

# Introduction to the Psalms as Torah

# History of the Psalms

# Fivefold Division

- From Hippolytus (early 3rd century Christian writer), we learn that the rabbis recognized the fivefold division and considered it based on the five books of Moses, (Grogan, Prayer, 27)

# On the continued usage of Psalms

- “**Every community, if it is not to disintegrate, must engage in such on-going symbolization and re-symbolization**”. (Brueggemann, “Response to James L. Mays, ‘The Question of Context,’” 31)
- Thus the **Psalms have been repurposed** throughout the years to fit the needs of the community
- The **study of the meaning of a text should begin with its use**, not with the sources from which it drew (Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith*, 23)
- The psalmist, **by using a traditional pattern** of speaking to God, could be **assured that his prayer** would be presented in form **acceptable to God** (Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith*, 24)

# About the Psalms

# Psalms as a Response

- The book of Psalms is responsive, subjective and poetic (Grogan, Prayer, 10)
- When the psalmist says God has forsaken him, is he penning **objective truth?** Or is this an emotional response the author is relaying? (Grogan, Prayer, 12-13)
- When saving acts happened to Israel, she did not keep silent... (Kraus, Theology, 11)  
She responded to her patron by giving honor/praise/glory
- “Some of the most theologically significant literature in Israel appears in poetic form (e.g. the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15).” (Grogan, Prayer,

# Poetic Form

- Most distinctive feature of poetic form is ***parallelism***:
  - **Synonymous parallelism**: lines are similar in meaning.
  - **Antithetical**: lines provide contrast with one another
  - **Synthetic**: the second and any subsequent lines supplement or compliment the first. (Grogan, *Prayer*, 56)
- On ambiguous terms: “My contention is that sometimes, maybe more often than we think, **a word, phrase, or sentence could be understood in two (or more) ways because both were intended**” (Rabbe, *Psalm Structures: A Study of psalms with Refrains*, Sheffield: JSOT, 1990: 213)

# General

- **The Psalms are realistic:** There is **conflict**, there are enemies, God's action or inaction is a cause for **concern**. Laments **complain** about God's rule yet are expectant of His response.
- While we know that the Psalms were the **“hymn book” of the second Temple**, “the hymnbook analogy ignores the fact that, in the final analysis, the **canonical Psalter has become a book to be read and meditated upon (Psalm 1)**, rather than music to be sung”  
(Wilson, “Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalms,” 72)
- other temples in the ancient Near East had singers attached to them

(Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, Vol 2, 80).

# Religion and the Psalm

- **“The Psalms protect us against the ‘primordial threat to man’ - religion...**In religion Israel would no longer be standing before Yahweh, but in a sphere of cultic and ritual mechanisms for making adaptations and producing results, in a world of autonomous experiences...the theology of the Psalms involves a constant effort to remain **true to its subject matter - God and Israel, God and the person in Israel, in their encounter and fellowship**, established by God and brought to realization by God” (Kraus, *Theology*, 14) ▪
- Yet they provide us with an important window into OT theology & ethics

Kingship of YHWH

# Kingship in the Psalms

- The **Davidic kingship is especially prominent in Books I-III**; it gives way to an emphasis in **Books IV-V on YHWH's kingship**. As Israel's history progressed, the eschatological aspect of its king and kingdom became more clearly understood. Israel's kingdom was a symbol of God's reign on earth; its king was God's vice-regent (Howard, "The Case for

# The Enthronement of YHWH

- The above-mentioned group of psalms (**Pss. 47, 93, 95–100**) thus depict the enthronement of Yahweh. This event contains the **same elements as the enthronement of an earthly king**. There are differences, however. For instance, Yahweh is not anointed—naturally enough, since as **Yahweh in no way submits himself to the priests**. Furthermore there are some elements in the description of the enthronement of Yahweh that are not known from the enthronement ceremony of an earthly king.

# Divine Kinship - God as king

- ***YHWH malak*** means more an activity than an office. It is the pattern of ordering chaos to bring forth cosmos and world. **It is intervening in human disorder by judgment and deliverance.**
- “All the topics and functions of Psalmic language fit into this collateral **pattern of active sovereignty**. The ***people of God***, the ***place God chooses*** to preempt in the world, the ***Messiah as earthly regent***, and the ***law of God*** are the principle topics. The ***prayers are pleas*** and ***thanksgivings of God’s*** servants to their sovereign, the ***hymns are praise*** of God’s sovereignty, and the ***instructional psalms*** teach how to live in the reign of God.”
- **Psa 2 as an introduction to the Psalms in order to emphasize the kingship of God as a major theme of the whole Psalter.** (Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 516).

# Divine Kinship - Creator/Redeemer

- **Ps 147:2-3 (redeemer of Israel), verse 4 (creator)**
- “Creation is not, however, only about power, but also about order”  
(Grogan, Prayer, 78)
- **Ps 19A (1-6) deals with creation and Ps 19B (7-14) deals with *Torah*.** Thus the connection between YHWH creating and YHWH giving the Torah is established...Torah is given to restore the order (life) of creation!  
(McCann, Theological Introduction, 28-30)

# Divine Kinship - Covenant

- **Frequency of *hesed* in the psalms (>120x)**
- “It is true that there are relatively **few psalms (only twelve) which explicitly reflect on God’s covenant with his people...** Nonetheless, we can’t ignore the fact that the **psalmists speak out of the context of covenant.** These are people who speak to God and about God on the basis of being in a covenant relationship with him. Thus, covenant is a concept which ties together many strands of the theology of the Psalms.”

InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1998, 57.)

(Longman, T., *How to Read the Psalms*,

# Divine Kinship - Torah

- 2 ways: The righteous and the wicked
- “in Israel the Torah instruction was not characterized by strict and stern demand for obedience, but that **the people praised it as a demonstration of the grace of Israel’s God, who honored his people by imparting to them his commands that bring life and wholeness.**” (Kraus, *Theology*, 35)

# Divine Kinship - Messiah

- **Messiah as Divine regent**
- **The Wisdom of the King**
  - Connection with Solomon's "wisdom"
  - "No psalm is more like Proverbs than 37"

# Divine Kinship - Feasts

- **Festivals**

- Celebrations of kingship
- Two large collections of psalms which were sung at the Pilgrim Feasts, the Egyptian Hallel (113-118), sung especially at the Passover, and the Songs of Ascents (120-134)

# Divine Kinship - Protection

- God rescues those who cry out to him.
- “The ultimate mark of God’s rule is not some ontological principle but the **social certitude of Yahweh’s solidarity with the poor**” (Brueggemann, Message, 44)
- But he always remains the very close, concrete, and personal God of the people, **ready to help and to liberate, even when he is dwelling in heaven or, by chance, “at sleep”** (Ps 44:24–27 [RSV 23–26]). Alas, **he will never “slumber nor sleep” (Ps 121:4)**, a phrase proving that **contradictions are natural to any true** (i.e., realistic) theology. (Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part 1*, 36)

# Divine Kinship - Judge

- Ps. 98:7-9
- “The belief that God is the ultimate and faithful judge who is determined to establish ***mishpat* in society is a source of constant joy in the Old Testament. No evil-doers are too strong to oppose him. No one can deceive him nor blur his judgement by bribery.** He will champion the cause of the poor and needy. His justice is perfect, his judgments all-wise. For the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the immigrant, **the God who is judge is in a real sense the God who is their deliverer.**”
- cf. Weinfeld, *Social Justice...*

# An Audience with the King

- “Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God is not an impersonal force, but a person with whom one can speak.” (Levine, *Sing Unto God*, 79)
- “When one views prayer as **petition, thanksgiving, praise, and affirmation of devotion, counterparts in courtly routine and protocol suggest themselves**” (Tigay, “Prayer in the Bible”, 365-366).
- The Psalms parallels of **ANE royal language of petitioners** to the king and its parallels to the prayers in the Psalms.

# The Lament

Petition to the King

# Function of the Lament

- “Many lament psalms might better be called psalms of complaint, for in them **the psalmist complains to God that he has not been active for his people, that he is apparently not listening to their prayer, or even that he seems to be forgetting his word of promise**”  
(Grogan, Prayer, 75)
- Is this subjective or objective?

# Function of the Lament

- “A lament psalm is not lamentation. It does more than simply bemoan current hardship. **It seeks change...They contain not merely a cry for help but also a statement of the wrongs suffered.** Moreover, the lament functions not simply to report an incident to Yahweh or to achieve catharsis for the psalmist, but to motivate Yahweh to act on the psalmist’s behalf, usually by making the description evocative and provocative. Thus, it joins with the petition to establish an appeal. **A lament psalm is primarily an appeal.**”
- Craig C. Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms: A Form-Critical and Theological Study*, vol. 52, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 14.

# The Lament as Judicial Process

- **A number of individual laments arise out of language and activity of a sacral judicial procedure in the sanctuary in which one who claimed to be falsely accused prayed to God** against his or her enemies (accusers) and received from the priests the verdict of God, which if favorable then elicited a further prayer of thanksgiving (ex: 3, 4, 5, 7, 17, 26, 27, 54, 55, & 69)...however, a number of laments cry out not for divine justice but for deliverance from sickness and misery (Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 5)

# Sin or Suffering

- “Most psalms either **do not identify the plight of the lamenter with sin** or at least are ambiguous on that score...The focus has been on Jesus’ work of salvation’s having to do with the forgiveness of sins rather than ending human suffering, even though the Gospels offer the **OT lament, especially Psalm 22, as a reference point for understanding the Passion of Jesus, that is, his identification with the suffering who cry out in the laments**” (Miller, *Interpreting*, 10)

# Form of the Lament

- First, invocation of the divine name, often with an introductory plea for hearing and answering.
- Next, the occasion for the psalm: the problem at hand
- Next, the petition, which reveals the purpose - usually for Yahweh to answer - removal of suffering or distress
- Finally, motivation to give reason for Yahweh to answer. Either as a response to the worshiper's trust or also for the sake of Yahweh's honor.

# Giving God a Reason to Respond

- **In the Torah, people are not simply told to obey.** They are not coerced. **They are persuaded**, by negative and positive means, by **explanation and appeal to compassion, by rational arguments and common sense.** A similar rhetoric governs the prayers of the Psalter as those who cry out, individually or communally, constantly set before the deity reasons why God should respond to their cries.

(Miller, "Deuteronomy and Psalms", 9-10)

- In the Psalms, the plea is often voiced that the God of Israel save **“for his name’s sake”**...**The concern here is for the honor**, the majesty of the name of Yahweh as a demonstration of help and deliverance

(Kraus, *Theology*, 20-21)

# The Lament as Disorientation

- **“The lament psalm is a painful, anguished articulation of a move into disarray and dislocation.** The lament is candid, even if unwilling, embrace of a new situation of **chaos**, now devoid of the coherence that marks God’s good creation” (Brueggemann, *Message*, 20)
- In this way, **it is the opposite of creation. It is crying out for new creation - redemption**

# Caution with the Lament

- If we praise a certain type of behavior in our prayers, we are telling God that this is how we intend to behave. On the other hand, **if in prayer we denounce certain acts and pray for God to punish them, we are in effect inviting God to judge us if we do the same.** (Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 57)
- On the other hand, the depiction of the wicked is designed to **deter the user of the psalms from identifying with the wicked.** (Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 60)

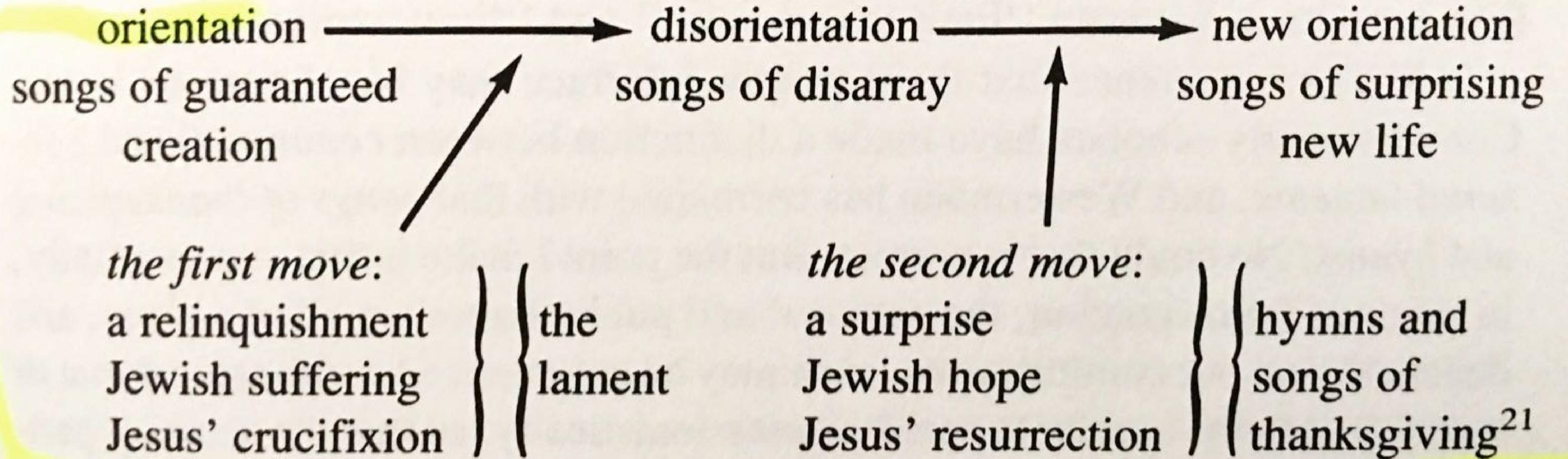
Orientation,  
Disorientation,  
New Orientation

# Description

- Orientation: Human life consists in satisfied *seasons of well-being* that evoke gratitude for the constancy of blessing.
- Disorientation: Human life consists in anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering, and death. These evoke rage, resentment, self-pity, and hatred.
- New Orientation: Human life consists in turns of surprise when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God, when joy breaks through despair. Where there has been only darkness, there is light.

- Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 19

# Cycle of Orientation -> New Orientation



# Orientation

- The Psalms of Orientation fall into the following categories (pp 25-49):
  - **Songs of Creation:** The most foundational experience of orientation is the daily experience of life's regularities, which are experienced as reliable, equitable, and generous (8, 33, 104, 45)
  - **Songs of Torah:** The good order of *creation* is concretely experienced in Israel as the *torah*. The torah is understood not simply as Israelite moral values, but as God's will and purpose, ordained in the very structure of life (1, 15, 24, 119)
  - **Wisdom Psalms:** Wisdom psalms express the well-ordered, reliable world (14, 37)
  - **Songs of Retribution:** Similar to wisdom and torah psalms. The world works so that persons receive consequences of their actions (112)
  - **Occasions of Well-Being:** The experience of the world where everything is ordered and reliable. These psalms reflect and affirm God's goodness in the blessings of creation. (133, 131)

# Disorientation

- **“Life is also savagely marked by disequilibrium, incoherence, and unrelieved asymmetry”** (pg 51)
- Brueggemann suggests that **“serious religious use of the lament psalms has been minimal because we have believed that faith does not mean to acknowledge and embrace negativity...[these psalms] lead us into dangerous acknowledgement of how life really is. They lead us into the presence of God where everything is not polite and civil.”** (52-53)
- The speech thus serves in a remarkable way, both to speak about the collapse of all oriented forms, and **yet to assure that even in the chaos of the moment there is a Yahweh-directed order** (54)

# Disorientation

- **Disorientation** is not viewed as a faceless situation or a passage, but as a ***trouble in the relationship***. When God properly guarantees and when Israel properly responds in ‘trust and obedience,’ life will be well-oriented. (88)
- Like Book III, then, **Book II is shaped to assist the community to face the disorienting experience of exile and dispersion and to reach a reorientation based upon a new understanding of the old grounds for hope** (McCann, “Books I-III and the Editorial Purpose of the Hebrew Psalter,” 103)

# Form of Disorientation

- **Plea**: God should correct a skewed situation (54-55)
  - Address to God
  - Complaint (how desperate the situation is)
  - Petition for God's action
  - Motivation: (innocence, guilty but seeking forgiveness, speaker is valued by God, appeal to God's own honor/reputation) - Note there is no claim of obedience as motivation
  - Imprecation (voice of resentment and vengeance until God retaliates against the evil doers)

# Form of Disorientation

- **Praise**: Something has changed and surprisingly there is now a move from plea to praise (56)
  - Assurance of being heard - Conviction of petition being heard
  - Payment of vows - speaker has not forgotten his/her vows
  - Doxology and praise -

# New Orientation

- the Psalms regularly bear witness to the **surprising gift of new life just when none had been expected**...the speaker and the community of faith are often surprised by **grace**, when there emerges in present life a new possibility that is inexplicable, neither derived nor extrapolated, but **wrought by the inscrutable power and goodness of God** (124)
- **Depending on how a psalm is used** it can articulate *surprising new grace or the endurance of God's graciousness*. (Goldingay, "The Dynamic Cycle of Praise and Prayer in the Psalms", JSOT 20 (1981)  
85-90) Thus, its canonical positioning matters!

# New Orientation

- The Psalms of New Orientation fall into the following categories (pp 125-xx):
  - **Thanksgiving Songs** - Giving thanks after God's response to a lament/complaint (30, 40, 138, 34).
  - **Thanksgiving Songs of the Community** - Celebrating the act of God's power that has moved Israel's life out of a time of disorientation (65, 66, 124)
  - **The Once and Future King** - Give public articulation to the "new kingship" of Yahweh, which has just now been established. Kinship is granted to Yahweh on the basis of the victory just won (114, 29, 96, 93, 97, 99, 47, .
    - These use mythic vocabulary and patterns of presentation which belong to the Near Eastern genre of victory song

# Canonical Editing

# Scholarly Consensus

- 1. It was generally agreed that the Psalter is **not a random collection of psalms** but was designed to constitute, in some sense, a **coherent book**.
- 2. It was agreed that the Psalms, most of which were **originally cultic**—that is, composed for use in various kinds of **public worship**—were **given a new interpretation in the post-exilic period**. Evidence of this is to be found inter alia in the addition of superscriptions to many psalms, the inclusion in the book of psalms that do not appear to have originated in the cult, and the significant placing of Psalm 1.
- 3. **While the Jerusalem temple continued to function, the new understanding of the Psalter was not necessarily opposed to the traditional cultic usage**, but was intended to offer an alternative way of using the Psalms in the new circumstances of the post-exilic period.
  - Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book*, 30-31

# Scholarly Consensus

- 4. The **positioning of certain psalms (other than Ps. 1) is crucial** for the study of the structure and theological meaning of the Psalter.
- 5. There is evidence that **some pairs and small groups of psalms** were formed by the redactors in order to further the new interpretation.
- 6. **Groups of psalms already formed at an earlier time** were retained by the final redactors.
- 7. The psalms, most of which were expressions of prayer, came to be **regarded as a source of instruction or an aid to theological reflection** (God's word to humanity).

# Structure

- Book 1: 1-41
- Book 2: 42-72
- Book 3: 73-89
- Book 4: 90-106
- Book 5: 107-150

# Reason for the 5 Books of Psalms

- The attempts to connect the Psalms with the triennial Torah reading cycle do not stand up to scrutiny (Wilson, *Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 200-201)

# Eschatology Aspect of the Editing

- The Psalms are purposefully arranged and this sequence is intended to present eschatological events. Yet, **when the Psalter was redacted, the house of David was in eclipse. The redactor must therefore have meant these psalms to refer to a Davidic scion not yet come, if he did not want simply to highlight the failure of the Davidic covenant** (Mitchell, D.C., “Lord, Remember David”, 528)

# Psalms 1 & 2 as an Introduction

- “[Psa 1] as a heading to the whole Psalter the blessing now includes the faithful meditation on the sacred writings which follow.” (Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 513). **This shifts the focus to meditation on the psalms rather than cultic performance.**
- Meditation on the Law - Look up the verb for “meditate”
- The **repetition of “blessed” or “happy” (*ashrey*) at the beginning of Ps 1 and end of Ps 2 is *inclusio* or envelope-structure** frequent in the Psalms and indicates that the two psalms are meant to be read as a literary unit (McCann, *Theological Introduction*, 41)

# Ps 1 & 2

- Ps 1 & 2 are a literary unit and serve to introduce the entire psalms as being **focused on the kingship of YHWH (Ps 2) and the instructions of the King (Ps 1)**
- “The real issue in Ps 2 is this: **Who rules the world?** Is it the kings and rulers of the nations and peoples (vv. 1-2)? Or is it the Lord (vv. 10-12)? For Psalm 2, the answer is clear: **The Lord reigns!**” This is even true if through YHWH’s regent, the “anointed one”, a son.

# Psalms 1 & 2 as an Introduction

- **[By introducing the two ways in Ps 1], The Psalter comes to be seen as a magnificent dramatic struggle between the two ways**—that of Yahweh, his anointed king, and the company of the just, and that of the wicked, the sinners, the evil-doers. (Brennan, 'Psalms 1-8', 29)
  - **These two categories of people dominate the psalms.**
- **The profane nations and rulers in Ps. 2** are identified with those who walk in the way of sinners and the wicked in Ps. 1. **It is the divine king (David and his eschatological descendant, the Messiah) who walk in the way of the righteous.** Thus the Psalter has gained the use as a source of Wisdom reflection and a model of prayers based on such a pious interpretation of the Torah (Sheppard, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct*, 142).

# The Drama of the Psalms

- The **Psalms is a drama** with a narrative which runs the entire corpus of 150 prayer-poems, connecting them all into a single drama. The story involves a **conflict between protagonist and opposing figure, which can only be resolved by the third major character, God**. Like Job, the wisdom of the Psalms teaches that the **righteous path does not necessarily lead to happiness, nor the wicked path to ruin. Yet the endpoint is rooted in faithfulness**, it resolves the current conflicts by pointing to the eschatological destiny of the world redeemed and ruled by a just God. (Levine, *Sing Unto God*, 105-106).

# Torah Psalms

- The Torah psalms [Ps 1, 19, and 119] point to a type of piety as a setting-in-life for the Psalms, a piety that used the entire book as prayer and praise...**Its basic religious commitments were devotion to the instruction of the Lord and trust in the reign of the Lord.** (Mays, “The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter”, 12)
- “More succinctly, **faith begins in obedience which is confident of God’s faithful response**” Footnote: “I am aware of the theological problems for conventional Christianity with the affirmation that faith begins in obedience. The canonical arrangement of the Psalter may require us to rethink our conventional notions of ‘grace-law’ which perhaps belong to particular historical crises.” (Brueggemann, “Response to James L. Mays, ‘The Question of Context,’” 37)

# Editorial Seams

- **“Each book concludes with an ascription of praise to God.** Four of these appear to be editorial, namely 41:13; 72:17-19...89:52 and 106:47,48, while the equivalent for Book 5 or the whole Psalter is 150 or even 146 to 150” (Grogan, Prayer, 174)
- The announcement of Psalm 2 of the authority of the messiah over the nations has a counterpart in **Psalm 89 at the end of Book III in the great lament over the frustration of the promise to the messianic Davidic king** (Mays, “The Question of Context in Psalm Interpretation”, 16-17)
- I am convinced that the final two books of the Psalter (Psalms 90–150) have been subjected to a thoroughgoing process of ordering following principles of arrangement quite distinct from those observed in the first three books (Psalms 2–89). This suggests to me the possibility of two separate periods of editorial activity behind these segments. (Wilson, “Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of Psalms in the Psalter: Pitfalls and Promise,” 42)

# Psalm 89 Turning Point

- **Following Psalm 89, book four has a high proportion of “untitled” psalms (13/17) which is indication of editorial manipulation.** Wilson proposes that [**book 4 stands to] answer the problem posed by Ps 89. The answer is (1) YHWH is king; (2) He has been our “refuge” in the past, long before the monarchy existed; (3) He will continue to be our refuge now that the monarchy is gone; (4) Blessed are they that trust in him!**

# Book 5

- **In some sense the fifth book was intended to stand as an answer to the plea of the exiles to be gathered from the *diaspora*.** The answer given is that deliverance and life thereafter is dependent on an attitude of dependence and trust in YHWH alone (107:12-13, 19, 28). **David is seen as modeling this attitude** of reliance and dependence in Pss 108-110 and 138-145 and is rewarded with YHWH's protection... **This attitude of dependence on YHWH will issue in obedience to his Law**, as set forth in the central *Torah* Ps 119, which is to serve as man's guide on the "way" of righteousness and life. (Wilson, *Editing*, 227).

The End!!!