

# Editorial: Reflections on Reading the Psalter

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Throughout the ages, the Psalter has been a precious book for God's people. In times of joy and hardship, success and trials, the church has repeatedly turned to the Psalter to learn how to praise, trust, and rejoice in God's covenant promises centered in Christ Jesus our Lord. As Jim Hamilton nicely reminds us in his recent two volume commentary on the Psalter: "No other body of poetry lyricizes the epic deeds of the living God, celebrating the past, signifying the future, interpreting the present, making God known" (*Psalms*, vol. 1 [Lexham, 2021], 1). Yet, the Psalter also reveals more than this since it reminds us that God's great deeds are all centered in the coming of Messiah Jesus, God's chosen King, the one that the book ultimately anticipates. Hamilton also makes this point when he states: "No other body of poetry has as its principle author God's chosen king, whose line of descent traces back through Judah to Abraham, and further still to Shem, Noah, and Adam. Nor can any other poetic or literary tradition lay claim to the fact that King David, in writing of his own experience with God in the world,

simultaneously wrote as a type of the one to come, Jesus, the world's best and only hope" (1).

However, as precious as the Psalter has been for God's people, too often it has been read in an atomistic way removed from its redemptive-historical context within the canon of Scripture. For example, individual psalms have been read independent of their place in the Psalter as if each psalm was intended to stand alone and not to be read as part of an entire collection. Or, we have read and applied individual psalms to our lives without first wrestling with their meaning in their OT context and overall placement in the Psalter. Or, we have applied the psalmists struggle with the rich and wealthy in Psalm 73 as if it was the same as our envy of the rich and famous in our day, instead of noting that in its context it is about a person who is wrestling with God's promises to enthrone the Davidic king over the nations in a time where there is no king. Thus, instead of first thinking through what the psalm means in its own context, we have removed the psalm from its place in the Psalter and OT history. Or, we have read that "unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain" (Ps 127:1a) and that "sons are a heritage from the Lord" (127:3a) as if this text directly applies to our families without first seeing that it is not about us but about God's building of the Davidic house which is ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

Although many have read the Psalter this way and benefited greatly from doing so, it is my contention that this reading and application of the Psalter is not quite right for at least three reasons. First, although the Psalter is composed of 150 psalms of diverse authors from different time periods, it is deliberately arranged as a book and as such, it should be read as an entire literary unit. Overall, the Psalter is identified with David, yet it includes within it psalms that span the time period from Moses (Ps 90) to the exile (Ps 137), and which is organized in a deliberate way. For example, the first two psalms function as the introduction to the Psalter, and the entire book is organized in terms of five books that echoes the Pentateuch. Also, as one moves from book to book, there is a deliberate storyline that runs throughout the entire collection. Moreover, given that a large number of the psalms are written by David and that Davidic psalms are strategically placed in each section of the Psalter, the ultimate point of the book is to unpack the significance of the Davidic house tied to the promises of the Davidic covenant, which in the end, anticipate the coming of David's greater Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

This way of viewing the Psalter is not new. In the patristic era, Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa acknowledged the specific structure of the entire collection although this insight was not always followed through in their reading and application of the book. In recent times, more attention has been given to the Psalter as an entire collection with a growing interest to read it not as fragmented units but as psalms that are part of a larger whole.

Second, our doctrine of inspiration also requires that we read Scripture not only as an entire canon but also individual books in their final form. In 2 Timothy 3:16, we are reminded that “All Scripture” (*pasa graphē*) is “God-breathed” (*theopneustos*), with emphasis being placed on the “God-breathed” nature of the text that the author writes. In other words, what the biblical author’s write as they are sovereignly “carried along” by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:20-21) is God’s word written. All of this requires that we view inspiration as pertaining to the book(s) of Scripture in their final form. As we apply this truth to the Psalter, this means that we must view the final form of the Psalter as God’s breathed out word. No doubt, Moses, David, and others acted under inspiration in the writing of their individual psalms, but we only have access to those psalms in an entire collection, which is what 2 Timothy 3:16 reminds us is God-given. As such, we must not think first of individual, discrete psalms, but psalms as part of an entire collection, which as an entire book are organized and structured under divine inspiration.

Third, as we read Scripture, it is also important to locate each book in terms of where it is located in the progress of divine revelation and then in light of its fulfillment in Christ. Scripture does not come to us all at once. Instead, God has revealed himself over time, and it is crucial to read books of Scripture in terms of the progress of revelation. In this regard, as a collection, the Psalter is a post-exilic book since Psalm 137 finds the nation of Israel in Babylon.

Why is this important? Because as an entire book, it is written in light of God’s unfolding plan and revelation from Genesis to exile. In this way, it is building on God’s covenant promises from Genesis 3:15 centered in the coming of David’s greater Son. For this reason, Psalm 2, along with the entire Psalter, is not merely about the Davidic king but ultimately about Christ. In the OT, the Davidic covenant is the *epitome* of the OT covenants, starting in creation with Adam and culminating in David and his sons. As the “son” to Yahweh (the “Father”), the Davidic king is not only “true Israel” (2 Sam

7:14; cf. Exod 4:22-23; Hos 11:1), he is also the one who fulfills the role of Adam to rule the world (2 Sam 7:19b). However, the problem is that in OT history the Davidic kings were cut off and by the time Psalm 2 is read in the Psalter, there is no Davidic king on the throne. This is why Psalm 2 read in the Psalter is thoroughly Messianic. In other words, Psalm 2 in the Psalter is part of prophetic eschatology that looks forward to the coming of a *greater* David, who will not only be a human “son,” but also a “Son” who will execute a universal rule, put all things under his feet (Ps 8, 72), and who is uniquely identified with Yahweh himself (Ps 45, 110). But unless we read individual psalms in light of the entire book and the Psalter’s location in redemptive-history, we may miss this crucial point and misunderstand the actual meaning of psalm.

Given the importance of the Psalter and the need to read it correctly, we have devoted this issue of *SBJT* to focus on reading the Psalter as an entire book and literary unit. All of our authors are convinced that this is how the Psalter ought to be read, and that the church would benefit from returning to this glorious book in that light. My prayer is that this precious book which has taught, strengthened, and encouraged God’s people throughout the ages will continue to do so as we seek to read and apply God’s word in light of the glory of Christ.