

Messianism in the Psalms

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“There are two faces to the psalms in the Psalter. Indeed, they are prayers. That is to say, the words of man to his God, but they are also words which were spoken by the Holy Spirit and written in the Holy Scriptures, and therefore, they are so to speak, words God speaks to man.” So writes Amos Chakham.¹

Many read the Psalms only as individual prayers or songs and fail to see that they have been carefully arranged to form a book: a prophetic book telling a story. Some might spot the prophetic hints within individual psalms that speak of the Messiah, but still fail to appreciate the landscape of the psalms that have been composed as a prophetic message when seen as a book. There are reasons for this, primarily a movement of 20th-century scholarship that sought the meaning of the individual psalms in isolation from their canonical context and saw the superscriptions and doxologies as unimportant, thus missing vital clues to the intended structure of the book of Psalms. This article will examine more recent scholarship challenging this atomistic approach, which much of contemporary scholarship has come to believe unquestioningly.

MISSING THE MESSAGE

The significant tension between the NT uses of the Psalms versus the view of most contemporary evangelical scholars is evident in what follows.

For David says of Him: “I saw the Lord ever before me; because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced. Moreover, my flesh will rest in hope, because You will not leave me in Hades or allow Your Holy One to see decay. You have revealed the paths of life to me; You will fill me with gladness in Your presence.” Brothers, I can confidently speak to you about the patriarch David: He is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn an oath to him to seat one of his descendants on his throne. *Seeing this in advance, he spoke concerning the*

¹ Amos Chakham, *The Book of Psalms, Vol. 1, Da’at Miqra* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989), 13 (Hebrew; translation of Hebrew by author).

*resurrection of the Messiah.*²

It is important to realize that psalms are not prophetic in the narrow sense. In some circles it is believed that a small number of very significant psalms have no Old Testament referent, but apply only to the coming Messiah. Examples include [Psalms 2; 16; 22; 69, and 110](#). *Indeed these psalms are particularly important psalms if for no other reason than the New Testament writers quote them more than any other psalm. However, they too have an Old Testament context.*³

These quotations, one from the apostle Peter in [Ac 2](#) and the other from a well-known evangelical introduction to the [OT](#), both make confident assertions about the psalms. In the first quotation, Peter unequivocally claims that David is the author of the [16th Psalm](#) and that he was a prophet who intentionally predicted the Messiah's resurrection in [Ps 16](#). In the second quotation, the authors argue that the "psalms are not prophetic in the narrow sense," and therefore, David's intention when writing [Ps 16](#) was not specifically to predict the Messiah's resurrection. Rather, the historical-grammatical meaning of [Ps 16](#) must be established in its [OT](#) context, namely, its original function as part of the liturgy in the first and/or second temple.

Although many Christians would bristle at the apparently contradictory claims of the second quotation, they would also likely admit that they would never have guessed that [Ps 16](#) prophesied the Messiah's resurrection had Peter not told us so in [Ac 2](#). The interpretive challenge of finding the Messiah in the book of Psalms is not limited to [Ps 16](#). Many of the [NT](#)'s Messianic interpretations of the psalms appear to be quite arbitrary at face value.⁴

However, the problem of interpreting Psalms as messianic is located in modern critical assumptions about the book of Psalms. This article will argue that the [NT](#)'s interpretation reflects a more careful reading of the psalms in their [OT](#) context, both in terms of the individual psalms as well as the book of Psalms as a whole.

² [Acts 2:25–31](#) (HCSB; emphasis added).

³ Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 233 (emphasis added).

⁴ For example, the Gospel of John appeals to [Ps 69:9](#) to explain Jesus' actions in the temple ([Jn 2:17](#)). [John 15:25](#) states that the hatred Jesus experienced was a fulfillment of the prophecy in [Ps 69:4](#). [Acts 1:16–20](#) also appeals to [Ps 69:25](#) as a prediction of the Messiah's betrayal at the hands of Judas. While it is obvious the [NT](#) authors interpreted [Ps 69](#) as messianic, it is not obvious how this psalm of individual lament is messianic.

TWO MODERN ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE BOOK OF PSALMS

These quotations express two modern critical assumptions about the psalms:

When examined closely, however, the Psalter surprises us and we have difficulty understanding its message.... [T]he individual psalms seem to be without a context, either historical or literary, in a way that is virtually unique to the Old Testament.⁵

A discussion of the theological message of the Psalter is difficult for two reasons. First, the book is composed of 150 individual compositions and, accordingly, does not present a systematically developed argument. Second, as will be more fully explored below, the psalms are prayers sung to God; thus they present us with the words of the congregation addressed to God, rather than the Word of God addressed to the people of Israel. How, then, is it possible to speak of the theological concerns of the Psalter?⁶

The first assumption found in the quotations is that the book of Psalms is not really a book. Whole books provide literary contexts to the individual chapters, and individual chapters find their places in the overall message of the book. However, these authors maintain that the book of Psalms is not really a book. According to their view, it would be a mistake to interpret Ps 3 in the context of Pss 2 and 4 or in the context of the book of Psalms as a whole, any more than trying to understand “Amazing Grace” in the context of “Blessed Assurance” and “It Is Well” in a hymnbook.⁷

The second assumption is that the individual psalms are not, technically speaking, God’s

⁵ Dillard and Longman, *Introduction to the OT*, 211.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁷ Gerald Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, Society of Biblical Literature, Dissertation Series 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 206, writes, “The Psalter has on occasion been styled ‘the Hymn Book of the Second Temple.’ This rather unfortunate designation has had the adverse effect of focusing a disproportionate amount of attention on the individual compositions contained within. A ‘hymn book’ collects hymns so that they may be readily available for individual use in worship. Emphasis is placed on the secondary use of the individual members of the collection rather than the collection itself. While some hymn books evidence a limited attempt to group their contents by theme, interest or liturgical function, there is seldom any sustained, organizational purpose at work in consecutive arrangement.”

prophetic word to His people . Whereas the prophetic literature is directly God's word to the community and frequently intended to be predictive, the psalms come to us as prayers *to* God rather than prophecies *from* God. To interpret Psalms as predictive prophecy, therefore, is to misunderstand its original function and purpose in the OT community. Let us deal with these common modern assumptions.

THE BOOK OF PSALMS REALLY IS A BOOK

Though evangelical scholarship tends to regard the hymnbook approach to the Psalter as conservative, its origins can be traced to the work of two critical scholars in 19th century: Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinkel.⁸ First, these scholars discarded the canonical order of the 150 psalms in favor of a focus on the individual psalms.⁹ Second, these scholars relegated the superscriptions¹⁰ as late editorial and noncanonical labels even though the

⁸ See *ibid.*, 1; Dillard and Longman, *Introduction to the OT*, 217.

⁹ Wilson, *Editing*, 1, writes: “Current Psalm scholarship emphasizes the study of individual psalms (pss), or at the most, those earlier collections of pss which can be discerned embedded within the final form of the canonical Psalter. The roots of this current trend can be traced to the influential works of the early, major figures in the field, namely Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinkel. Both men have been largely concerned to focus on individual pss, loosed from their traditional moorings in the Psalter (MT 150) and rearranged according to other criteria in groups which (in effect) ignore the canonical order.”

¹⁰ Psalm 3 contains the first superscription in the book of Psalms: “A psalm of David when he fled from his son Absalom.” This particular superscription contains information about the genre (mizmor [psalm]), the author (David), and the historical content (“when he fled from his son Absalom”) (Wilson, *Editing*, 155). All superscriptions are considered the first verse in the Hebrew Bible. Obviously, the Christian English translations (e.g. HCSB), do not attribute canonical status (inspiration) to the superscriptions, which are therefore excluded from the versification of the psalm itself and presented in a font that is distinguished from the psalm itself. Superscriptions contain information about the author, genre, instructions, and historical content. Genre categories include the following: *Shiggaion* (Book I: Ps 7); *Miktam* (Book I: Ps 16; Book II: Pss 56; 57; 58; 59; 60); prayer (Book I: Ps 17; Book III: Ps 86; Book IV: Pss 90; 102); *Maskil* (Book I: Ps 32; Book II: Pss 42; 44; 45; 52; 53; 54; 55; Book III: Pss 74; 78; 88; 89; Book V: Ps 142); praise (Book V: Ps 145); Hallelujah (Book V: Pss 111;

superscriptions are included in all ancient manuscripts and translations of the Hebrew Bible ([Dead Sea Scrolls](#), the Septuagint, [etc.](#)), are included in the versification of the Hebrew Bible, and are treated as Scripture by Christian interpreters before the time of Gunkel (e.g., [KJV](#)).¹¹ Since the superscriptions were regarded as noncanonical (not inspired), they were also regarded as irrelevant for interpretation.¹² The abandonment of the canonical order and the superscriptions necessitated a new framework for interpreting the psalms. [Form criticism](#) provided this new framework. Gunkel identified certain patterns in each of the various kinds of psalms, and consequently classified, arranged, and interpreted the psalms according to their forms ([form criticism](#)). Each form was identified with various situations (*Sitz im Leben*) in the context of Israel's worship.¹³

One significant result of this hymnbook approach to the book of Psalms was a “rupture with the traditional Jewish-Christian understanding of the Psalter,”¹⁴ and this for two reasons. First, once the psalms are loosed from their canonical context (i.e., within the context of their specific arrangement in the 150 psalms of the Psalter), the messianic interpretation of an individual psalm, in many cases, appears to be completely arbitrary. For instance, Peter used [Ps 90:4](#) as a proof text for the delay of the [second coming](#) of the Lord ([2Pt 3:4, 8–9](#)).¹⁵ It is

112; 113; 135; 146; 147; 148; 149; 150); psalm (Book I: Pss 3; 4; 5; 6; 8; 9; 12; 13; 15; 19; 20; 21; 22; 23; 24; 29; 30; 31; 38; 39; 40; 41; Book II: Pss 47; 48; 49; 50; 51; 62; 63; 64; 65; 66; 67; 68; Book III: Pss 73; 75; 76; 77; 79; 80; 82; 83; 84; 85; 87; 88; Book IV: Pss 92; 98; 100; 101; Book V: Pss 108; 109; 110; 139; 140; 141; 143); and song (Book I: Ps 30; Book II: Pss 45; 46; 48; 65; 66; 67; 68; Book III: Pss 75; 76; 83; 87; 88; Book IV: Ps 92; Book V: Pss 108; 120; 121; 123; 124; 125; 126; 127; 128; 129; 130; 131; 132; 133; 134) (Wilson, *Editing*, 158).

¹¹ See Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 509.

¹² Dillard and Longman, *Introduction*, 216, make this point clear when they write, “Therefore, while the titles are not canonical, they may be reliable. Nonetheless, they are not important to the interpretation of individual psalms.”

¹³ Form Criticism, or *Gattungsforschung*, treats each psalm independently and divorced from its canonical context, with special attention on the genre of the particular psalm (see Wilson, *Editing*, 1–2). Psalm types include hymns, lament psalms, royal psalms, thanksgiving psalms, and wisdom psalms.

¹⁴ Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 509.

¹⁵ Examples of seemingly arbitrary messianic interpretations of the psalms isolated from their canonical

difficult to see how this verse in [Ps 90](#) addresses that specific concern when it is not interpreted in light of the previous psalm, with its anguished question “How long, LORD?” ([Ps 89:46](#)), an enquiry directly tied to the timing of the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant (see [Ps 89:33–45](#)).

Second, once the superscriptions are considered irrelevant for interpretation, Jesus’ and Peter’s messianic interpretations of [Pss 16](#) and [110](#) are suspect, since the logic of their argument depends on the superscriptions identifying David as the author (see [Mt 22:41–45](#); [Ac 2:25–31](#)). Moreover, as will be discussed, a rejection of the [canonicity](#) of superscriptions also brings with it a rejection of the prophetic origins of the psalms themselves.¹⁶

Although the “hymnbook approach” has been seriously challenged in the past 40 years in academic circles (conservative and nonconservative),¹⁷ this body of scholarly literature has not been popularized for nonscholarly consumption, so has had limited influence upon the way Christians read and interpret the psalms. In what follows, I hope to make the latest psalms research accessible and, in the process, show why the book of Psalms is really a book and should be interpreted in its canonical order (as a book, superscriptions included).

EVIDENCE THAT PSALMS WAS COMPOSED AS A BOOK

In Gerald Wilson’s ground-breaking and highly influential work on Psalms research, he

context include Hebrews’ use of [Ps 8:4–6](#) ([Heb 2:6–8](#)); Acts’ use of [Ps 16:8–11](#) ([Ac 2:25–28](#); [13:35](#)); Hebrews’ use of [Ps 40:6–8](#) ([Heb 10:5–7](#)); Ephesians’ use of [Ps 68:18](#) ([Eph 4:8](#)); and John’s use of [Ps 69](#) ([Jn 2:17](#); [15:25](#)).

¹⁶ The importance of the superscriptions for the prophetic origins of the psalms will be discussed in the following section.

¹⁷ Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 511–13; Wilson, *Editing*; David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms*, Journal for the Study of Old Testament Supplement Series 252 (Sheffield: SAP, 1997); David M. Howard, *The Structure of Psalms 93–100* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997); Robert L. Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III (Psalms 73–89)*, Journal for the Study of Old Testament Supplement Series 307 (Sheffield: SAP, 2000); Michael K. Snearly, *The Return of the King: Messianic Expectation in Book V of the Psalter*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 624 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015); Clinton J. McCann, ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (Sheffield: SAP, 1993).

Michael Rydelnik and Edwin Blum, eds., *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy: Studies and Expositions of the Messiah in the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2019).
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offered persuasive evidence in favor of the intentional and purposeful compositional¹⁸ shaping of the Hebrew Psalter (book of Psalms) into a unified literary composition. The literary evidence presented in favor of understanding the book of Psalms as a single book is not only impressive, it also has literally changed the face of Psalms scholarship.

1. Fivefold Structure

First, he showed how the book of Psalms was intentionally arranged into a fivefold structure (Five Books) by means of doxologies marking the last verses of each of the five books of the Psalter.¹⁹ Each of these doxologies shares unique language and themes found only in the doxologies themselves, strongly suggesting that these doxologies were strategically placed to mark the end of the Books, rather than to simply mark the end of the individual psalms themselves.

Book I: Psalms 3 ²⁰ –41	Book II: Psalms 42– 72	Book III: Psalms 73– 89	Book IV: Psalms 90–106	Book V: Psalms 107–145 ²¹
May Yahweh, the God of Israel, be praised from everlasting	May the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does wonders, be praised.	May the LORD be praised forever.	May Yahweh, the God of Israel, be praised from everlasting to	My mouth will declare Yahweh’s praise; let every

¹⁸ Wilson uses the word “editorial” rather than “compositional” (see Wilson, *Editing*, 155). I believe the word “editor” does not correctly convey the essence of the making of a biblical book, nor the significance of the maker of a biblical book (see John van Seters, *The Edited Bible* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006]). An editor, at least in the modern sense, is a person in charge of the final content of a text, but typically at the level of corrections and suggestions to the author. The individual responsible for the final form of the book of Psalms made a book (an author in his own right), and did so under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The word “editor,” therefore, falls far short of a title fitting for an inspired maker of a biblical book.

¹⁹ Wilson, *Editing*, 182–90. More recently, Michael Snearly has argued that Ps 145:21 shares key terminology with the other doxologies and should also be understood as the doxology of Book V. Michael Snearly, *Return of the King*, 164–68.

to everlasting. Amen and amen. (41:13)	May His glorious name be praised forever; the whole earth is filled with His glory. Amen and amen. (72:18–19)	Amen and amen. (89:52)	everlasting. Let all the people say, “Amen!” Hallelujah! (106:48)	living thing praise His holy name forever and ever. (145:21)
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Thus, one can understand the macrostructure of the book of Psalms as follows:

[Psalms 1–2](#): Introduction to the book of Psalms

[Psalms 3–41](#): Book I

[Psalms 42–72](#): Book II

[Psalms 73–89](#): Book III

[Psalms 90–106](#): Book IV

[Psalms 107–145](#): Book V

[Psalms 146–150](#): Conclusion to the book of Psalms²²

A crucial aspect of identifying these doxologies at the ends of the five books means that the fivefold structure is, by implication, inspired, since their function is not to mark the end of each of the individual psalms, but rather to signal the ends of the five books.²³ These doxologies have a function and meaning beyond the individual psalms where they are located that extends to the composition of the entire book.

2. *Superscriptions Are Strategic*

Second, Wilson showed how the superscriptions strategically link groups of psalms together within each of the five books of the Psalter, soften the transitions between groups of psalms, and mark major transitions between each of the five books of the Psalter.²⁴ In other words, the

²² See also, David M. Howard Jr., “[Divine and Human Kingship as Organizing Motifs in the Psalter](#),” in *The Psalms: Language for All Seasons of the Soul*, ed. Andrew J. Schmutzer and David M. Howard Jr. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013), 199.

²³ All ancient manuscripts and translations include the doxologies.

²⁴ “For Books One through Three of the Psalter ([Pss 3–89](#)) the primary organizational concern is

superscriptions bind individual psalms into a larger literary framework and provide shape to the book as a whole. Each psalm finds its place within a larger matrix of psalms whose superscriptions share catchwords and phrases linking each together. That the Psalter was intentionally organized by means of doxologies and superscriptions further suggests the canonical arrangement of the Psalter must be factored into the interpretation of the individual psalms. Each psalm has an inspired literary context.

3. *The Uniqueness of Psalms 1–2*

Third, Wilson (and others) showed that Pss 1–2 stand apart from the body of Book I (Pss 3–42), given their lack of superscriptions, and as such, introduce the major themes of the Psalter as a whole.²⁵ According to David Howard Jr., the following themes are introduced in Pss 1–2 and may be traced throughout the Psalter.²⁶

1. The way of the righteous vs. the way of the wicked
2. The importance of God’s word
3. God as Sovereign King over all the nations

apparently authorship” (Wilson, *Editing*, 155). While authorship in the superscriptions links psalms together within the books of Psalms, there is a shift in authorship at the seams of the major divisions of the first four books of the Psalter (Books I–IV). From David at the end of Book I (Ps 41:1) to the sons of Korah at the beginning of Book II (42:1); from Solomon at the end of Book II (72:1) to Asaph at the beginning of Book III (73:1); from Ethan at the end of Book III (89:1) to Moses at the beginning of Book IV (90:1) (Wilson, *Editing*, 157).

²⁵ Though Wilson explicitly treats Ps 1 as the introduction to the Psalter, he implicitly treats Ps 2 as part of the introduction when he notes the absence of its superscription in Books I–III (Wilson, *Editing*, 155, 173). For a thorough treatment of the function of Pss 1–2 in the Psalter, see Robert L. Cole, *Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2013).

²⁶ David M. Howard Jr., “Divine and Human Kingship as Organizing Motifs in the Psalter,” in *The Psalms: Language for All Seasons of the Soul*, eds. Andrew J. Schmutzer and David M. Howard Jr. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013), 202–203; see also Robert L. Cole, *Gateway to the Psalter*, Hebrew Monographs 37, ed. David J. A. Clines, J. Cheryl Exum, and Keith W. Whitlam (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013).

4. David as God’s anointed king, his vice-regent

Crucial to note is the importance of the Davidic king with reference to God’s purpose for Israel and the nations in the introduction to the Psalter. Though God’s vice-regent sits in Zion (2:6), God intends this king’s rule to extend to the ends of the earth (2:8).

In addition to Wilson’s evidence in support of a unified and strategic arrangement of the Psalter (as outlined in the three points above), further substantiation comes in the presence of concatenation, inclusios, and observable patterns of key words.

4. Concatenation—Literary Linking Devices

Concatenation²⁷ by means of unique words and phrases is a common phenomenon throughout the Psalter.²⁸ Throughout the Psalter, juxtaposing psalms frequently share unique words and phrases, binding the psalms together. For example, David is introduced as the “servant of the Lord” for the first time in the Psalter in Ps 18. In Ps 19, the juxtaposing psalm, David calls himself servant two times (Ps 19:11, 13). In Ps 1, the blessed man “meditates” (Hebrew verb *hagah*) in the Lord’s instruction (v. 2), and in Ps 2:1, the peoples “plot (literally, meditate) in vain.”²⁹ In Ps 3:5, David says he “will lie down and sleep.” In Ps

²⁷ Todd J. Murphy, *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of Biblical Hebrew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 47, defines concatenation as the “joining of a group of immediate constituents into a chain, such as a construct relationship . . .” See also Mark D. Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook*, Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis, ed. David M. Howard Jr. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 231.

²⁸ See Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter*, 46. Chakham, *The Book of Psalms*, 36, “ ‘There is no early and late’ in the psalms of the book of Psalms. The sages already highlighted (in *M. Ber.* 10a) that ‘a psalm of David when he fled from Absalom his son’ (Ps 3) brings up an event that was later than the time of an event that is mentioned in ‘For the choir director: “Do Not Destroy.” A *Miktam* of David when he fled before Saul into the cave’ (Ps 57). The conclusion from this observation is that the psalms of the Psalter are not arranged according to the chronological order of the events mentioned in them, but by allusions and common topics in the juxtaposing psalms” (author’s translation of the Hebrew).

²⁹ The word “plot” in the HCSB is the same word used for “meditate” in Ps 1:2. The same word does not

4:8, David says he “will both lie down and sleep in peace.” The verbs “lie down” and “sleep” are used together only these two times in the entire Psalter. [Psalms 3:2](#) and [4:6](#) both share the phrase “many are saying,” a phrase found only in these two places in the entire Bible.

Likewise, the juxtaposing psalms have been carefully situated within a matrix of questions and answers, intentions and fulfillments, *etc.* For example, [Ps 106:47](#) ends with a request that “Yahweh our God ... gather us from the nations, so that we may give thanks to Your holy name ...” [Psalm 107:1–3](#) fittingly begins with the psalmist “giv[ing] thanks to the LORD [Yahweh]” who “has gathered them from the lands.” [Psalm 7:17](#) ends with David’s intention to “thank the Lord” and to “sing about the name of Yahweh the Most High.” [Psalm 8](#) is a song³⁰ dedicated to magnifying the name of Yahweh (see [Ps 8:1](#)). [Psalm 89](#) ends Book III of the Psalter with an agonizing question about the timing of the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant ([Ps 89:46](#)). Fittingly, Book IV begins with a psalm all about time in the divine economy ([Ps 90:4](#)). More evidence can be multiplied exponentially, but for the purposes of this article, it is worth noting that the concatenation of juxtaposing psalms is extensive, and once again strongly suggests that meaning crosses the boundaries of individual psalms. The individual psalms do in fact have an inspired, canonical context that must be factored into interpretation.

5. *Inclusios—Literary Framing Devices*

Literary inclusios³¹ are also used throughout the Psalter to bind groups of psalms together, at both the micro- as well as the macro-compositional level. For instance, the introduction of the first psalm and the end of the second are framed by the phrase “happy is/are.” Both psalms also end with the phrase “perish” and “way” (Ps 1:6; 2:12).✎ The framing of these two

appear again in the Psalter until [Ps 35:28](#) where the HCSB translates it “proclaim.”

³⁰ The word used for “psalm” in the superscription of [Ps 8](#) comes from the same Hebrew root of the word used for “sing” in [Ps 7:17](#).

³¹ Murphy, *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of Biblical Hebrew*, 90, defines an inclusio as a “literary construction in which the discourse boundaries are marked off by a similar word, clause or phrase.” See also Mark D. Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 32, 232. For example, [Ps 8](#) begins and ends with the same phrase, “Yahweh, our Lord, how magnificent is Your name throughout the earth! (8:1, 9). An inclusio is used to mark literary boundaries for texts of various levels, from the smallest (*i.e.* for a single literary unity like [Ps 8](#)) to the largest (*i.e.* a literary frame around an entire book).

untitled psalms binds the two into a unified introduction to the Psalter. [Psalm 1](#), at the beginning of Book I, opens with the word “happy.” This word appears again as the first word of the last psalm of Book I ([41:1](#)). The verb form of “happy” (*ashar*—to call blessed or happy) appears only twice in the Psalter, once in the beginning of the final psalm in Book I (Heb. [41:3](#); Eng. [41:2](#)) and again near the end of the final psalm in Book II just before the doxology ([72:17](#), “call him blessed”). The author of the Psalter has arranged the first two books of the Psalter by means of “happy” inclusios. Fittingly, a verse at the end of Book II marks the special unity of Books I ([1–41](#)) and II ([42–72](#)): “The prayers of David son of Jesse are concluded” (Ps [72:20](#)). Inclusios are also used to arrange Book IV (Pss [90–106](#)). Book IV begins and ends with references to Moses (Pss [90:1](#); [106:16, 23, 32](#)). Moses in fact is a key figure in Book IV of the Psalter, yet mentioned only one other time elsewhere in the Psalter ([90:1](#); [99:6](#); [103:7](#); [105:26](#); [106:16, 23, 32](#); see [77:20](#)). One other significant example will suffice. The Psalter begins and ends with a cluster of words and phrases that are found only in Pss [2](#) and [149](#).

Why do the *nations* rebel and the *peoples* plot in vain?... “Let us tear off their *chains* and free ourselves from their *restraints*.” ... “... You will break them with a rod of *iron*; You will shatter them like pottery. So now, *kings*, be wise; receive instruction, you *judges* of the earth. (Ps [2:1, 3, 9–10](#))

... inflicting vengeance on the *nations* and punishment on the *peoples*, *binding* their *kings* with *chains* and their dignitaries with *iron shackles*, carrying out the *judgment* decreed against them. This honor is for all His godly people. Hallelujah! (Ps [149:7–9](#))

This inclusio demonstrates the careful arrangement, not only of juxtaposing psalms, but also of the entire composition.

6. *The Prominence and Absence of Key Words as an Indicator*

Certain words that are prominent in some books are absent in others. For instance, “Selah,” a word frequently used in Books I–III (67 times), is completely absent in Book IV, and used only four times in Book V ([140:4, 6, 9](#); [143:6](#)). “Hallelujah” is found almost exclusively in Book V. It appears 24 times in the Psalter, four times in Book IV (Pss [104:35](#); [105:45–106:1](#); [106:48](#)) and 20 times in Book V (Pss [111:1](#); [112:1](#); [113:1, 9](#); [115:18](#); [116:19](#); [117:2](#); [135:1, 21](#); [146:1, 10](#); [147:1](#); [147:20–148:1](#); [148:14–149:1](#); [149:9–150:1](#); [150:6](#)).

Additionally, personal names are used to provide careful order to the Psalter. The name “David” is used extensively in Books I–III and V (89 times), yet appears only twice in the superscriptions of Book IV (Pss 101; 103). “Moses” is a key name in Book IV (7 times), yet found only one other time in the rest of the Psalter (Ps 77:20). Finally, the divine names are used quite consistently to organize each of the books. A search of every psalm that uses the name Yahweh and excludes the name Elohim (God), and conversely, every psalm that uses the name Elohim and excludes the name Yahweh reveals a remarkably consistent pattern across the Psalter. Only in Books I, IV, and V do whole psalms refer to Yahweh and not Elohim. Likewise, only in Books II and III do psalms refer to Elohim and not to Yahweh.

The evidence in favor of a careful arrangement of the Psalter is compelling. Doxologies, superscriptions, concatenation, inclusios, key words, and personal names have all been meticulously and strategically employed to bind the individual psalms into a single, carefully composed work of literature.³² Contrary to the opinion that the canonical order and the superscriptions are irrelevant to interpretation of the individual psalms, the book of Psalms is not merely a collection but truly a book, and should be interpreted as such.

EVIDENCE FOR THE PROPHETIC NATURE OF THE PSALMS

Not only is the Psalter demonstrably a book rather than a random selection of songs, but it is a prophetic book with a message to convey.

1. *The Authors Are Recognized Prophets*

Previously, another common assumption about the problematic nature of the theological intentionality of individual psalms was raised. As the argument goes,

[T]he psalms are prayers sung to God; thus they present us with the words of the congregation addressed to God, rather than the Word of God addressed to the people of Israel. How, then, is it possible to speak of the theological concerns of the Psalter?³³

³² Another line of evidence in favor of a purposeful arrangement of the Psalter is its movement from lamentation to praise in the macrostructure of the book (see Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1981], 257–58; Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 80).

³³ Dillard and Longman, *Introduction to the OT*, 227. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical

The problem with this assumption is that it completely ignores the OT's testimony about the individual authors who are mentioned in the Psalter's superscriptions. Several authors are named in the superscriptions of the Psalter including David, Moses, Asaph, the Sons of Korah, and Solomon. Several of the musicians accredited with prophecy in 1Chr 25:1–4 are referred to in the superscriptions of the psalms: Asaph (Pss 50; 73; 74; 75; 76; 77; 78; 79; 80; 81; 82; 83); Heman (Ps 88); Jeduthun (Pss 39; 62; 77). Second Chronicles 29:30 identifies Asaph as a seer (a prophet).³⁴ Moses, mentioned in the superscription of Ps 90, is certainly the greatest of all OT prophets (Nm 12:6–8; Dt 34:10). The superscriptions give the distinct impression that, beyond their importance for organizing the book of Psalms as a whole, they also serve to identify the contents of the psalms with the inspired words of the prophets. One unfortunate consequence of the critical rejection of the authenticity and canonicity of the superscriptions is a broken connection between the psalms and their prophetic authors.

2. *Music Is a Recognized Partner to Prophecy*

David, who is mentioned in the great majority of the superscriptions,³⁵ is noted in Scripture Commentary 19 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 39, shares a similar perspective when he writes, Within the OT as a whole, the biblical literature may be divided loosely into two categories. First, there is that which purports to be God's direct revelation to mankind (specifically to Israel) through the medium of the prophet; for example, much of the Law of Moses and the oracles of the prophets fall into this category. Second, there is that literature which purports to be primarily a human creation, though it is created in the religious context and pertains to the relationship between Israel and God, or in some cases to the relationship between Hebrew and Hebrew. The Psalms fall into this second category. With the exception of a few psalms which have a prophetic character, the Book of Psalms as a whole contains Israel's songs and prayers which constitute the response of the chosen people to their revelation from God. (The Book of Psalms is thus recognized as "revelation," or inspired, by virtue of its inclusion in the canon of Holy Scripture, rather than by any internal characteristics specifying God's direct self-revelation in word.)

³⁴ See 2Sm 24:11; Am 7:12; 1Chr 21:9; 25:5; 29:29; 2Chr 9:29; 12:15; 19:2; 29:25, 30; 33:18; 35:15.

³⁵ Pss 3:1; 4:1; 5:1; 6:1; 7:1; 8:1; 9:1; 11:1; 12:1; 13:1; 14:1; 15:1; 16:1; 17:1; 18:1; 19:1; 20:1; 21:1; 22:1; 23:1; 24:1; 25:1; 26:1; 27:1; 28:1; 29:1; 30:1; 31:1; 32:1; 34:1; 35:1; 36:1; 37:1; 38:1; 39:1; 40:1; 41:1; 51:1; 52:1; 53:1; 54:1; 55:1; 56:1; 57:1; 58:1; 59:1; 60:1; 61:1; 62:1; 63:1; 64:1; 65:1; 68:1; 69:1;

for his supernatural gifting as a musician, one whose music could even drive out evil spirits (1Sm 16:18, 23). There is an important connection between music and prophecy in the OT. For instance, Elisha the prophet required the presence of a musician in order to prophesy to king Jehoshaphat (2Kg 3:15). Also, 1Sm 10:5 refers to a group of prophets who prophesy by the accompaniment of various musical instruments. It would be an error to think that because the Psalms are musical in nature that they are not prophetic. The opposite is true. Moreover, Scripture also testifies that David declared his psalms through the Spirit of the Lord (2Sm 23:1–2; see Ac 1:16; 2:30–31). In other words, David, the author of the majority of psalms in the Psalter, is identified as an inspired author with supernatural musical abilities (1Sm 16:23).

Moreover, Scripture also affirms that the Levites whom David appointed to praise the Lord in the temple were also musician-prophets.

David and the officers of the army also set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, who were to prophesy accompanied by lyres, harps, and cymbals. This is the list of the men who performed their service: From Asaph's sons: Zaccur, Joseph, Nethaniah, and Asarelah, sons of Asaph, under Asaph's authority, who prophesied under the authority of the king. From Jeduthun: Jeduthun's sons: Gedaliah, Zeri, Jeshaiiah, Shimei, Hashabiah, and Mattithiah—six—under the authority of their father Jeduthun, prophesying to the accompaniment of lyres, giving thanks and praise to the LORD.... All these sons of Heman, the king's seer, were given by the promises of God to exalt him, for God had given Heman fourteen sons and three daughters.³⁶

Hezekiah stationed the Levites in the LORD's temple with cymbals, harps, and lyres according to the command of David, Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet. For the command was from the LORD through His prophets.... Then King Hezekiah and the officials told the Levites to sing praise to the LORD in the words of David and of Asaph the seer. So they sang praises with rejoicing and bowed down and worshiped.³⁷

The singers, the descendants of Asaph, were at their stations according to the command of David, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun the king's seer. Also, the gatekeepers were at each gate. None of them left their tasks because their Levite brothers had made preparations for them.³⁸

70:1; 86:1; 101:1; 103:1; 108:1; 109:1; 110:1; 122:1; 124:1; 131:1; 133:1; 138:1; 139:1; 140:1; 141:1; 142:1; 143:1; 144:1; 145:1.

³⁶ 1Chr 25:1–3, 5.

³⁷ 2Chr 29:25, 30.

³⁸ 2Chr 35:15.

The OT itself, therefore, testifies of the relationship between the writers of the psalms and prophecy. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the author of the canonical Psalter understood this relationship and regarded the psalms as the word of these prophets. The thoughtful, intentional arrangement of the psalms serves to highlight and expound their meaning, as is the case with all the other prophetic writings in the OT (e.g., Isaiah, Amos, etc.). To understand the prophetic witness of the psalms, therefore, interpreters must pay careful attention to the macro-structural arrangement of the Psalter, rather than treating the book of Psalms as a loose collection of prayers and hymns.

THE BOOK OF PSALMS HAS A STORY TO TELL

Few books of the Bible explicitly state their purpose. A noteworthy exception is the Gospel of John: “But these are written so that you may believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by believing you may have life in His name” (Jn 20:31). Rather, the books of the Bible have been composed with numerous literary clues. Wilson argues that the best place to look for the purpose of the book of Psalms is in those places where the fingerprints of the composer are most clearly evident, namely, in the seam psalms at the end of each of the books, as well as in the introduction to the book of Psalms as a whole.

Without a doubt, the Davidic covenant (Royal Psalms) stands out in all of the psalms at the seams in Books I–III.³⁹ In Wilson’s words, “It has been suggested . . . that to discuss the editorial purpose behind the Psalter arrangement one must begin by looking at the Pss which mark the seams between the books. A brief glance at Pss 2; 41; 72, and 89 reveals an interesting progression in thought regarding kingship and the Davidic covenant.”⁴⁰ Psalms 2 and 72 frame Books I–II with an expectation that God, in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant,⁴¹ will raise up an exalted descendant of David whose reign will extend to the ends of the earth (Ps 2:8; 72:8). A comparison between Ps 72:8 and Zch 9:9–10 makes clear the identity of this

³⁹ Rolf Rendtorf, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 249, writes, “[T]he emphatic position of the royal psalms is of great significance. They conclude subsidiary collections (72; 89) and provide a framework for the first collection (2; 110).” See also Childs, *Introduction*, 515–17.

⁴⁰ Wilson, *Editing*, 209.

⁴¹ Compare Ps 2:7 with 2Sm 7:14; 1Chr 17:13; Isa 9:6–7.

exalted king.

May he rule from sea to sea and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth. (Ps 72:8)

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout in triumph, Daughter Jerusalem! Look, your King is coming to you; He is righteous and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.... He will proclaim peace to the nations. *His dominion will extend from sea to sea, from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth. (Zch 9:9–10)*

[Zechariah 9:10](#) is a nearly verbatim quotation of [Ps 72:8](#), making clear that this king can be none other than King Messiah. Moreover, the final verse of [Ps 72](#) before the doxology makes it clear that God’s purpose through this exalted king is to fulfill His promises to Abraham: “May his name endure forever; as long as the sun shines, may his fame increase. May all nations be blessed by him and call him blessed” ([Ps 72:17](#); compare [Gn 12:2–3](#); [22:18](#)).

Moreover, the exaltation of the Davidic scion on Mount Zion at the seams of Book I–II stands in stark contrast to the numerous laments of the king (see, e.g., [Pss 3–7](#)). These laments, however, are already anticipated in the introduction of the Psalter. If “the wicked will not survive the judgment” and the “way of the wicked leads to ruin” ([Ps 1:5–6](#)), “why do the nations rebel and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers conspire together against the LORD and His Anointed One” (i.e., his Messiah; [Ps 2:1–2](#)). Yes, God will ultimately establish His Son upon Mount Zion ([Ps 2:6](#)), but this will not be without opposition. The lament psalms throughout the Psalter, therefore, may be heard as the cries of God’s persecuted king.

[Psalm 89](#), a seam-psalm marking the end of Book III, marks a significant psalm in the structure of the Psalter. Not only does this psalm explicitly mention God’s faithfulness with respect to the Davidic covenant ([Ps 89:4, 29, 35](#)), it also laments its apparent failure ([Ps 89:39–52](#)). The sinful behavior of David and his sons (see for example, [Ps 51](#)) results in the destruction of the southern kingdom, and with it, the Davidic throne is overthrown ([Ps 89:44](#)). While David is mentioned 65 times in Books I–III, he practically disappears in Book IV ([Ps 101:1](#); [103:1](#)). Though Wilson argued that the purpose of Book IV is to provide an alternative to the failure of the Davidic covenant,⁴² David Alexander Gundersen, in a recent dissertation,

⁴² Wilson, *Editing*, 215, writes, “In my opinion, [Pss 90–106](#) function as the editorial ‘center’ of the final form of the Psalter. As such this grouping stands as the ‘answer’ to the problem posed in [Ps 89](#) as to

vigorously and persuasively argues that Book IV provides the resolution to the problem of the broken Davidic covenant by appealing to God’s merciful dealings with sinful Israel in the wilderness through the mediation of Moses (the key figure in Book IV).⁴³ According to Gundersen, *Pss 90* (a prayer of Moses) and *103* (the second of only two Davidic psalms in Book IV) have a crucial relationship to God’s ongoing purposes through the house of David. It is worth quoting Gundersen at length:

Psalm 103 also alludes to *Exodus 32–34*, so that *Psalms 90* and *103* share a common allusion to the golden calf incident and Yahweh’s subsequent self-revelation. In *Psalm 90*, Israel’s blatant

the apparent failure of the Davidic covenant with which Books One–Three are primarily concerned.”

⁴³ David Alexander Gundersen, “Davidic Hope in Book IV of the Psalter (Psalms 90–106),” Dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015; see also David C. Mitchell, “Lord, Remember David: G. H. Wilson and the Message of the Psalter,” *Vetus Testamentum* 56, no. 4 (2006): 526–48; Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy’s Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms*, SBL Academia Biblica 17 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004); David M. Howard Jr., “The Case for Kingship in the Old Testament Narrative Books and the Psalms,” *Trinity Journal* 9.1 (Mar. 1988): 19–35; *ibid.*, “The Case for Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52.1 (Spring 1990): 101–15; *ibid.*, “The Proto-MT Psalter, the King, and Psalms 1 and 2: A Response to Klaus Seybold,” in S. Gillingham, ed., *Jewish and Christian Approaches to the Psalter: Conflict and Convergence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 182–89; Michael G. McKelvey, *Moses, David and the High Kingship of Yahweh: A Canonical Study of Book IV of the Psalter*, Gorgias Biblical Studies 55 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2014); David C. Mitchell, *The Songs of Ascents: Psalms 120–134 in the Worship of Jerusalem’s Temple* (Newton Mears, Scotland: Campbell Publications, 2015); David Willgren, *Like a Garden of Flowers: A Study of the Formation of the ‘Book’ of Psalms* (Lund: Lund University 2016); Michael K. Snearly, *The Return of the King*; Carissa M. Quinn Richards, “The King and the Kingdom: The Message of Psalms 15–24” (Ph.D., Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015); Mark D. Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook*, Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007); Robert L. Cole, *Psalms 1–2: A Gateway to the Psalter*; Jerome L. Skinner, “The Historical Superscriptions of Davidic Psalms: An Exegetical, Intertextual, and Methodological Analysis” (Ph.D., Andrews University, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 2016). I want to offer a special word of thanks to David Howard Jr. for calling my attention to many of the works referenced in this footnote.

idolatry, Yahweh's burning anger, Moses' desperate intercession, and Yahweh's self-revelation are reimagined once again. [Psalm 103](#), however, picks up only positive elements from the story, while [Psalm 90](#) echoed only negative elements. [Psalm 90](#) repeats themes of sin and iniquity, God's consuming anger, and Moses' pleas that Yahweh turn and relent. But [Psalm 103](#) picks up themes of sin and iniquity being forgiven, Yahweh keeping his covenant, and God proclaiming his steadfast love afresh to his people.⁴⁴

[Psalm 103](#) stands as a magnificent psalm on its own, anywhere in the Psalter, with Davidic titling or without. But its Davidic authorship, its celebration of individual and communal restoration by the mercies of God, and its placement at the height of the Davidic progression in [101–103](#) suggest that [Psalm 103](#) upholds the hope for a king from David's line.⁴⁵

Book IV encourages its readers to look back to a period, long before the establishment of the Davidic dynasty, to realize that God is still king ([Pss 93:1; 95:3; 96:10; 97:1; 98:6; 99:1, 4](#)), and that, in spite of Israel's sin, God "revealed his ways to Moses," and He is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and rich in faithful love" ([Ps 103:7–8](#); see [Ex 34:6](#)). And so [Ps 106](#) takes us through Israel's ongoing history of disobedience, noting that in all this, God "remembered His covenant with them, and relented according to the riches of His faithful love" ([Ps 106:45](#)). The psalmist, therefore, can confidently conclude Book IV with a prayer of faith: "Save us, Yahweh our God, and gather us from the nations, so that we may give thanks to Your holy name and rejoice in Your praise" ([Ps 106:47](#)).

Book V rekindles this hope by noting that God, whose faithful love endures forever ([Ps 107:1](#)), "has gathered them from the lands—from the east and the west, from the north and the south" ([Ps 107:3](#)). [Psalm 126](#) refers to the return of the remnant from the Babylonian exile, thereby providing confidence that God will indeed keep His promises to the house of David. And, as in the earlier books, David (and his Lord) returns once again as the hero of Book V.⁴⁶ In [Ps 110](#), a Davidic descendant sits at God's hand, only to return yet again to take his seat on Mount Zion to rule and reign forever ([Ps 132:11–18](#)). David's dishonored crown ([Ps 89:39](#)) will once again be glorious ([Ps 132:18](#)). The mood of the Psalter, therefore, shifts from

⁴⁴ Gundersen, "Davidic Hope," 235.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁴⁶ [Pss 108:1; 109:1; 110:1; 122:1, 5; 124:1; 131:1; 132:1, 10–11, 17; 133:1; 138:1; 139:1; 140:1; 141:1; 142:1; 143:1; 144:1, 10; 145:1.](#)

mourning (Books I–III) to a growing chorus of praise that embraces Israel and all nations (Pss 146–150).

Before concluding this article, it is essential to discuss the dating of the composition of the canonical Psalter. Given the reference to a return from exile in Pss 107:3 and 126:1, clearly the book of Psalms must have been composed sometime after the return from the Babylonian exile, during the Second Temple period. This being the case, the prominent position of the royal psalms in a book composed long after the house of David was in eclipse means that this exalted king, and the numerous references to David throughout the Psalter, reinforce the sole possibility that the book must be understood as messianic.⁴⁷ For what other reason would the Davidic covenant be celebrated during the Second Temple period? To quote Brevard Childs, “Indeed, at the time of the final redaction, when the institution of kingship had long since been destroyed, what earthly king would have come to mind other than God’s Messiah?”⁴⁸

Finally, it is essential to deal with one common objection to the claim that the psalms are directly messianic. As the argument goes, some psalms, such as Ps 69, cannot be directly messianic because of the confession of guilt and sin that is altogether inappropriate for the sinless Messiah.⁴⁹ David says in Ps 69:5 [MT 69:6], “God, You know my foolishness, and my guilty acts are not hidden from You.” Yet the NT authors frequently allude to and cite Ps 69 as a Messianic prophecy that was fulfilled in Jesus (see Mt 27:34, 38; Mk 15:36; Lk 23:36; Jn 2:17; 15:25; 19:28; Rom 15:3; see also Ac 1:20). Though the NT authors did not regard v. 5 as a disqualification of their messianic interpretation, it is necessary to provide an explanation of this verse, and others like it (see also Ps 40:12 [MT 13]), to defend the messianic message of the individual psalms as well as the book of Psalms as a whole.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Mitchell, “Lord, Remember David”: 529; *ibid.*, *The Message of the Psalter*, 82–83.

⁴⁸ Childs, *Introduction*, 516.

⁴⁹ See Tremper Longman III, Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 262.

⁵⁰ Some have explained these confessions by identifying David as a type, one who did not understand that he was writing about the Messiah but is identified as a type in the NT (e.g. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms*, [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969], 501). Others see the confessions in the Psalms as the vicarious confessions of the Messiah, taking the sins of others upon Himself (E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament*, [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1970], 92. Bruce Waltke, who understands the

Accordingly, to reject the messianism of these psalms on the basis of the confessions of sinfulness on the part of the psalmist fails to consider other analogies of comparison between the biblical figures and the Messiah in the Hebrew Bible—and it also misses the purpose of these confessions in the plot of the book of Psalms as a whole.

First, consider another crucial Messianic analogy in the Pentateuch. In [Dt 18:15](#), Moses predicts the coming of a prophet like him: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers . . .” (cf. [34:10](#); also cf. [Nm 23:21–22](#) with [24:7–8](#)). When Moses promises that God will raise up a prophet like him, he obviously does not mean in every way, since there are several examples of Moses’ moral and spiritual failures in the Pentateuch (e.g., [Nm 20:12](#)). The promise of a prophet like Moses, rather, focuses specifically on Moses’ unique role in God’s redemptive program. Thus, in the context of Isaiah’s “New Exodus” ([Isa 40–55](#)), there is the promise of a future redeemer who will be like Moses ([Isa 42:1–4](#); [49:1–6](#); [50:4–9](#); [52:13–53:12](#)), but obviously not with respect to Moses’ sin.⁵¹

When considering God’s promise to David in [2Sm 7:11–16](#) in light of the larger Davidic narrative in 1 and 2Sm, David is revealed as an ideal king, but an imperfect one at that. In one sense, the author presents David as an example of a man after God’s own heart, and a mighty warrior on Israel’s behalf. At the same time, David’s moral failure with Bathsheba comes to signify the beginning of a long history of the failures of David and his royal line, failures ultimately leading to the Babylonian exile. Obviously, the author of 1 and 2Sm considers David as a figure or pattern of the coming Messiah, but not in every way. Moreover, God’s promise to establish an eternal throne ([2Sm 7:16](#)) creates the need for a Davidic descendant who will not be like David. Rather, he must be someone far greater than David.

final form of the book of Psalms as messianic, merely dismisses these confessions as “the historical eggshells from the preexilic period when the psalms were used for Israel’s less than ideal kings” (Bruce K. Waltke, “A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms,” *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. John S. and Paul D. Feinberg [Chicago: Moody Press, 1981], 16).

⁵¹ On the relationship of Isaiah’s Servant Songs with the prophet like Moses, see G. P.

Hugenberger, “The Servant of the Lord in the ‘Servant Songs’ of Isaiah: A Second Moses Figure,” in *The Lord’s Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess, G. J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995): 105–40.

This tension between the ideal king (Pss 2; 72) and the historical David with all his failures (Pss 32; 51) is felt throughout the story line of the Psalter. In fact, Ps 89 represents the major crisis in the story line, wherein David's throne and crown are cast into the dust, leading the psalmist to struggle in anguish over the timing of God's faithful promises (Ps 89:5, 29, 34 [MT 5, 30, 35]) to a faithless line (Ps 89:46 [MT 47]). The problem of the sinfulness of David's house finally finds resolution in Book IV (Ps 103:1–5), and with this resolution, there is a renewed focus on the coming of the ideal Messianic King in Book V of the Psalter (Pss 110; 132).

So, what to do with the verses describing David's confessions of guilt? In the book of Psalms, they are to be understood as a persistent reminder of the coming of a future King who will be like David, but not in every way since the author of the Psalter presents the real David, warts and all.⁵² David's confessions reveal the guilt of a man who imperfectly symbolizes the coming King who will be far greater and without sin. In fact, this coming King is so great that David calls him Lord (Ps 110:1).

CONCLUSION: THE BOOK OF PSALMS HAS A MESSIANIC MESSAGE TO TELL

Many modern readers struggle to see the messianic message of the book of Psalms. This article has attempted to show that this struggle is rooted in the so-called higher criticism of the 20th century, a criticism that literally removed or minimized all the compositionally inspired stitches (superscriptions, doxologies) holding the Psalter together as a unified book with a unified message, as well as the canonical superscriptions identifying the authors as inspired prophets. Though modern proponents of the grammatical-historical method of interpretation tend to look down upon the pre-critical reading of the Psalter, and have found the NT's use of the Psalms creative and eisegetical, this study has shown the opposite. It is the modern critical reading of the Psalter that has been measured in the balance and been found wanting. The NT authors have correctly received the individual psalms and the book of Psalms as a whole as a witness to the sufferings of the Messiah and His glories to follow. David's laments, voiced

⁵² *The Moody Bible Commentary*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 816, calls these confessions “ ‘symbolic realism’ in which the real David becomes a symbol of the Messiah. Hence, David used his own flawed experiences as the symbol of the Messiah and therefore included his own confession of guilt.”

through God's inspired prophets, predict Messiah's sufferings (e.g., Pss 22; 69). David's Lord sitting at the right hand of God (Ps 110) is also God's Son whom God will seat upon Mount Zion (Pss 2:6; 132:11–18). God will eventually bind the rebellious kings and dignitaries with iron shackles (Ps 149:6–9), and Israel and all nations will celebrate the victory, such that everything that has breath will join in the triumphal celebrations (Ps 150:6).