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Psalm 1



The Shape of Book 1 (Psalms 1–41)

THE MOST IMMEDIATELY obvious characteristic of Book 1 of the Psalter is its dominant Davidic character. Assuming the special character of the untitled Psalms 1 and 2 as introductory, we are left in this initial section with thirty-nine psalms, of which all but two bear attribution to David in their headings—employing the simple although somewhat ambiguous¹ construction *ledawid*, meaning “to/for/by/concerning/under the authority of/in the style of David.” The two anomalous psalms (Pss. 10 and 33) have no headings, but each preserves a textual tradition of having been combined with the psalm that immediately precedes (Pss. 9 and 32 respectively). If we accept the tradition for the combination of these aberrant psalms with their immediate predecessors, Book 1 of the Psalter is a uniformly Davidic collection bounded at the beginning by Psalms 1 and 2 and concluded by the doxology in 41:13: “Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.”²

Between these two boundary posts, Book 1 is characterized largely by individual psalms and pleas for deliverance. Of the compositions in the book, twenty-seven are *clearly* individual psalms,³ of which eighteen are pleas for deliverance.⁴ An additional seven psalms (9; 10; 18; 21; 30; 32; 34) offer thanksgiving for deliverance from trouble, and five more (14; 15; 35; 36; 37) provide instruction regarding the experience of evil in the world. By contrast, unambiguous praise of Yahweh is encountered in only five psalms (8; 16; 19; 29; 33), and confident reliance on Yahweh is expressed in only three (11; 23; 27). A single psalm (24) represents an entrance liturgy.

1. For further discussion of the ambiguity of the Heb. construction (preposition *le-* + personal name) that is generally assumed to indicate authorship, see the section “Psalm Headings” in the Introduction.

2. The references in the English Psalter are often one verse different from the Hebrew Psalter, since the latter often considers the title as verse 1. This commentary will follow English versification.

3. To say a psalm is “individual” is not to say that it could not have been performed as part of the communal worship of Israel. This may often have been the case, esp. when the individual was the king, who exercised a representative role within temple worship.

4. Pss. 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 12; 13; 17; 20; 22; 25; 26; 28; 31; 38; 39; 40; 41.

Following the elevated hopes for kingship expressed in Psalm 2, Book 1 shifts decisively into a block of pleas for deliverance at its opening (3–7) and concludes with an extended block of psalms focused on instruction concerning continuing evil in the world (35–37) and additional pleas for deliverance (38–41). Between these two extremes, psalms with an awareness of evil and trouble (thanksgiving, instruction, pleas) outnumber psalms of praise and reliance two to one.⁵ The effect of this arrangement is to focus the collection on the experience of pain and suffering rather than on praise of God for a well-ordered and firmly established world.

Despite the appearance of reliance and praise scattered through the middle of this first book, the overriding sense expressed is of attack, suffering, and the need for divine deliverance. Even though the central expression of the collection (Ps. 21) is a thanksgiving psalm celebrating the victory granted the king against his enemies, this joyous psalm is preceded by a prayer for deliverance (20) and followed by agonized prayer of suffering and abandonment (22). This leaves the reader with the impression that any sense of victory is fleeting while suffering and distress are constant in life.

Elsewhere I have suggested that the first three books of the Psalter (Pss. 1–89) are arranged in a sort of rough commentary on the Davidic kingship by the strategic placement of royal psalms.⁶ Book 1 announces the institution of the kingship with the promises of universal dominion (Ps. 2), but quickly slides into mourning and pleas for divine deliverance in Psalm 3 and following. A real sense is established here of the frailty of human power,⁷ the secure refuge God affords, and the need for divine deliverance and protection. The last four psalms (38–41) are bounded before and after with prayers for deliverance from sickness—a circumstance that accords well with David at the conclusion of his own life and reign. While some may question whether these psalms were actually written by David, they do reflect the uncertainty, confusion, and plotting that characterize the transition between kings, even within the Davidic dynasty.

5. From Ps. 8 to Ps. 34, there are eighteen psalms categorized as plea, thanksgiving, or instruction, as compared to only nine psalms in the categories of praise, reliance, or entrance liturgy.

6. Gerald H. Wilson, "The Use of Royal Psalms at the 'Seams' of the Hebrew Psalter," *JSTOT* 35 (1986): 85–94; idem, "The Shape of the Book of Psalms," *Int* 46 (1992): 129–42.

7. Ps. 8: "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" (8:4). Ps. 19: "Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression" (19:12–13). Ps. 33: "No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save" (33:16–17).

If this were the end of the Davidic collection, then the situation would seem dismal indeed. But the combination of this first book with the second, as the postscript in 72:20 suggests, expands the Davidic collection by the addition of Psalms 42–72. This provides the first Davidic collection with a different terminus (“This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse”), and, as we will consider in “The Shape of Book 2,” with a different character. As it stands, Book 1 does not represent the end of the Davidic dynasty but mirrors at its conclusion (38–41) the difficulty of transition from one king to subsequent generations.

The uncertainty reflected in these concluding psalms is also consonant with that experienced by the Diaspora community, who had known not just the death of a king but of the monarchy altogether. The grouping of Psalms 38–41 here provides counsel and hope that would have resonated deeply with the needs of those struggling to survive in exile. These psalms affirm that despite the suffering of attack, Yahweh is the only source of salvation; he is salvation! (38:22). The appropriate response to the continuing suffering is to acknowledge it is a just, divine rebuke for sin (38:1; 39:10) and to wait silently for divine redemption (38:13–16; 39:1–3, 8–9). Psalm 40 mirrors this same kind of enduring patience in the face of suffering and adds an attitude of expectant anticipation (see the Bridging Contexts section of Ps. 40).

The whole grouping and Book 1 conclude with Psalm 41 and its description of the suffering weakness of one facing death from disease. Remarkably this psalm begins with the by-now familiar cry “Blessed” (*ḥāšre*), which links this final psalm back to 2:8 and its triumphant celebration of the election of the Davidic dynasty for powerful rule over the nations. Although the situation reflected at the conclusion of Book 1 is radically different (as was the circumstance of the exilic community), the call for blessing remains unchanged. Those who took refuge in the conquering king in 2:8 have now become those who cast their lot with the “weak” (41:1), but both remain “blessed” in their enduring patience to wait for the coming one.

- ¹ Blessed is the man
 who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
 or stand in the way of sinners
 or sit in the seat of mockers.
- ² But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law he meditates day and night.
- ³ He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
 which yields its fruit in season
 and whose leaf does not wither.
 Whatever he does prospers.

- ⁴Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.
- ⁵Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
- ⁶For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.



IF YOU WERE to open a handwritten medieval manuscript of the Psalms at its beginning, chances are that you would discover this psalm—the first in the canonical collection—written in red ink and without any evidence of a number.⁸ That is because at an early date the psalm we now know as Psalm 1 was understood to be an introduction to the *whole Psalter* rather than just another psalm. It is likely that the final editors of the Psalter chose Psalm 1 as the gateway to the psalms because it encourages the readers/hearers⁹ to consider the songs that follow to have the effect of divine guidance or *torah*. This psalm also exhorts the readers both to read the psalms and to meditate deeply on the message God is communicating through them. It strongly affirms that how one responds to the revelation of God unleashed by reading the psalms determines one's ultimate destiny.

The use of Psalm 1 as an unnumbered preface to the whole Psalter may also explain the description in Acts 13:33 (in some Western manuscripts of the Greek New Testament) of a quotation from what we now consider Psalm 2:7 as having been taken from the "first psalm." Apparently in that manuscript tradition what we now call Psalm 1 was either unnumbered or had not yet been appended to the beginning of the collection.¹⁰ In either case, the special character of this psalm as introductory is affirmed.

8. The two great collators of manuscripts of the Heb. Old Testament and their numerous variations, Benjamin Kennicott and Johannes Bernhardus de Rossi—both of whom did their work in the mid to late eighteenth century—each list a number of manuscripts in which Ps. 1 is left unnumbered as a *preface* to the whole Psalter. Cf. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 204–5.

9. We must always remember that while the psalms are now part of Scripture and accessed primarily through the act of reading and meditation, in their origin they were performance pieces, spoken out loud and thus available to the ear. It is important to consider how *hearing* the psalms in the context of public, corporate worship is a decidedly different experience from *reading* them in the course of private study and devotion.

10. The final fixation of the Psalter arrangement may have taken place as late as the end of the first century A.D. (cf. Gerald H. Wilson, "A First Century C.E. Date for the Closing for

Psalm 1 is described both as a *wisdom* psalm and as a *Torah* psalm.¹¹ The former designation recognizes the standard wisdom motif of the “two ways” (1:6) of righteousness and wickedness (1:1, 4–6) as well as the characteristic wisdom exhortation “Blessed!” (ʔašre) at the beginning of the psalm. The designation as a Torah psalm is a response to the centrality accorded the *torah* (NIV “law”) in verse 2. Other such Torah psalms (19; 119) appear in significant locations within the Psalter and provide a thematic focus for the final form of the whole collection.¹²

Structurally Psalm 1 is arranged into a series of two-verse comparisons between the lifestyle, consequences, and divine evaluation of the alternative “ways” taken by the righteous and wicked. Three such comparisons are offered: (1) guilt by association (1:1–2); (2) identifying fruits (2:3–4); (3) ultimate consequences (1:5–6). In addition, the first and fifth verses intentionally employ similar terms and motifs of standing in the public assembly to drive home the contrast between the ultimate destiny of the righteous and the wicked.

The psalm is, then, an exhortation—through positive and negative examples—to adopt the fruitful and satisfying life characterized by immersion in the J. C. McCann, ed., of God. Then and only then will the faithful find themselves on the “way” that is blazed and watched over by God himself.

Guilt by Association (1:1–2)

THE OPENING BLESSING of the psalm (ʔašre) is common enough in the wisdom teaching of the Old Testament to recognize it as a characteristic method of the sages to exhort hearers to right action.¹³ The word “blessed” conveys the

the Hebrew Psalter,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 28 [2000]: 102–10). An alternative solution is that Pss. 1 and 2 were read *together* as a single psalm and introduction to the Psalter. Kennicott also mentions seven Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament that do not separate between Pss. 1 and 2. The joining of untitled psalms with adjacent compositions that *do* have titles is relatively common in ancient manuscripts of the Psalter (cf. the chart in Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 134–35). Others suggest that these originally independent compositions have been purposefully placed together at the beginning of the Psalter to introduce the whole collection (cf. Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms* [NIBC; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999], 41–42).

11. See the discussion of the Torah psalms in James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 128–35.

12. Cf. James L. Mays, “The Question of Context in Psalm Interpretation,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. C. McCann (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 14–20; idem, “The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter,” *JBL* 106 (1987): 3–12.

13. Outside the Psalms, the term ʔašre is found at Deut. 33:29; 1 Kings 10:8; 2 Chron. 9:7; Job 5:17; Prov. 3:13; 8:32, 34; 14:21; 16:20; 20:7; 28:14; 29:18; Eccl. 10:17; Isa. 30:18; 32:20; 56:2; Dan. 12:12. Within the Psalms ʔašre is found at Pss. 1:1; 2:12; 32:1, 2; 33:12; 34:8; 40:4; 41:1; 65:4; 84:4, 5, 16; 89:15; 94:12; 106:3; 112:1; 119:1, 2; 127:5; 128:1, 2; 137:8, 9; 144:15; 146:5.

idea of happiness that flows from a sense of well-being and rightness. The same term probably originally underlies the “blessed” of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5.¹⁴

Who does not walk . . . stand . . . sit. The positive exhortation leads to a negative example. This is a lifestyle to be avoided, not emulated. The sequence of verbs employed describe a life immersed and focused on association with all that is opposed to God. The order of these verbs may indicate a gradual descent into evil, in which one first walks alongside, then stops,¹⁵ and ultimately takes up permanent residence¹⁶ in the company of the wicked.

The passage has interesting similarities with the important command following the Shema (Deut. 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one”) that faithful Israelites were to share Yahweh’s commandments with their children “when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deut. 6:7).¹⁷ While the parallels are not exact, both passages illustrate a totality of experience in which one is immersed, focused, and committed to a culture of association that dominates and shapes a worldview. In light of the move in Psalm 1:2 to direct the hearer’s attention to constant meditation on and delight in Yahweh’s *torah*, the contrasting profession and command from Deuteronomy may well have been in the back of the psalmist’s mind.

Wicked . . . sinners . . . mockers. The categories of persons mentioned can be instructive as well, and these groups of opponents of God return often in the remainder of the psalms. The “wicked” (*reša’im*) are those who have been judged “guilty” in a court of law or would be if brought to trial. In a legal contest between two parties, a judge would hear the testimony of the parties and make a determination (*mišpaṭ*) of the facts of the case and what the individual parties *should* have done in response. What actually happened is then compared with this *mišpaṭ*, and judgment is pronounced on each party. Those who appropriately fulfilled the expectations of the *mišpaṭ* were proclaimed *šaddiq* (“righteous”), while those who failed to live up to this standard were pronounced *raša’* (“guilty”). These pronouncements were

14. “Blessed” in the Beatitudes is a translation of the Greek *makarios*. This same Greek word is used to translate *ʾašre* in the LXX version of Ps. 1.

15. The verb *ʿmd* has more the sense of “take a stand” than simply “stand still.” There is volition (and therefore responsibility) assumed in this action.

16. The verb *yšb* can mean “sit down” or often “dwell, take up permanent residence” in a place.

17. This exhortation to Israel also occurs at Deut. 11:19 in almost exactly the same language—an indication that this idea of the need to keep God’s guiding instruction constantly present and in mind was an important and formative part of Israel’s religious identity.