



## Meditation— psalms introduction: canonical approach

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Looking back at antiquity, individual psalms can be understood within principally three settings. First is their original, “historical” setting, or *sitz-im-leben*. Second is their temple setting. Third is their setting within the Book of Psalm as it has come to us.

It seems likely that for the most part individual psalms, whether near or far in their present order within the Psalter, were originally as independent, unique, time and circumstance conditioned, and unrelated to one another as are, say, the anguished prayer of a young mother who has lost a child, the confused prayer of a teenager lost in teenage angst, the innocent prayer of a child who seeks help in finding a lost toy, the grateful prayer of a grandfather during a cherished family gathering, the pastor’s concluding prayer at the end of a worship service, or the musings of a theologian on the nature of God, or good, or evil. Just as it is reasonable, perhaps necessary, to study each of these prayers or musings in light of these original settings, forms, functions, composers, audiences, needs, uncertainties, appreciations, etc., in order to fully comprehend their meaning and significance, it is reasonable, perhaps necessary, to translate and study individual psalms of the Hebrew Psalter in light of their original settings, forms, functions, composers, audiences, needs, uncertainties, appreciations, etc.

We appreciate and applaud those who attempt this type of translation and explication of individual psalms. We learn much from them. At the same time, we are all too aware of the limitations in our ability to identify the original settings, forms, functions, composers, audiences, needs, uncertainties, appreciations, etc., of psalms composed millennia ago. We often simply lack the information from outside the Book of Psalms itself necessary to accomplish the desired task. Such translation and explication of individual psalms often becomes speculative and subjective. This is not intended as criticism, as even such speculative and subjective observations can be informative, inspiring, and thought provoking such as to lead to further understanding of the human condition and theological possibilities as understood through the eyes of the Psalmist.

Generally speaking, I eschew attempts to define *original* settings, forms, functions, composers, audiences, needs, uncertainties, appreciations, etc. in this present translation and explication of the Book of Psalms, though I do occasionally give a nod to such considerations. In part, I eschew such attempts because of what I feel has been the uneven and unsatisfactory nature of others attempts. We simply lack the necessary data for firm, confident, and enduring conclusions on such matters. To be honest, I also eschew such attempts because I lack the intellectual wherewithal to pull off such a daunting task. So, I’ll leave it to others, braver and smarter than I.

It is almost universally agreed that whatever the original settings of individual psalms found in the Book of Psalms, many of them were used in Israel’s ancient temples. While it is possible that some few psalms might have originally been written specifically for temple use, most so used were adapted and adopted for temple use from whatever other original settings and usages might previously have been.

Examining the possible temple settings for individual psalms can be fascinating and rewarding. I again value and applaud the work of so many in this effort of establishing possible temple settings for

individual psalms. I have often found my own temple experience inside LDS temples to have been amplified because of insights found in such investigations. Again, however, we lack sufficient knowledge about Israel's temple from outside the Book of Psalms to be definitive about the temple setting of individual psalms. As heroic as the effort has been, it has been highly speculative and subjective, producing a plethora of differing and competing views. If providence allows me sufficient life longevity, I would love to explore in detail this aspect of many an individual psalm. But, though I will, again, offer the occasional nod toward the question of psalm use in Israel's temple worship, it will by no means be a guiding star of any kind in my translation or explication of the psalms.

Whatever the original settings of individual psalms—temple or not—someone, likely, many someones, gathered, compiled, edited, and ordered the psalms into the Book of Psalms as we have it today. The ordering of the psalms, the placement of individual psalms with disparate original settings next to one another in that ordering, and the collection of the psalms into five books<sup>1</sup> were imposed upon the individual psalms. It seems unlikely that the psalms were collected and then strung together haphazardly. Rather, it seems likely that the ordering of the psalms possessed reason, meaning, and purpose to those who so ordered them.

Establishing the significance of the ordering and the potential relationships between conjoining psalms and psalms belonging to the same book is a significant effort. Like the effort of ferreting out original or temple settings for individual psalms, the effort to establish possible significance of ordering or reason for conjoining individual psalms is subjective. Welcome to being human. However, this approach has the advantage of not being dependent upon any outside information. One has only the material at hand to consider.

The ordering of the psalms as we have them in the Book of Psalms, the relationship between conjoining psalms, and the relationships within smaller collections of psalms within the greater whole will play a significant role in my translation and explication of each individual psalm. Some might call this holistic approach “canonical.” But this approach is not science—as if science is the only legitimate means by which one subjects their inherited world to investigation. There is no doubt whatsoever that others can and have found other explanations for the canonical structure of the Book of Psalms. Some might be more learned and reasoned than mine. No doubt, one is benefited by multiple perspectives. There is little room for dogmatism over such matters.

All any of us can do, certainly all *I* can do is interact with the Book as it speaks *to* me and as it speaks *of* me; for, as the writer of the New Testament's Book of Hebrews recognized, scripture is better at reading an earnest reader us than an earnest reader is at reading it.

“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is *a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*”<sup>2</sup>

This scriptural discernment of the individual earnest reader is, I believe, central to scripture's divine mission. It is of incalculable importance and benefit. At least, that is how it seems to me. The translation and explication of the Book of Psalms that is found in this work is a direct and unavoidable result of this scriptural mission. There is no reason for anyone to apologize for such grace. Certainly, I will not apologize for the grace God has given me as I have opened myself to the discerning power of this most

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<sup>1</sup> The five books are 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, 107–150. Or, if one considers Psalms 1 and 2 as a kind of introduction to the entire Psalter and Psalm 150 as a doxology to the entire Psalter, then the five books are 3–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, and 107–149.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews. 4.<sup>12</sup>

incredible of Books—the Book of Psalms.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: may 9, 2024)*