at a different level. After all, there are different types of lyric poetry, and in the