

Psalms: Editing of the Psalter

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Bruce Waltke examines the holistic editorial design and compositional history of the canonical Psalter. He traces the five-stage development of the Psalms from individual liturgical compositions and temple collections to authorial groupings, the five-book canonical structure, and final synagogal canonization. Special attention is given to the Elohistic Psalter (Psalms 42–83), the symbolic significance of the number 42, and how the thematic arrangement reflects the tension between exile, judgment, and eschatological messianic hope. Ultimately, Waltke demonstrates how the Psalter was intentionally shaped around the royal Davidic covenant and redemptive history to serve as a manual for instruction, prayer, and theological meditation.

Outline

I. Introduction and Course Context

A. Context within the course on Psalms

1. Prior approaches examined: historical context, royal Psalms, form criticism, wisdom Psalms, and messianic interpretation.
2. Current focus: holistic editorial design and canonical composition of the Psalter.

B. Titles and Nomenclature of the Book of Psalms

1. Hebrew Titles: Absence of a formal book title in the Hebrew Bible; named in rabbinic literature as Sefer Tehillim ("Book of Praises").
2. Greek Titles: Psalmoi (Codex Vaticanus / Codex B) translating Hebrew mizmor; Psalterion (Codex Alexandrinus) giving rise to "Psalter".
3. Latin Title: Jerome's Liber Psalmorum ("Book of Psalms").
4. Semantic Shift: Transition from denoting instrumental accompaniment (mizmor) to connoting sacred songs and hymns of praise.

II. The Five-Stage Process of Collection and Canonical Formation

A. Stage 1: Individual Compositions

1. Compositions created directly for temple liturgy (hymns and thank-offering songs).

2. Compositions created away from the temple during personal trials (e.g., David's wilderness laments).

B. Stage 2: Adaptation for Public Temple Worship

1. Commitment of private laments to the chief musician for liturgical usage.
2. Democratization of individual royal prayers for public congregational and antiphonal singing (priests, king, and congregation).

C. Stage 3: Collection into Specialized Groups

1. Grouping by Authorship: Davidic collections (Books I & II), Sons of Korah (Psalms 42–49, 84–88), Asaph (Psalms 50, 73–83), Solomon (Psalm 72), and Moses (Psalm 90).
2. Grouping by Genre: Technical subscripts and superscripts such as mizmor, michtam, and maskil.
3. The Elohistic Psalter (Psalms 42–83):
 - a. Statistical shift in divine names: Yahweh occurs 584 times outside vs. 45 times inside; Elohim occurs 94 times outside vs. 210 times inside.
 - b. Inversion of parallelisms: Elohim occupies the A clause and Yahweh the B clause.
 - c. Synoptic psalm variations demonstrating intentional editorial adaptation (e.g., Psalm 14 vs. Psalm 53).
 - d. Structure: A Davidic core (Psalms 51–72) framed by Levitical choir collections (Korahites in 42–49 and Asaphites in 73–83).
 - e. Symbolic meaning of 42: Number 42 associated with premature judgment, national crisis, and temple destruction, counterbalanced by Songs of Zion providing hope.
4. Grouping by Thematic Associations, Metaphors, and Catchwords:
 - a. Alternation of morning and evening prayers (Psalms 3–6).
 - b. Linked thematic sequences and verbal framing (Psalms 7–9; Enthronement Psalms 93–99; Songs of Ascents 120–134).
 - c. Doxological framing using Hallelujah and Hodah ("Give thanks") markers.

D. Stage 4: Organization into Five Canonical Books

1. Book I: Psalms 1–41 (primarily Davidic).
2. Book II: Psalms 42–72 (Levitical Korahite and Davidic core).
3. Book III: Psalms 73–89 (Asaphite and exile lamentations).
4. Book IV: Psalms 90–106 (Moses and Yahweh's reign).
5. Book V: Psalms 107–150 (Post-exilic praise and restoration).
6. Doxological seam endings concluding Books I–IV (Psalms 41:13, 72:18–19, 89:52, 106:48).
7. Intended structural complement to the five books of the Mosaic Pentateuch.

E. Stage 5: Final Canonical Shape and Textual Witnesses

1. Dead Sea Scrolls evidence (11QPss scroll and liturgical vs. canonical debates between Skehan/Talmon and Flint/Sanders).

2. Shift from temple spoken liturgy to fixed canonical Scripture for synagogal meditation and instruction.

III. The Editorial Significance and Theological Message of the Psalter

A. Cohesive Editorial Vision

1. Evidence of a unified editorial mind framing the Psalter with introductory (Psalms 1–2) and concluding (Psalms 146–150) anchors.
2. Transformation of historical human prayers into divine instruction (Torah) for the community of faith.

B. Focus on the King and the Davidic Covenant

1. Books I & II: Davidic royal establishment, personal distress, and prayer for universal cosmic dominion (Psalms 2, 72).
2. Book III: The crisis of exile, temple destruction, and the apparent failure of the Davidic covenant (Psalms 74, 88, 89).
3. Book IV: Re-anchoring the covenant in Yahweh's eternal reign and Moses' foundational theology (Psalms 90–106).
4. Book V: Restoration from diaspora, gathered exiles, and eschatological messianic expectation (Psalms 107–150, Psalm 110).

C. Integration of Judgment and Hope

1. Prophetic biblical pattern: Judgment passages consistently resolve into promises of restoration and remnant theology.
2. Eschatological climax: The Psalter leads the worshiper from lament over earthly kingdom failure to praise for the eternal Messianic King.