

A HOLISTIC READING OF THE PSALTER

(Willem A. VanGemeren)

The new perspective on reading the Psalter attempts to read each psalm in relation to a collection, to the book, and to the whole Psalter. While there surely is no consensus, the general approach can be stated as follows:

1. Psalms 1 and 2 form a programmatic introduction to the entire book of Psalms. The themes of wisdom (1:2; Torah), divine retribution (1:6), the establishment of God's kingdom through the messianic agent (Ps 2), and the happiness of godly individuals (1:1; 2:12) frame the expectations of the reader in interpreting the Psalter. The priority of Psalm 1 encourages individuals to appropriate all the psalms, even those connected with David, so as to live wisely in the hope of the establishment of divine justice (retribution) and of God's kingdom. In so doing, individuals are empowered by God's grace to be (messianic) agents in establishing God's kingdom. Yet the hope of the messianic kingdom remains alive by the royal psalms and by the placement of eight Davidic psalms (Pss 138-145) in Book V immediately before the five "Hallelujah" psalms (Pss 146-150). Psalms 146-150, with the theme of praise, form the conclusion to and counterbalance the many laments found throughout the Psalter, and especially in Books I-III.

2. The editors placed the mini-collections into five maxi-collections; Book I (Pss 3-41, with a doxology and double Amen in 41:13); Book II (Pss 42-72, with a doxology and double Amen in 72:19), Book III (Pss 73-89, with a doxology and double Amen in 89:52), Book IV (Pss 90-106, with a double doxology and Amen in 106:48), and Book V (Pss 107-145, without a doxology). It is conceivable that there were inspired additions to existing psalms as changes in the circumstances of God's people may have occasioned an additional strophe to be added. This may explain the prayer for the restoration of Zion in Psalm 51:18-19 and for God's blessing on Zion in 69:34-36. The present textual witnesses reveal some flexibility in the organization and headings. Both the Hebrew and Greek editions of the Psalter contain 150 psalms. The Hebrew text has thirty-four psalms without a heading and the Greek text (Septuagint) only seventeen. The Greek text combines Psalms 9 and 10 and Psalms 114 and 115 into one, but it splits Psalms 116 and 147 into two. The Qumran materials create an even more complex picture.

3. Books I (3-41), II (42-72), and III (73-89), with many superscriptions connecting the psalms with David, the sons of Korah, and Asaph, develop a story line. Beginning with the glorious expectation of the establishment of the universal rule of a Davidide (Ps 2; cf. Ps 72), the many lament psalms bring promise in touch with reality. The cries by the Davidides (cf. Pss 3-7) and Israelites (cf. Pss 42-43; 73; 88) for mercy and vindication gain new significance in the light of the ultimate complaint lamenting the rejection of the Davidic dynasty (Ps 89).

Book I and Book II and III differ in at least two aspects. First, the name for God is mainly *Yahweh* (the LORD) in Psalms 1—41 but *Elohim* (God) in Psalms 42-72 (*Elohists* Psalter). Second, David is prominent in the headings of Book I (Pss 3-32, 34-41), but in Book II David (Pss 51-65; 68-70) shares the honor with the sons of Korah (Pss 42-29), with Asaph (50), and with Solomon (72). Several psalms are anonymous (66; 67; 71) and are known as "orphan psalms." The addition of Book III marks the second



stage. Book III shares with Book II its preference for the name *Elohim* and its diversity of authors (Asaph [73-83]; the sons of Korah [84-85; 87]; David [86]; and the sons of Korah and Heman [88]). But Psalm 73 breaks the spell cast by the magnificent vision of the messianic kingdom (Ps 72) by introducing the question of God's justice and power. This issue comes to a new head in Psalm 89, the last psalm of this book. Psalm 89 opens up many issues pertaining to the future of the Davidic dynasty. The selection of Psalms 73 and 89 as the boundaries of Book III permanently alters the optimistic expectations of the messianic agency. In it there are no orphan psalms. The depressing opening of Book III (Ps 73) prepares the reader for the book's tragic close (Ps 89). Through a democratizing reading of the lament psalms, the exilic community read the lament psalms in Books I-III as a commentary on their plight.

4., The boundary between Book IV and Book V is not absolute. Psalms 106 and 107 share the identical opening and a number of themes. Books IV and V suggest a move from lament to praise and from a concern with individuals to the community. These books have fewer superscriptions and may best be interpreted as providing a response to the failure of the Davidic dynasty with a renewed emphasis on God's kingly rule of justice and righteousness in this world (Pss 93; 95-100; 145; cf. Ps 89).

Book IV is composed of a collection of royal psalms (93-100), psalms reflective of the storyline from creation to the exile (Pss 104-106), and several other psalms. Few psalms are connected with authors—only Psalm 90 (Moses) and Psalms 100 and 103 (David). Book IV engages questions raised by the dissolution of the Davidic covenant at the time of the exile (see Ps 89). The inclusion of the benediction of Psalm 106:48 in 1 Chronicles 16:36 may well be an indication that Book IV was complete in the postexilic era. It contains many orphan psalms (91; 93-97; 99; 104-106).

Book V comprises a number of collections—the Egyptian Hallel (Pss 111-118, including three Hallelujah hymns [Pss 111-113]), the Great Hallel (Pss 114-118), a Torah psalm (Ps 119), the Songs of Ascents (Pss 120-134, which include four Davidic psalms [122; 124; 131; 133]), eight Davidic psalms (Pss 138-145), and five concluding Hallelujah hymns (Pss 146-150). There are a number of orphan psalms in Book V (107; 111-119; 136-137; 146-50).