

ASCENDING THE HILL TO PRAISE: THE FUNCTION OF THE PSALTER'S STRUCTURE AND POETRY IN FORMING HEARTS OF PRAISE

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ABSTRACT. The Psalms constitute more than a randomized collection of discrete songs. God has given the psalms to form believers through regular performance. The Psalms are not merely an anatomy of the soul: the Psalms are medicine for the soul. A proper understanding of the dominant metaphors within the psalms, through their use and practice, renders the Book of Psalms a pathway toward refuge and the refuge itself. The worshipper must sing his or her way through the Psalms from songs of lament and repentance, through songs of thanksgiving and trust, eventually ascending the hill to praise.

KEYWORDS: Psalms, Psalter, poetry, sing, formation, praise

Introduction

It is no secret that psalm singing has largely fallen out of practice in most evangelical churches today. In my recent book, *Musing on God's Music: Forming Hearts of Praise with the Psalms*, I suggest that two primary factors have caused most modern Christians to undervalue the psalms in daily life and corporate worship. First, I posit that most Christians today do not understand the overarching story that the 150 psalms is meant to embody; rather, most Christians conceive of the Psalter as a loosely organized collection of songs. So one of the primary purposes of my book is to introduce modern Christians to the deliberate organization of the psalms into five books that progressively unfold God's plan in history (Aniol 2023).

Second, I suggest that another reason Christians undervalue the psalms is that they do not understand the purpose and power of poetry and song. Due largely to secularization in the West, most modern people consider art to be merely diversion

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rather than the rich medium of meaning and formative power that it is. However, the psalms are nothing if they are not poems, and they should be treated as such. As I argue in the book, poems in Scripture do something for us that no other kind of literature can do. The poetry is a feature, not a bug.

What I would like to do in this paper is to press even further than I do in my book into both of these features of the psalms, and in so doing I would like to emphasize two primary points: First, both of these characteristics of the Psalter—its storyline and its poetry—are actually the same kind of thing in principle: namely, they are metaphors on a macro and micro level. And second, the purpose of metaphor, both on a macro and micro level, is to form our imagination.

I will first broadly survey the history of psalms studies with attention to how both of these aspects of the psalms have been treated. Second, I will consider the nature of how meaning is transferred through metaphor and demonstrate how the canonical shape of the psalter is itself metaphor on a larger scale. Third, utilizing the work of William Brown on metaphor in the psalms, I will demonstrate the connection between the dominant individual metaphors within the psalms and the larger story of the Psalter. Finally, I will draw these threads together to emphasize how this understanding ought to impact our performance of the psalms for personal devotion and in corporate worship.

The Forest and the Trees

Trends in psalm studies have seemed to fluctuate between the trees and the forest, that is, between considering individual psalms on their own merits and considering the larger picture of the psalms as a unified whole. Recognition of a deliberate ordering of the Psalter toward a particular goal appears as early as Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-394), who insisted,

One must pay attention to the progressive arrangements of the concepts in the book under discussion. These are indicated both by the order of the psalms, which has been well arranged in relation to knowledge of the aim, and by the sections of the whole book, which are defined by certain distinctive conclusions. The entire prophecy in the Psalms has been divided into five parts. . . . and there is a systematic arrangement and division in these sections (Gregory of Nyssa 1995: 1.2-3, 5.37).

Other early psalm commentators also acknowledged intentional arrangement, such as early rabbis, Augustine, Eusebius, Basil, and Jerome. Others well into the nineteenth century also addressed the Psalter's arrangement (Ho 2019: 6-7; Wenham 2006: 335).

Pursuit of understanding the deliberate purpose and arrangement of the psalms among Christians was derailed in the twentieth century, largely as a result of Her-

mann Gunkel's approach to the psalms that focused on their genre, an approach carried on by Gunkel's student Sigmund Mowinckel that dominated psalm study for the most of the twentieth-century (Gunkel 1926). Gunkel encouraged attention to thematic categories of psalms and consideration of the setting-in-life from which they came as the preferred method of interpreting individual psalms' meaning and significance. James Crenshaw claims: 'Modern study of Psalms owes more to the insights of Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) than to any other scholar' (Crenshaw 2001: 80). Gunkel's form criticism influenced psalm scholarship to focus on individual trees without attention to the forest.

However, Gerald Wilson's 1985 *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* sparked a renewed interest in the Psalter's canonical organization. Fueled by the work in canonical criticism pioneered by Brevard Childs, Wilson argued, 'I contend there is evidence within MT 150 itself of an editorial movement to bind the whole together . . . [which] represents the end result of purposeful, editorial organization' (Wilson 1985: 4). Wilson drew attention to the common benedictions that close each of the five books of psalms as well as other "seams" that appear to indicate intentional groupings (Wilson 1985: 182-86). He noted how the first two psalms seem to be introductory (173), and he gave special consideration to the role of the Davidic covenant in the Psalter's progression. Other scholars followed Wilson's lead, identifying features within the psalms that signal deliberate organization and presenting various theories regarding the purpose of the canonical structure that typically include the importance of the Davidic covenant, messianic fulfillment, and focus on blessedness (see Hossfeld and Zenger 2005; de-Claissé-Walford, Tanner, and Jacobson 2014; Ho 2019; Parrish 2003; Hamilton 2021). The unifying assumption is that each psalm was composed by an individual author in a particular setting for a specific reason. But later, editors moved by the Holy Spirit arranged the order (and possibly in some cases the psalm texts themselves) into five books with deliberate thematic progression as their intent. Thus, the superscriptions containing historical settings for individual psalms do accurately identify their author and situation. Hamilton (2021: 1.14) notes: 'I would thus attribute inspiration not only to the individual authors of each psalm but also to the editor(s)/anthologist(s) who put the book of Psalms into its canonical form.' Gentry (2009: 19) agrees: 'What is authoritative as inspired Scripture is the *canonical text*.' Yet the psalms are not arranged chronologically; rather, the psalms are arranged *thematically* toward a specific end. The Psalter itself is a story meant to be understood and appreciated as such.

The canonical approach to psalms studies has provided quite fruitful consideration of the larger whole, but more recently some scholars have feared losing the trees for the forest, pushing back against an emphasis on the canonical shape of the Psalter

in favor of poetic analysis of individual psalms. For example, in his fittingly titled article, 'From the Psalter Back to the Psalms,' Hermann Spieckermann has recently encouraged 'commentators of the psalms [to] concentrate their efforts on elucidating the language and the ideas of every single psalm intended to be received and reused in uncounted ways. Each psalm,' argues Spieckermann, 'is a kind of textual individuality, according to contents and to form.' He suggests that Gunkel's form criticism was helpful in terms of evaluating individual psalms but was 'useless for properly understanding the majority of the texts.' Conversely, considering an individual psalm's 'position in the context of a collection may contribute to its proper understanding, [but] the most demanding challenge,' he insists, 'is the task to carve out the individuality of every single psalm.' He continues, 'to uncover the gift of language preserved in the psalms to make human beings understand themselves in relation to God, may be regarded as a rewarding task for future commentators of the psalms' (Spieckerman 2020: 19-20).

The shift away from treating the psalms as poetry, however, predated more recent emphases on the Psalter's canonical shape. In modern psalm studies, poetry has largely been relegated to classification of Hebrew parallelism, much due to the impact of Robert Lowth in the eighteenth century (Baker 1973: 429-40; Jacobson and Jacobson treat the subject of poetry in the psalms almost exclusively in terms of parallelism [2013: 9-20]; cf. also Longman 1988; Bullock 1988; Futato 2007; Berlin 2008; Bellinger 2012). This led to a myriad of theories concerning how to classify parallelisms and what their significance is for a psalm's meaning. Students of the psalms thus began to believe that they were doing poetic analysis by classifying parallelisms, but as Leland Ryken notes, 'Because biblical scholars generally do not know how to handle poetic language, they often attempt to get an analytic mileage out of parallelism that it does not possess.' Rather, he insists, 'the verse form of parallelism is not the aspect of poetry that embodies the meanings. The imagery and figures of speech embody the message. Parallelism is only the vehicle in which the figurative language is packaged' (Ryken 2015: 69-70). However, infatuation with parallelism had all but extinguished attention to poetic features that actually embody the most significant meaning. Likewise, Hermann Gunkel's form criticism, as Spieckermann noted, gave scholars a false idea that they were treating psalms as poetry, but in reality such analysis got them no deeper than surface-level genre identification. In other words, genre and parallelism classification gave scholars and preachers the impression that they were doing poetic analysis, but such analysis rarely led to satisfying conclusions regarding a psalm's meaning and significance. The canonical approach did satisfy a longing to see beauty and order on the macro level, but it nevertheless often continued to sacrifice study of the poetry itself.

Attention to biblical poetry is not new, of course. However, recent scholars are pressing for a renewal (see Miller 2000; Brown 2002; Alter 2011; Weber 2012; Seow 2013; Heffelfinger 2013-14; Couey and James 2018; Jacobson 2019; Heffelfinger 2020-21; James and Burt 2020). This renewed emphasis upon considering the psalms as poems is a welcome development, but my contention here is that development in micro poetic study of the psalms need not abandon macro-canonical study. I contend that pursuits to discover the Psalter's canonical shape do not conflict with attempts to analyze the poetry of individual psalms any more than consideration of a Pauline epistle's overarching argument conflicts with analysis of an individual pericope within the letter. In fact, as that parallel illustrates, macro analysis and micro analysis are quite complementary.

Meaning Transfer Through Poetic Imagery

In order to make this case, I will now consider the nature of poetic imagery in the psalms. In contrast to the emphases of both Gunkel's genre classifications and Lowth's parallelisms, meaning in the Psalms is found in their poetic imagery.

As I mentioned early, secularization in the West has caused most modern people to undervalue the purpose and power of poetry. Metaphors and other symbolism in the psalms are often considered impediments to discerning the core propositional truth of a psalm. Many psalms are read or preached in the same way one would read or preach a Pauline epistle. This sterilizes the psalms and weakens their intended purpose to form believers in a particular way. As Walter Brueggemann correctly observes, 'the Psalms are filled with metaphors that need to be accepted as metaphors and not flattened into descriptive words.' He notes how, in our modernistic society, we believe that 'the function of language is only to report and describe what already exists,' and thus we often use the psalms to merely *describe* what is already in our hearts. 'By contrast,' he insists, 'in the Psalms the use of language does not describe what is. It evokes into being what does not exist until it has been spoken' (Brueggemann 2007: 18). William Brown likewise argues, 'The power of Psalms lies first and foremost in its evocative use of language. . . . As poetry, the psalms do not simply express; they also impart and teach. The language of ancient verse does more than glorify itself, in distinction perhaps from much modern poetry. Biblical poetry is poetry with a purpose' (Brown 2002: 2).

If getting at the *meaning* of psalms is our goal, then we must move beyond mere genre classification, analysis of parallelisms, or syntactical study to finding meaning in the poetry itself. As Nancy deClaissé-Walford argues, 'devices and symmetries . . . in a poem are not merely decorations . . . but are pointers or signs which indicate what the meaning is' (deClaissé-Walford 2012: 56). Beat Weber agrees that poetic elements 'are not merely ornamental phenomena but are relevant to semantics' (Weber 2012:

160). He argues, 'A firm grasp of form in poetic texts such as the psalms is therefore *extraordinarily important*' (Weber 2012: 164). Similarly, Robert Alter argues, 'Poetry, working through a system of complex linkages of sound, image, word, rhythm, syntax, theme, idea, is an instrument for conveying densely patterned meanings, and sometimes contradictory meanings, that are not readily conveyable through other kinds of discourse' (Alter 2011: 141). 'To read the psalms,' Brown suggests, 'is to *hear* their rhythms; to hear them is to *behold* the rich imagery they convey; to behold the psalms is to *feel* them in all their pain and promise; and to feel them is, ultimately, to "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps 34:8a)' (Brown 2002: 2).

In other words, poetry is important because without it, wholistic embodiment of God's truth would be truncated. The psalms employ aesthetic devices of the imagination to communicate God to us in ways that would not be possible with only fact statements. Since God is a spirit and does not have a body like man, since he is infinite, eternal, and totally other than us, God chose to use particular aesthetic forms to communicate truth about himself that would not have been possible otherwise. These aesthetic forms are essential to the truth itself since they present an interpretation of God and his world beyond the ability of mere propositions to articulate. Thus, the truths of Scripture are not Scripture's propositional content that just happens to be contextualized in certain aesthetic forms. Truth in Scripture is content plus form, considered as an indivisible whole (Aniol 2021). Clyde S. Kilby asserts that these aesthetic forms of Scripture are not merely decorative but part of the essential presentation of the Bible's truth: 'We do not have truth and beauty, or truth decorated with beauty, or truth illustrated by the beautiful phrase, or truth in a "beautiful setting." Truth and beauty are in the Scriptures, as indeed they must always be, an inseparable unity' (Kilby 1961: 21).

Metaphors in particular are important for the psalms' central purpose of communicating God's truth. There is a reason the psalms call God a 'king' rather than simply asserting the doctrinal fact of his rulership. There is a reason the psalms call God a shepherd, fortress, father, husband, and potter rather than simply stating the ideas underlying these metaphors. These images of God paint a picture that goes far beyond mere doctrinal accuracy. They communicate something that could not be expressed in mere prose. They shape our imagination of who God is, both expressing and forming right affections for God, which are central to Christianity.

Warren Wiersbe explains that 'metaphors affect the whole personality'; they are what 'powerfully "connect" the mind and heart of the hearers so that they want to do something in response to what they learn' (Wiersbe 1995: 24-25). Vanhoozer calls metaphors 'a fundamental scheme by which people conceptualize the world and their own activities' (Vanhoozer 2016: 79). Without metaphor, we would not be able

to fully conceptualize God and his world. Northrop Frye, whom Leland Ryken calls 'the most influential literary critic of [the twentieth] century' (Ryken 1990c: 4), explains that 'our primary thinking is not rational but metaphorical, an identification of subjective and objective worlds in huge mental pictures. Metaphors are statements of identity' (Frye 2006: 231). This is why images are essential to communicate God's truth. As Frye argues, 'all language directly concerned with the larger dimensions of infinite and eternal must be . . . metaphorical language' (Frye 1985: 594).

For this reason, God intends for the truth of Scripture to form, not just the intellect, but also the imagination. The Psalms use tools of the imagination not simply to decorate truth or make it more interesting, but in order to rightly shape our imagination of truth. As Kevin Vanhoozer notes, 'Literary forms are less containers than lenses; they do not simply deliver information but are rather means of information processing that organize the data in meaningful patterns. . . . One cannot reduce a form to its informative content, then, without losing the very pattern of information processing' (Vanhoozer 2011: 256). This reality reveals the essential importance of the imagination in the presentation of truth. Ryken observes,

The point is not simply that the Bible allows for the imagination as a form of communication. It is rather that the biblical writers and Jesus found it impossible to communicate the truth of God without using the resources of the imagination. The Bible does more than sanction the arts. It shows how indispensable they are (Ryken 1990b: 192-93).

Indeed, argues Vanhoozer, 'form and content work together, both to teach us concepts (i.e., convey information) and shape our conceptions (i.e. process information). . . . It is for the sake of forming right judgments that we must view biblical authority in other than merely propositionalist terms' (Vanhoozer 2011: 266). Robert Alter poignantly summarizes the necessity of imagery in the psalms to communicate the fulness of who God is:

God exists before and beyond language, and is by no means the product or the captive of the poets' medium. But God manifests himself to man in part through language, and necessarily his deeds are made known by one man to others, and perhaps also by any one man to himself, chiefly through the medium of language. Psalms, more than any other group of biblical poems, brings to the fore this consciousness of the linguistic medium of religious experience. These ancient makers of devotional and celebratory poems were keenly aware that poetry is the most complex ordering of language, and perhaps also the most demanding. Within the formal limits of a poem the poem can take advantage of the emphatic repetitions dictated by the particular prosodic system, the symmetries and antitheses and internal echoes intensified by a

closed verbal structure, the fine intertwinings of sound and image and reported act, the modulated shifts in grammatical voice and object of address, to give coherence and authority to his perceptions of the world. The psalmist's delight in the suppleness and serendipities of poetic form is not a distraction from the spiritual seriousness of the poems but his chief means of realizing his spiritual vision, and it is one source of the power these poems continue to have not only to excite our imaginations but also to engage our lives (Alter 2011: 169-70).

In other words, the images in the psalms are powerfully transformative. This transformation takes place since metaphors enable us to conceptualize something abstract (like the rule of God) by means of connection to something concrete in human experience (like a shepherd or king). Janet Soskice defines metaphor in the following way: 'The metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms [that] are seen to be suggestive of another' (Soskice 1965: 15).

Key aspects of the meaning and significance of the concrete image are carried over into the abstract concept. The term metaphor comes from *metapherein*, which literally means 'to carry across, to transfer' (Soanes and Stevenson 2004). Ryken explains: 'metaphor secures an effect on one level and then asks the readers to transfer that meaning to another level' (Ryken 1982: 11). In other words, images in the Psalms help us to properly conceptualize abstract ideas by connecting the abstract reality to concrete experiences in real life. This means that these images are not incidental or unimportant—they are a fundamental component of what forms a biblical imagination of God's truth. Images in the psalms cannot be flattened out into abstract ideas. In his insightful book, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*, William Brown argues, 'Broadly put, metaphors *do* something to enable the reader to perceive something differently. In the event of a metaphor, two or more modes of perception become juxtaposed and fused' (Brown 2002: 6). This is the metaphor's transformative power. Therefore, as Ryken notes, a proper understanding of this 'takes the images of the Bible seriously as something that embodies and communicates truth' (Ryken 1993: 15).

This kind of meaning transfer takes place with more than simply metaphors. All poetic language works by means of meaning transfer from something concrete to something abstract. As Brown argues, all poetic features—including rhythm, symmetry, parallelism, sound, imagery, and a variety of other poetic devices—are pressed into the service of reshaping the reader's worldview' (Brown 2002: 12; cf. Jones 2022: 329-46). This formation through poetry is central to the Psalter's intended purpose, as encapsulated by the term *hā·gāh* first seen in Psalm 1:2—'on [Yahweh's] law [the blessed man] *meditates* day and night.' The term translated here as 'meditates,' appears eleven times in the psalms (Psalms 1:2, 2:1, 35:28, 37:30, 38:12, 63:6, 71:24,

77:12, 90:9, 115:7, 143:5) and carries the idea of musing on something—allowing it to form and shape our imaginations. This is why this Hebrew word is also sometimes translated ‘to imagine’ (Psalm 2:1, KJV). Michael Lefebvre is right when he notes, ‘The Psalms require a different kind of “heart motion” as we sing them—meditation rather than declaration’ (Lefebvre 2011: 98). Meditation is more than just studying Scripture—it is more than just *thinking* about abstract concepts. Meditation is writing the Word of God ‘on the tablet of your heart’ (Proverbs 3:3, 7:3; Jeremiah 17:1, 31:33; Hebrews 10:16). Meditation is *slow formation* as meaning is transferred from the poetry to the abstract concepts.

Like metaphor proper, other poetic features transfer meaning through what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls ‘fittingness’—‘similarity across modalities’ (Wolterstorff 1987: 99). That is, the meaning of the concrete poetic feature is transferred to the abstract concept by virtue of a similarity between the concrete feature and the abstract idea. Wolterstorff explains, ‘The expressiveness of objects inheres not in their casual effect on percipients but rather in *the relations of fittingness* that the aesthetic character of those objects bear to the qualities which those objects express’ (Wolterstorff 1987: 112). Thus, instead of attempting to elucidate abstract concepts like godliness, mercy, forgiveness, goodness, evil, providence, and worship using only discursive propositions, the psalms rather utilize images like honey (19:10), thunder (29:3), a razor (52:2), a broken arm (37:17), grass, (147:8), bread (127:2), and countless other concrete images, and other poetic devices like rhythm, sound, and structure, all of which transfer meaning through relations of fittingness. Meditation, then, requires active engagement as the reader consciously, and in some cases subconsciously, becomes aware of the fittingness between the image and the concept and transfers the meaning between the two, and it is in this active process of meditation that transformation occurs.

Scripture is, of course, filled with examples of conceptualizing abstract ideas by means of concrete poetic features, but as Brown notes, ‘there is no better place to find rhythm, metaphor, and imagery in Scripture than in the Psalter’ (Brown 2002: 12). Thus Spieckermann and others are correct to insist that in order to benefit from the Psalms as God intended, we must read individual psalms as poems, seeking to grasp the meaning intended through the poetic features of the psalm.

Story As Extended Metaphor

Having acknowledged, then, the critical significance of reading individual psalms as poems, I return to consideration of Spieckermann’s claim: Does consideration of the poetry of individual psalms preclude analyzing the psalter’s unified structure as Spieckermann seems to indicate? I contend that it does not. In fact, I would suggest that canonical study and poetic analysis are simply different species of the same

thing, and understood as such, both approaches can actually benefit from each other in discerning the psalms' formative purpose and power.

I suggest this for one very simple reason: story is simply metaphor on a macro level. Ryken explains:

The narrative world that a storyteller creates by his or her selectivity of details is a picture of the world as the writer understands it, and of what is right and wrong in that world. It should also be remembered that storytelling is an affective art. That is, a story conveys much of its meaning by getting a reader to feel positively or negatively toward characters and events (Ryken 1990a: 136).

He continues, 'Stories help readers relive an experience in the order in which the events happened and as vividly as possible' (Ryken 1990a: 130). In other words, if metaphor is a concrete image that transfers its meaning to an abstract idea by means of cross-modal fittingness, then story is the same thing on a larger scale—it transfers the reader from his present experience to the experience embodied within the story itself.

This is why it is important to understand the overarching flow of the Psalter and the image it is seeking to form in us. What individual images do in one particular psalm, the story of the Psalter does on a macro level—it artistically embodies a formative story. But it is not just a prosaic or even poetic story, the Psalter is a musical story. The flow of what John Walton describes as a five-movement cantata traces the outworking of God's rule through his Anointed One in the midst of a wicked world, not tracing it in terms of historical events—that's the purpose of the historical books in Scripture—but in creating an artistic image of the outworking of God's plan that can form our imagination more powerfully (Walton 1991: 24). A cantata is a musical composition in which a composer takes some previously composed songs, combines them with newly composed material, and weaves them together into a unified flow with a logical progression. Movement I of the cantata shows the preservation of David, God's Anointed King; Movement II unfolds the continuation of the Davidic rule over his enemies and extended to his son, Solomon; Movement III portrays the anxiety created by the Babylonian exile that God had abandoned his covenant to David; but Movement IV reaffirms that God is still on his throne and that his steadfast love endures forever; this leads to Movement V anticipating the coming of David's Greater Son and progressively moving to thanksgiving and trust, until the last five psalms break forth with unhindered praise to the Lord.

Refuge and Pathway

Notably, William Brown's work on metaphor in the psalms provides a key to connect the macro story of the Psalter with dominant metaphors present in individual psalms. Brown argues that the root metaphors found in the psalms are *refuge* and *pathway* (Brown 2002: 16). The image of *refuge* appears first at the end of the introductory psalms in Psalm 2:12: 'Blessed are all who take refuge in him.' This image, Brown argues, 'is a metaphorical "schema" or domain populated by a number of concrete images, whose target domain is the protective God' (Brown 2002: 19). These concrete images include *rock*, *shield*, *stronghold*, *wings*, etc., several of which appear in a poignant cluster in Psalm 18:1-2:

I love you, O LORD, my strength.
The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,
my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

Even the images of *sanctuary presence*, *Zion*, and *holy mountain* encapsulate the refuge motif. The 'counter metaphor or symbolic opposite,' argues Brown, is 'the Pit, or abode of the dead,' (Brown 2002: 26) as pictured in Psalm 28:1:

To you, O LORD, I call;
my rock, be not deaf to me,
lest, if you be silent to me,
I become like those who go down to the pit.

Likely the most striking concrete image for God in the refuge domain is that of King, including related images like *scepter*, *kingdom*, *dominion*, *reign*, *rule*, *judge*, and even *shepherd*. Brown suggests, 'The metaphor "God is king," undeniably central in the Psalter, has its home in refuge, monumentalized by Zion and extended cosmically' (Brown 2002: 29). Brown summarizes the significance of the *refuge* image in the Psalter:

In sum, 'refuge' is a foundational metaphor or schema in the Psalter. Its associations are wide-ranging and profound. Concretely embodied in the symbol of Zion, the metaphorical schema is powerful enough to incorporate distinctly moral concerns into the fold of divinely wrought deliverance and blessing. The object of deep longing, refuge is emblematic of the person who places complete trust in God. It highlights, moreover, the royal role of God, of the King who is intent on making the world a refuge and provides protection to those in distress (Brown 2002: 30).

The second dominant metaphor in the Psalter, Brown argues, is that of *pathway*, particularly *the way of torah* (Brown 2002: 32). This image appears in the opening verses of Psalm 1, contrasting the way of the blessed man with that of the ungodly.

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish (Psalm 1:6).

The path image continues in Psalm 2 and throughout the Psalter:

Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled (Psalm 2:12).

You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore (Psalm 16:11).

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake (Psalm 23:3).

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Psalm 119:105).

As the Torah psalms—Psalms 1, 19, and 119—indicate, the path of the blessed man will, first, be characterized by delighting in and meditating on the law of the Lord, by musing on God's music so that it shapes our way.

Not only is the pathway motif directly connected to *torah*, Brown also demonstrates its connection to *wisdom*. 'As wisdom is taught and imparted,' Brown suggests, 'so also is the "way," as well as *torah* and its precepts, "the way of [God's] statutes"' (Brown 2002: 35). He summarizes, 'Like "refuge," the "pathway" metaphor generates as well as holds together various connotations, from the didactic to the salvific: *torah*, moral conduct, character, destiny, and danger. In the image of the "pathway," conduct and destiny are held as an inseparable unity, pointing to a conceptual schema of moral dynamism that binds together act and consequence' (Brown 2002: 38).

Brown's argument is helpful for uncovering the dominant metaphors in individual psalms, but he also helps to show how these two micro metaphors also characterize the 'deep structure' of the Psalter's macro story: 'These two metaphorical schemas adequately capture the dynamic, paradigmatic whole that frames the Psalter as both a pilgrimage of prayer and a sanctuary of praise' (Brown 2002: 48). *Pathway* emphasizes the formative purpose of the psalms, both on a macro and micro level. The very nature of a path is that which forms the journey of a traveler. This is the very nature of story. Take, for example, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. What is the value of a story about a man traveling toward a Celestial City? We read about Christian's journey, one in which he is formed by various experiences along the way. Bunyan created an allegory of salvation and the Christian life in such a way that by walking along the journey with Christian, we can be formed by his journey *as if we are experiencing his*

journey ourselves. This is the power of story—we are formed as we walk along the artistic path the artist created for us.

In the case of the psalms, then, *path* is not only a metaphor that appears in various individual psalms, the Psalter's canonical story is a path that shapes the hearts of those who travel along its way. Both the macro story and the individual poems form within the worshiper a proper conception of blessedness under God's rule. Psalm 1 introduces the idea that the Psalter is meant to portray two different conceptions of what it truly means to be blessed—two different “paths” along which an individual can walk. DeClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner note,

The Hebrew Psalter opens with an instructional psalm that maps the future as a choice between one of two different paths. These two paths are not characterized by their terrain or geography . . . , but by the character of the people who tread them. Down one path walk the wicked, sinners, and scoffers. Their eventual destination is judgment and unhappiness. Down the other path march the righteous, who bring with them the Torah of the Lord. Their end is happy, because they journey under the protection of the Lord (de-Claissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner 2014: 58).

They observe that the term *’ašrê*—‘blessed’—is based on a verbal root that means ‘to go straight, to advance, to follow the track’ (de-Claissé-Walford, et al. 2014: 95). As Psalm 1 introduces, the psalms themselves embody *the way of torah*, the ‘path’ of a blessed man being formed by God's Law rather than wicked counsel, a path that will ultimately determine how one lives and his final destination.

But the two dominant images are inextricably linked. The other key image, *refuge*, emphasizes the goal of the formation achieved by walking along *the way of torah*. ‘These two motifs,’ Brown argues, ‘help define the Psalter's deep structure. The didactic dimension, connoted by “pathway,” is contextualized within the sacred parameters of “refuge,” concretized by Zion. At the same time, “refuge,” via “pathway,” constitutes the *telos* of learning and moral conduct, as well as the *locus* of divine presence and activity. Together they evoke a powerful setting for the praxis of faithful living, for righteousness and reverence, obedience and worship’ (Brown 2002: 50). It is no coincidence that the first introductory psalm begins with a focus on a pathway (1:1) and the second introductory psalm ends with the aim of refuge (2:12). This structure of the two introductory psalms is paradigmatic of the structure of the whole Psalter.

In summary, these two dominant images of *refuge* and *pathway* both appear prominently in individual psalms throughout the Psalter and embody the nature of what the Psalter's story is doing. The Psalter as a whole, as well as the poetry of each individual psalm, is meant to form within the believer a confident trust in Yahweh as refuge. Thus, while I agree with Spieckermann that we ought to focus on the poetic

significance of each psalm individually, I contend that we nevertheless miss out on an even greater depth of meaning if we do so at the expense of recognizing how individual psalms fit into the larger story. And, conversely, to give attention to the canonical flow of the psalms without also immersing ourselves in the psalms' poetic language likewise misses the psalms' formative power.

The Pathway to Refuge

What, then, is this pathway to refuge embodied in the Psalter's story and developed in the poetic features of each individual psalm? Broadly speaking, Brown summarizes the story as a progression from lament to praise:

The world-creating power of path making is characteristic of the Psalter's performative power. Indeed, "pathway" denotes the *ongoing* process of refuge making by which the psalmist can ultimately leave behind the cry for vengeance in favor of the call to praise, a move illustrated by the general movement of the Psalter as a whole. As Psalm 1 lays out the "path" of righteousness, the journey is not complete without entrance into "refuge," the world-embracing setting for thanksgiving and praise, as conveyed in Psalms 146-150 (Brown 2002: 52).

In other words, the Psalter itself is a pathway that begins with lament and climaxes in praise formed in the hearts of those who find refuge in Yahweh.

But more specifically, I suggest that the Psalter's larger structure portrays a covenant-keeping God who will deliver his people through his Anointed King, and individual psalms within the structure poetically embody particular aspects of confident response in his covenant. The goal of this story is to form the believer's inner conception of what it means to be blessed, happily submitting to the rule of God in a wicked world. Psalm 1 paints a picturesque image of this sort of blessedness in verse 3:

[The Blessed Man] is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

This description reinforces the importance of poetry in the psalms for the formation of an inner conception of blessedness. The psalmist does not explain the nature of blessedness in some sort of abstract, propositional manner; rather, he uses concrete imagery to shape our conception of blessedness. Blessedness is like a flourishing tree. This image does not simply present intellectual information to our minds, it forms our imagination of what true flourishing and prosperity are like. It does this on a micro level in the image within the psalm itself, but also Psalm 1 'is there,' James Mays notes, 'to invite us to read and use the entire book as a guide to a blessed life' (Mays 1994: 40). This reinforces an understanding of the *purpose* of the Psalter's overarching

ing story rather than merely speculating on the canonical structure as an academic exercise. The purpose of the larger story is the same as that of individual metaphors: formation. As Peter Ho notes, 'As poetry, the *form* of the Psalter is as important as its thematic content' (Ho 2019: 4, emphasis added).

The Psalter itself is the path to blessedness. The 150 psalms are arranged into an intentionally crafted story, an artistic path along which we travel such that we are formed by that story. The central purpose of the Book of Psalms is to shape our image of what it truly means to be blessed such that we will be able to praise the Lord, even in the midst of a wicked world and our own sinful flesh. Psalms 1 and 2 present the foundation of this image of blessedness as a proper conception of life under God's rule. God is King, he has set his Anointed One on his holy hill, and all who submit to that rule and take refuge in him will be blessed like a tree flourishing by streams of water. However, if one conceives God's rule as something that is burdensome and seeks to cast off the rule of God and his Anointed, if that is one's image of what it means to be blessed, then that person will perish. The Book of Psalms then traces out the conflict between these two images of life under God's rule throughout all of history in such a way that we will be able to know how to praise the Lord in the midst of that conflict. It might look like the wicked are prospering, but God is on his throne, he has determined the destiny of the wicked and the righteous, and all who take refuge in him will be blessed.

Impact for Worship

Understanding this formative purpose and power of both the macro story and micro poetry of the psalms holds significance for psalm scholarship in a variety of ways, but it also bears significance upon using the psalms in worship. In fact, this understanding demands that the psalms be not merely read and studied for academic purposes, but that the psalms be performed as worship. Brown observes,

Despite its variegated context and content, one unifying characteristic of Psalms is its performative value: each psalm cries out to be prayed, sung, recited, studied, and appropriated. This feature, in and of itself, makes the Psalter the literary embodiment of *ritual*, whereby even meditation or devotional reading constitutes a form of ritualized activity, a life-forming discipline (Brown 2002: 55).

In other words, the formation God intends for the psalms to have upon his people happens only as they regularly perform them—all of them—as individual songs of worship but also understood as part of the larger story.

In fact, the psalms' performative necessity highlights even further the deep connection between pathway and refuge, both on macro and micro levels. Only in the regular performance of the Psalter can the pathway actually *become* the refuge as

habit turns to habituation. In *Liberating Rites: Understanding The Transformative Power of Ritual*, Tom F. Driver describes the rituals of corporate worship as a *pathway*. He observes, 'To ritualize is to make (or utilize) a *pathway* through what would otherwise be unchartered territory.' He continues, then, to explain how the pathway itself can become a refuge:

As a particular act of ritualizing becomes more and more familiar, as it is repeated so often that it seems to circle round upon itself, it comes to seem less like a *pathway* and more like a *shelter*. These two images—*pathway* and *shelter*—reflect the tension in ritualization between the verb and the noun. Some ritualizations have become in the course of time such elaborate shelters that they are like architecture. . . . What once were newly blazed *pathways* are now old forms invested with rich symbolic content and carefully guarded by explicit traditions and rules. These are the great liturgies and ceremonies of stable institutions. . . . They both *guide* and *shelter* the passing of generations (Driver 2019: 16-17).

If, as Driver argues, liturgy itself is a pathway meant to become a refuge for believers in a hostile world, how much more ought we utilize the God-inspired pathway of the Psalms as the fundamental foundation of our liturgy.

What is critical to understand about the nature of both the story of the Psalter and the poetry within the psalms is that God has given us the psalms, not merely to find a mood that first our present state of being, but rather, God has given us the psalms to *form* us through regular performance. The Psalms are not *merely* an anatomy of the soul, the Psalms are medicine for the soul. Or, to use the dominant metaphors within the psalms themselves, when understood and regularly performed as God intended, the Book of Psalms can become both a pathway toward refuge *and* the refuge itself. We sing our way through the Psalms from songs of lament and repentance, through songs of thanksgiving and trust, ascending the hill to praise.

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