

## God of all Nations – Reading the Psalms

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Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?...  
I have installed my king... “You are my son”.<sup>1</sup>

Declare his glory among the nations...  
Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns”.<sup>2</sup>

All authority is given to me... make disciples of all nations.<sup>3</sup>

The gospel... regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the nations<sup>4</sup> to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake.<sup>5</sup>

The book of Psalms has provided forms and content of prayer for God’s people for centuries, shaping and sustaining not only words of worship but life in all its vicissitudes. In response to current practice in many churches, N. T. Wright has called for the reclaiming of the power of the Psalms in contemporary public worship and personal devotion:

The Psalms represent the Bible’s own spiritual root system for the great tree we call Christianity... The regular praying and singing of the Psalms is *transformative*... so that we look at the world, one another, and ourselves in a radically different way.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Psa 2:1, 6–7. All biblical quotations are from NIV® unless otherwise stated and references are to psalms unless otherwise specified. Psalm and verse numbers will follow English versions, with MT or LXX numbers in brackets if different.

<sup>2</sup> Psa 96:3, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Matt 28:18–19.

<sup>4</sup> Instead of NIV “Gentiles” for (τὰ ἔθνη) I use “nations” to make explicit shared language with Matt 28:18.

<sup>5</sup> Rom 1:2–5; similarly Rom 16:24–26, an *inclusio* for the letter.

<sup>6</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 5–7.

Recent decades have seen a major shift in academic study of Psalms which is beginning to be expressed in commentaries<sup>7</sup> and has great potential to affect preaching, worship and devotion – and hence life. Previously focus, in both research and preaching, has been on individual psalms, whether exploring possible historical settings of composition (including the life of David) or classifying psalms on the basis of their forms and possible cultic settings. While those approaches have continuing benefit, attention is turning to Psalms as a book. Nancy deClaisé-Walford is representative in asking, “Why these 150 psalms, in this particular order in the Psalter? Why does Psalm 1 begin the Book? Why is Psalm 90 located where it is? And so forth.”<sup>8</sup> There is evidence of intentional arrangements that point to theological emphases and desired patterns of response.<sup>9</sup> Here I will argue that Psalms provides us with prayers that can illuminate our understanding of Christ’s commission (and Paul’s response) and sustain us as we are caught up in God’s mission that covers all ‘nations’. Individual psalms find their meaning as part of the whole.

### **Psalms as a Book**

As with any area of biblical interpretation, some proposals regarding the structure of Psalms and theological themes gain wider acceptance than others. This is not the place to review and evaluate proposals in detail, but rather I highlight some well-recognised

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<sup>7</sup> E.g., J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996, Vol. 4), 639–1280; Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2001); Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms, Volume 1* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002); and in most detail, Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) and *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011) [*Psalms 1: A Commentary on Psalms 1–50*, forthcoming].

<sup>8</sup> Nancy L. deClaisé-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel* (St Louis: Chalice, 2004), vii, referring to her earlier *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Recent overviews are in W.D. Tucker, Jr., “Psalms 1: Book of,” and L. Wray Beal, “Psalms 3: History of Interpretation,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (ed. Tremper Longman, III and Peter Enns; Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2008), 578–93, 605–13; and in more detail, Gordon J. Wenham, “Reading the Psalms Canonically,” in his *The Psalter Reclaimed: Praying and Praising with the Psalms* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2013), 57–79 [reprinted from “Towards a Canonical Reading of the Psalms,” in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig G. Bartholomew et al.; Scripture and Hermeneutics; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 331–51] and J. Kenneth Kuntz, “Continuing the Engagement: Psalms Research Since the Early 1990s,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 10, 3 (2012), 321–78.

features that provide a context in which to explore the place of the ‘nations’.

That there are collections in Psalms has been long recognised. For instance, superscriptions are clustered: every psalm superscription in Book I (1–41) mentions David, apart from 1–2, 10<sup>10</sup> and 33<sup>11</sup>, with a similar collection a major part of Book II (42–72; see 51–65, 68–70, with 72:20 “This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse”). There are however later psalms with a Davidic superscription, mainly in Book V (107–150).<sup>12</sup> Two other significant collections associate “sons of Korah” (42–49, 84–85, 87–88) and “Asaph” (50, 73–83). Firth comments that the Korahite psalms “have a strong focus on Jerusalem” and “God as the great king over all the earth”, with a “dialectic [that] holds together honest complaint and the hope offered by the presence of God”, while the Asaph collection “appears to be shaped by concerns generated by the fall of Jerusalem... in which covenant, individual testimony and national reflection can be applied to the sense of loss created by the exile.”<sup>13</sup>

Clearly Psalms as we now have the book reached its form after the exile in the Second Temple period and so the question arises as to whether this historical setting has affected the overall collection and not only the Asaph collection. Is there a purpose, a ‘story’, in the present arrangement? Childs in 1979 was perhaps the first to argue for taking seriously the canonical structure of Psalms, making

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<sup>10</sup> Psalms 9 and 10 were probably a single psalm (as in LXX). Together they form an alphabetic acrostic; see e.g. *BHS*.

<sup>11</sup> “Ps 33:1 links directly to Ps 32:11 in regard to key words, sentence structure, and liturgical setting. The functional affinity of the two songs was thus clear to the compiler of the collection” (Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part I; with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (The Forms of Old Testament Literature; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 144).

<sup>12</sup> Psalms 86, 101, 103, 108–110, 122, 124, 131, 133, 138–145. LXX Psalms manuscripts increase the number and content of superscriptions with around 87 titles (mss vary) compared to MT 73. LXX translators apparently did not understand לדוד (*ldwd*) as implying Davidic authorship, seen both in the use of the dative, τῷ Δαυιδ [cf. the genitive τοῦ Μωυσῆ, Psalm 90 (89)] and extended superscriptions such as Psalm 65(64), “A psalm τῷ Δαυιδ [for David], a song: Ἰερεμίου καὶ Ἰεζεκιηλ [of Jeremiah and Ezekiel] from the record of the sojourning, when they were about to depart.”

<sup>13</sup> D. G. Firth, “Asaph and Sons of Korah,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (ed. Tremper Longman, III and Peter Enns; Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2008), 25–27. Other collections: 111–118 each begin or end הללויה “hallelujah” and 120–134 have as superscription שיר המעלות “A song of ascents”. 42–83 overwhelmingly use אלהים “God” (201 times, with יהוה “Yahweh”, 44 times; contrast 3–41 with the proportion 15:278, and 84–150 with 16:370). There are also doublets, e.g., 14 and 53 (note divine names), and 108:1–13 (2–14) combines 57:7–11 (8–12) and 60:5–12 (7–14).

observations on Psalm 1 as opening and on the scattering of royal psalms providing an eschatological note.<sup>14</sup> This was developed in detail by Wilson<sup>15</sup> who highlighted the significance of both the position of Psalm 2 and the closing psalm of each of the five books, so incidentally supporting the canonical division into five books which has textual evidence as early as the Psalms scrolls from Qumran. Psalms, 2, 72, and 89, are royal psalms, with Book IV (90–106) standing

as the ‘answer’ to the problems posed in Ps. 89 as to the apparent failure of the Davidic covenant with which Books One-Three are primarily concerned. Briefly summarized the answer given is: (1) YHWH is king; (2) He has been our ‘refuge’ in the past, long before the monarchy existed (i.e., in the Mosaic period); (3) He will continue to be our refuge now that the monarchy is gone; (4) Blessed are those who trust in him!<sup>16</sup>

Book V is more heterogeneous with an encouragement of trust in Yahweh.<sup>17</sup> “David is seen as modelling this attitude in Psalms 108–110 and 138–145, an attitude which finds expression in obedience to YHWH’s Torah, expressed in the massive and centrally located Psalm 119.”<sup>18</sup> The final block, Psalms 146–50, each starting with

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<sup>14</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979), 504–25.

<sup>15</sup> Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBL Dissertation Series 76; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985); “The Use of the Royal Psalms at the ‘Seams’ of the Hebrew Psalter,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35 (1986), 85–94; “Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalms,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (ed. J. Clinton McCann; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 159; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 72–82; “King, Messiah, and the Reign of God: Revisiting the Royal Psalms and the Shape of the Psalter,” in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception* (ed. P. W. Flint and P. D. Miller, Jr.; Vetus Testamentum Supplements 99; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 391–406.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, *Editing*, 215.

<sup>17</sup> 11QPs<sup>a</sup> preserves parts of thirty nine psalms that are in MT and another eleven compositions, seven known elsewhere and four previously unknown. All of the MT psalms are from Books IV and V but with a different order. There is similar lamenting over Jerusalem and expression of hope, but more focus on a Davidic deliverance. The יהוה מלך “Yahweh reigns” psalms are not included. See Gerald H. Wilson, “The Qumran Psalms Scroll (11QPs<sup>a</sup>) and the canonical Psalter: Comparison of editorial shaping,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59, 3 (1997), 338–64; Ryan M. Armstrong, “Psalms Dwelling Together in Unity: The Placement of Psalms 133 and 134 in Two Different Psalms Collections,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, 3 (2012), 487–506.

<sup>18</sup> David M. Howard, Jr., “Editorial Activity in the Psalter: A State-of-the-Field Survey,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (ed. J. Clinton McCann; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 159; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 63, here summarising Wilson.

הללויה “hallelujah”, praises Yahweh’s cosmic sovereignty. The motif of “obedient trust”, expressed in following the way of God’s “instruction”<sup>19</sup> as in the opening Psalm 1, is reinforced by the structurally framing wisdom psalms, 73, 107 and 145, with 119 dominating the central section of Book V.<sup>20</sup>

A detailed stimulating elaboration of a post-exilic reading of the psalms in order is that of deClaissé-Walford:

But this “unfettered” praise [Psalm 150] is only possible at the *end* of the story of the Psalter. The postexilic community must understand where it has come from (the “Who are we?”) and where it is going (the “What are we to do?”) before it can participate in the praise of YHWH the king. Thus the Psalter becomes a story of survival in the changed and changing world with which the postexilic Israelite community is confronted.<sup>21</sup>

In the process of collecting and ordering and placing within the canon of scripture,

The Psalms underwent a transformation from being the words of humankind to God into scriptural words of God to humankind. They became words of encouragement and hope to a community in turmoil, a community coming to grips with a new life situation.<sup>22</sup>

Psalms 1 and 2 no doubt had separate origins and may appear unrelated but their juxtaposition as ‘orphan psalms’ before the cluster of Davidic psalms, together with literary links, leads to a composite picture that shapes subsequent reading. The “happy, blessed” (אַשְׁרֵי *’ašrē*) are “the person whose delight is in the תּוֹרָה (*tôrâ*) of the LORD” (1:1–2) and “all who take refuge in him” (2:12), an *inclusio* for the two psalms. They bring together the generic individual (אִישׁ *’iš*, 1:1) and ‘the nations’ (גּוֹיִם *gōyim*) with their

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<sup>19</sup> תּוֹרָה *tôrâ*, commonly translated “law”, is not so much a set of rules but “instruction in the broadest sense, written tradition that is authoritative for the people of God. Specifically, Psalm 1 introduces the psalms as Scripture to be studied, heeded, and absorbed” (James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 15). The New Jewish Publication Society Version (1985) translates “teaching”. It includes the whole story of God’s involvement with his people and creation, recounted in some psalms. The structuring of Psalms into five ‘books’ may be a deliberate reminder of the five books of the ‘Torah’, in which individual ‘laws’ have as their context a broader historical narrative.

<sup>20</sup> Wilson, *Editing*, 200–28, and ‘Shaping,’ 78–82.

<sup>21</sup> deClaissé-Walford, *Reading*, 103.

<sup>22</sup> deClaissé-Walford, *Introduction*, 5. See also J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

contrasting הַגָּה (hāgā): faithful “meditating” (1:2) and rebellious “plotting” (2:1). The contrast in 1:6, between the דֶּרֶךְ (*derek*, “way”) of the צַדִּיקִים (*ṣaddiqîm*, “righteous”) that Yahweh “watches over” and that of the רְשָׁעִים (*rěšā’îm*, “wicked”) which will אָבַד (*’abad*, “lead to destruction”), leads in 2:12 to the warning to “you kings” to acknowledge God’s rule or “your way (דֶּרֶךְ) will lead to your destruction (אָבַד)”.<sup>23</sup>

While Psalm 1 orients the reader to receive the whole collection as instruction, Psalm 2 makes explicit the essential content of that instruction—the Lord reigns. The entire psalter will be about the “happy” / “blessed” life, and it will affirm that this life derives fundamentally from the conviction that God rules the world.<sup>24</sup>

Psalms 1 and 2 thus provide a number of interlocking motifs: the call to delight in Yahweh’s ‘instruction’ as the only way to blessing, Yahweh as ruling the world through his anointed king in Zion, and the fate of the ‘wicked’ who persist in rebellion against Yahweh. How are the people of Israel to live as vassals within the powerful Persian empire – and later Greek then Roman? They may have some measure of self-rule, but certainly were not a ‘nation’ with a king reigning in Jerusalem. In Psalms they find expression of hope: it is Yahweh who is ‘enthroned in heaven’ (2:4) and who has the last word to all nations; their response was to transcend their traditional ideas and to find identity as they “delight in the *tôrâ* of the Lord” (1:2), that was the path to ultimate blessing.

### The ‘Nations’ in Psalms

If they, and we, continue to live among the ‘nations’, what views of the nations are shaped by worship using Psalms? What kinds of attitudes and expectations are fostered? Looking at Psalms within the wider canon of both Old and New Testaments, in what ways might Psalms contribute to shaping and undergirding response to the commission to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19), calling all nations εἰς ὑπακοήν πίστεως “to obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5; 16:26)?

<sup>23</sup> The end of 2:11 and start of 2:12 is textually difficult, hence different translations in English versions, “kiss the son” and “kiss his feet” (cf. NIV, NRSV). Irrespective, the context points to submission to Yahweh’s appointed ruler.

<sup>24</sup> McCann, “The Book of Psalms,” 688–89.

Studies using a canonical approach to Psalms have given little attention to ‘nations’ other than under the general rubric of Yahweh’s kingship and place of the Davidic ruler. On the other hand, Christopher Wright has contended that “the proper way for disciples of the crucified and risen Jesus to read their Scriptures, is *messianically* and *missionally*”<sup>25</sup>. His own work is organised thematically, so he discusses a few specific psalms referring to the ‘nations’ under the headings: “David: a king for all nations”; “nations as beneficiary of Israel’s blessing”; and “the nations will worship Israel’s God”.<sup>26</sup> In a footnote however he comments, “The growth of interest in the Psalms as a whole may hold further missional significance”<sup>27</sup>. In response to an invitation, Wenham recently explored a canonical reading of “The Nations in Psalms”:

The canonical approach does not ignore discussion of the original author’s understanding of each psalm, but it holds that the most accessible and authoritative sense of a psalm is that of the Psalter’s editor, a sense that is opened by reading the psalm within its wider context of surrounding psalms.<sup>28</sup>

In a similar vein I explore the topic, with some obvious indebtedness to Wenham and other commentators.

### **The Nations as Book-ends: Psalms 2 and 144–150**

Psalm 2 has boldly placed nations and their kings under the sovereignty of Yahweh, with a call for all to acknowledge him or face destruction. The same motif appears in the concluding Psalms 148–149. Yahweh’s cosmic reign (“The One enthroned in heaven”, 1:2) leads in conclusion to a call to universal “praise”, including that of

kings of the earth and all nations  
you princes and all rulers on earth (148:11).

Yet there remain those who continue to refuse that call, and so Yahweh’s חֲסִידִים (*ḥăśîdîm* “faithful ones”), who as עֲנָוִים (*‘ănāwîm* “lowly, humble”) have first been the recipients of Yahweh’s יְשׁוּעָה:

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<sup>25</sup> Christopher J. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006), 30 (emphasis his).

<sup>26</sup> Wright, *Mission*, 345, 474–78, 478–84.

<sup>27</sup> Wright, *Mission*, 481, n.28.

<sup>28</sup> Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 162. Chapter 8, “The Nations in the Psalms” (161–186) was originally a lecture given in 2010.

(*yěšū'á* “victory, deliverance”), will be agents carrying out his sentence, in imagery (but not language) reminiscent of 2:9–12:

To inflict vengeance on the nations  
 and punishment on the peoples,  
 to bind their kings with fetters,  
 their nobles with shackles of iron,  
 to carry out the sentence written against them (149:4–9).

As in 2:6 Zion is the centre, but there is mention only of Yahweh as “King” (149:2).<sup>29</sup> Here it is the “faithful ones” who enjoy victory and who see the submission of the “nations” and their “kings” as their *הַדָּבָר* (*hādār*, “adornment, splendour”; 149:9b). Mays notes connections with Isaiah 40–66:

These are the prophecies that speak overall of the LORD’s revelation of his kingship in the world through the victorious salvation of his people (e.g., 40:1–11; 41:21–29; 52:7–10). Specifically, the LORD in these prophecies promises to make Israel a *two-edged* instrument to crush those who war against them (41:11–16) and to *adorn* his people with saving victory (55:5; 60:9)... Something wonderful and strange is afoot here, the lowly becoming the warriors who fight for the kingdom and inherit the earth.<sup>30</sup>

Relevant here is the ending of Isaiah. Isaiah 40–66 has much that is positive concerning “the nations”, reflected in Paul’s several citations in Romans, but there is also diversity similar to Psalms,<sup>31</sup> and Isaiah, like Psalms, ends with destruction of “those who rebelled against me” (66:24).<sup>32</sup>

David has last been mentioned in the block with Davidic superscription (138–145) that precedes the concluding “hallelujah” psalms (146–150). In particular the concluding pair, 144–145, includes Yahweh giving him victory over others, so leading into the concluding praise psalms. Psalm 144 begins with battle imagery, calling to Yahweh,

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<sup>29</sup> The parallelism points to the identity of “their King” as being “their Maker”.

<sup>30</sup> Mays, *Psalms*, 447–48, citing also Matt 5:3, 5. Linguistic parallels, especially with Isaiah 60–61, are listed also by Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150* (Word Biblical Commentary, Waco, Texas: Word, 1983), 319–20.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Rikk E. Watts, “Echoes from the Past: Israel’s Ancient Traditions and the Destiny of the Nations in Isaiah 40–55,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28, 4 (2004), 481–508.

<sup>32</sup> John W. Olley, “‘No Peace’ in a Book of Consolation—A Framework for the Book of Isaiah?” *Vetus Testamentum* 49 (1999), 351–70.

my shield, in whom I take refuge (הֹסֵד *hāsâ*)  
who subdues peoples<sup>33</sup> under me (144:2).

The language recalls 2:12, with its promise of blessing to the one who “takes refuge” (also הֹסֵד *hāsâ*), following the promise to “my king” of rule over “the nations”. There is affirmation of future praise

to the One who gives victory to kings,  
who delivers his servant David (144:10).

The present stance however is a prayer for deliverance, including a repeated plea to “deliver me, rescue me ... from the hand of foreigners” (144:7, 11). The phrase בְּנֵי נִכְרִי (*bēnê nēkār* “sons of foreignness”) occurs in Psalms only here and in 18:44, 45 (45, 46), a psalm which celebrates the king’s victory over foreigners who “cower... obey me... lose heart”, and which is replete with language and imagery seen in 144, 145. There may have been victory then (see further below), but as one journeys to the conclusion of Psalms, submission of others is still in the future. So the following acrostic Psalm 145 is an affirmation of Yahweh’s kingship, concluding with blessing for “those who fear him” (v. 19; cf. 2:11) but destruction for “the wicked” (v. 20; cf. 1:6; 2:12) and the affirmation: “let every creature [כָּל-בְּשָׂרַיִם *kol-bāsār* “all flesh”] praise his holy name for ever and ever”.

## At the Seams

### *Psalms 72 and 89*

Psalm 72 not only closes Book II but also “concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse” (72:20). In what may have been a coronation psalm the prayer is that the king will receive the submission and tribute of nations near and far (72:8–11), summarised in

May all kings bow down to him  
and all nations serve him (72:11).

A result of his reign exercised with justice and righteousness, with care for the “weak and needy”, is material prosperity and, in fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise (Gen 12:3),

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<sup>33</sup> While most MT manuscripts have עַמִּי ‘*ammî* “my people”, the masorah notes “one would expect עַמִּיִם [‘*ammim* “peoples”]”, which is the reading in 11QPs<sup>a</sup>, also followed in Aquila, Syriac, Targum and Vulgate; cf. 18:47(48).

Then all nations will be blessed (וְיִתְבָּרְכוּ *wəyitbārēkū*)<sup>34</sup> through him,  
and they will call him blessed (יִאֲשְׁרֵהוּ *yə'asšē'ūhū*)<sup>35</sup> (72:17).

Reading this as a prayer of David “for Solomon”<sup>36</sup> one can reflect on the possibilities then ahead for the nation with Solomon’s reign, with temple, peace, and prosperity, enhanced by tribute brought.

Post-exilic readers knew of the decline that began in Solomon’s reign itself, a decline that 1 and 2 Kings repeatedly links with failure to obey God’s commands.<sup>37</sup> The juxtaposition and order of Psalms 1 and 2 point to the same priority on obedience and relationship. Read now after the exile, “because the rule of God is the ultimate object being praised... [there is an] eschatological dimension.”<sup>38</sup>

Unlike the hope of Psalm 72 at the end of Book I, Book II ends in the lament of Psalm 89 that contrasts Yahweh’s kingship and the current distress. Instead of the nations seeing Israel as a nation to be emulated and so be blessed (72:17), now, with repetition adding to the anguish,

Remember, Lord, how your servants<sup>39</sup> have been mocked,  
how I bear in my heart the taunts of all the nations,<sup>40</sup>  
the taunts with which your enemies, LORD, have mocked,

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<sup>34</sup> As in Genesis there is debate as to the best understanding of the hitpa’el form (commonly reflexive/reciprocal), hence NIV alternative “will use his name in blessings (see Gen. 48:20)” (the hitpa’el is also in Gen 22:18; 26:4) and JPSV “invoke his blessedness upon themselves”. LXX translates as the passive, εὐλογηθήσονται. Irrespective, nations share in the blessing through identification.

<sup>35</sup> The root אֲשַׁר *’šr* as in 1:1; 2:12 (so NRSV “happy”).

<sup>36</sup> So interpreting the preposition ל- *l-* of the superscription in light of the closing sentence; e.g., Childs, *Introduction*, 516.

<sup>37</sup> The story of Solomon’s reign begins with David’s charge that links the promise of blessing with “walk in obedience to him... as written in the Law of Moses”, repeated in Yahweh’s direct words to Solomon with increasing warning (1 Kgs 2:2–4; 3:14; 6:12–13; 9:3–4–8). Sadly, after his death “the whole assembly of Israel” described Solomon’s rule with language echoing the oppressive slavery in Egypt before the exodus (1 Kgs 12:4).

<sup>38</sup> Childs, *Introduction*, 517. Childs is perhaps the first to highlight the canonical placing.

<sup>39</sup> So NIV alternative, translating the plural עֲבָדָי *’ābādeyā* of most MT mss, followed by LXX and Vulgate. Most EVV follow 24 mss and the Syriac which have the singular. The plural may be similar to the plural “faithful people” in v. 19 (20), and the plurals of vv. 15–18 (16–19), so linking people and their king.

<sup>40</sup> The Hebrew of this line is awkward. If MT כְּלִרְבִים עַמִּים *kol-rabbim ’ammim* is followed it may have the sense “all the many (different) peoples”; see detailed discussion in Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, 1990), 412–13.

with which they have mocked every step of your anointed one [89:51(52)].

Again brought together are the life of the people, focussed in an “anointed one” (cf. 2:2), the overarching kingship of Yahweh (“*your* enemies”, “*your* anointed one”), and the behaviour of “the nations”. A strong expression of dissonance is seen climactically not only in the destruction of Jerusalem *per se* [v. 40(41)] but in the resultant scorn and taunting. There is “shame” [v. 45(46)], but this in turn involves Yahweh and the “nations”. One cannot separate the life of God’s people from Yahweh’s purposes for the nations. The doxology at the end of Book II is now read with Psalm 89. It poignantly brings to the fore the issue, how is Yahweh, to whom “heaven and earth” belong [v. 11(12)], now to be “blessed” by all (בָּרַךְ *bārūk*) [v. 52(53)]?

#### **Book IV (90–106)**

The dramatic change of mood from 90 on has long been recognised. More than fifty years ago Westermann observed that “(t)he first half of the Psalter is comprised predominantly of Psalms of lament, the second predominantly of Psalms of praise”<sup>41</sup>. Psalm 90 pivotally answers the cries of 89 (and 88) and moves forward with its affirmations of God’s long-standing compassionate relationship with his people, yet recognising “our iniquities” (90:8; absent from 88, 89), with a willingness to be “taught” and so “gain a heart of wisdom” (90:12). The superscription “Prayer of Moses, the man of God”

immediately takes the reader back to the time of Moses when there was no land or Temple or monarchy... (Book IV) offers the “answer” that pervades the psalter and forms its theological heart: God reigns... Relatedness to God is still possible as it was in the time of Moses.<sup>42</sup>

In describing the Psalm as a תְּפִלָּה *tēpillā* “prayer (supplication, intercession)” is there also a reminder of the occasions when Moses interceded for the people – in Exod 32:11–13 an intercession based on God’s reputation among the nations and his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Israel – and God showed his forgiving, restoring compassion? The following psalm affirms the lasting

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<sup>41</sup> Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen; 2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), 257 (original German article, 1962).

<sup>42</sup> McCann, “The Book of Psalms,” 1040.

security of those who say, “The Lord is my refuge” (91:2, 9; מְחַסֵּה *mahseh*; cognate noun of the verb used in 2:12).

The central clustering in Book IV of psalms affirming Yahweh’s kingship (93, 95–99) is commonly noted, with Howard adding an argument for the placing of 92 and 94 which “show the wicked and foolish who may flourish for a moment, but who will ultimately be overcome by YHWH and YHWH’s righteousness”<sup>43</sup>. The motifs of Psalms 1 and 2 are again brought together.<sup>44</sup>

Significant for our exploration is that Book IV with only 17 psalms, has the plural nouns ‘nations, peoples’<sup>45</sup> 25 times (101 in all psalms).<sup>46</sup> To sing of Yahweh as King is to have the whole world in view. It is not only that we<sup>47</sup> are “the flock under his care” (95:7) who must ensure that we “do not harden [our] hearts” (95:8), but at the same time we “declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all people” (96:3). To affirm God as creator-king has consequences for how God’s people see political structures, imperial power and the many “gods of the nations” (96:5).

Is there more? Psalm 100 opens with a call to joyful worship by “all the earth” (100:1). Zenger argues in detail that, although מֶלֶךְ *mlk*, as either noun “king” or verb “reigns as king”, does not appear in 100, yet the language is shaped throughout by “royal theology” and statements from 93, 95, 96 and 98 are cited, and so 100 can be understood as climax and conclusion of the preceding ‘YHWH is king’ psalms. There are also links between 100:3 and 46–48 (see below on 47). This leads to a striking conclusion:

If we read Psalms 93–100 as a continuing context, the nations move steadily into the center of the event, drawing closer and closer to Israel and its God... Psalm 100, as the climax of the composition, integrates the nations of the world in worship before the God of Zion:

<sup>43</sup> Howard, “A Contextual Reading,” 121.

<sup>44</sup> Links with 1 may be seen in 92:12–14; 94:11, 12.

<sup>45</sup> EVV generally translate עַמִּים *gōyīm* as “nations”; עַמִּים *‘ammīm* as “peoples”, but sometimes “nations”; and the less common עַמִּים *lē’ummīm* as “nations” or “peoples”. Similar variation is seen in LXX ἔθνος and λαός.

<sup>46</sup> עַמִּים *gōyīm* 10 (54), עַמִּים *‘ammīm* 14 (37), עַמִּים *lē’ummīm* 1 (10).

<sup>47</sup> I deliberately switch to ‘we’ since the songs of the people of Israel have become the songs of the Christian church – and most, if not all, readers of this article will be part of that community.

they should, and they will, shout aloud to YHWH, serve him (and not the idols; cf. 97:7) with joy, and experience his nearness—like Israel and together with it... This astonishing universalism is found in pointed fashion at the beginning and end of the canonized prophetic corpus but also in the Psalter itself [Isa 2:1–5; 19:21–25; 66:18–23 and Zech 14:9–21; cf. esp. The Psalter’s conclusion, Psalms 145–150].<sup>48</sup>

While Wenham notes that “[n]ot all commentators share Zenger’s daring reading that makes verse 3 a confession by the nations”, he continues, “it is clear that this psalm calls on all of them to join in the true worship of the God of Israel”.<sup>49</sup>

Following the flow of the psalms in the movement from the end of Book III into the central cluster of Book IV is to go from the depths of despair, powerlessness and hopelessness into the boldest affirmation of confidence and inclusion possible! Importantly, these psalms follow quite closely from the agonizing cry of 89. To sing these psalms with their focus on Yahweh, his people, and the nations is to live out the dramatic reversal in the middle of Psalm 73 (the first psalm in Book III):

When I tried to understand all this,  
it troubled me deeply  
till I entered the sanctuary of God;  
then I understood their final destiny (73:16–17).

How is an impoverished subject people without political independence, whether living within the Persian province of Yehud or elsewhere in the empire (or subsequently under Greek, then Roman rule), to live as God’s people? It may seem counter-intuitive that the answer is firstly to boldly affirm Yahweh’s absolute sovereignty and to call all nations and peoples to give glory to him, to recognize that they too are subject to his rule. It also means that one lives as Yahweh’s people, faithfully delighting in his *tôrâ* (and so the comprehensive, all embracing Psalm 119). That is the basis upon which and the context within which further cries can be made.

Significantly the same explicit reminder at times of weakness, powerlessness and/or injustice and idolatrous syncretism of God’s purposes for the nations is seen throughout the Old Testament. The first statement in Gen 12:3 is given to Abraham when it might seem he had nothing (no child or land and away from familiar

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<sup>48</sup> Zenger in Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 494, 497, with n.23.

<sup>49</sup> Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 184.

surroundings). God's glory amongst the nations is the basis of Moses' intercession at the time of the golden calf incident (Exod 32:11–12) and similarly Joshua's after the defeat at Ai (Josh 7:8–9). The narrative setting of Deuteronomy is a people at present without land, but again it is through the presence of God and "righteous decrees and laws", which are to be "followed", that "the nations" will be drawn (Deut 4:5–8). Times of blatant injustice and syncretistic worship or economic weakness are addressed with a vision of God's glory amongst all nations (e.g., Isa 2:3–4; Jer 3:17; Zeph 2:11; Hab 2:14; Mal 1:11).

### **'Nations' Throughout the Psalms**

Previous studies have argued that kingship (Davidic and Yahweh's) and wisdom are key elements in the five-book structuring of Psalms and that there is a consequent broad story-line. Here I have sought to present evidence that, inseparably linked with these motifs, is the place of the 'nations'. This does not mean that the "nations" has been an element in the structuring but rather that motifs of kingship and of God's people following his *tôrâ*, walking in his 'way', cannot be spoken of without reference to the 'nations'. The 'nations' are an integral component in the mix. God's sovereignty and his purpose that "all nations" honour him is the context in which Israel is God's people and David is his "anointed one".

This is the context in which psalms of crying to Yahweh for deliverance continue through all the five books. Features of Psalm 86 are representative. After affirming

All the nations you have made  
will come and worship before you, Lord;  
they will bring glory to your name (86:9)

there is a cry

Arrogant foes are attacking me, O God;  
ruthless people are trying to kill me—  
they have no regard for you (86:14).

### **Wright comments**

The subtext, then, of the implied logic in the psalmist's appeal is that if all the nations are going to have something to praise God for, it should not be too difficult for God to sort out the psalmist's personal problems and give him a more immediate cause for praise (Ps 86:12) ... The Abrahamic promise thus becomes not just a majestic vista of

the ultimate mission of God but a very potent engine of personal hopefulness in the immediate saving power of God.<sup>50</sup>

To this can be added the psalmist's plea immediately following the affirmation concerning the nations:

Teach me your way, Lord.  
That I may rely on your faithfulness;  
give me an undivided heart,  
that I may fear your name (86:10).

Brought together are the nations bringing glory to God, the individual knowing and following God's way, and praying in the midst of present conflict.

The two psalms with greatest number of instances of 'nations/peoples'<sup>51</sup> are 96 (nine times), a psalm in the middle of the Yahweh kingship psalms of Book IV, and 67 (ten times), framed by 66 (twice) and 68 (twice). Read canonically, 66–68 provide a backdrop for the cries for deliverance in 69–71, followed by the royal psalm 72 which has the nations bringing tribute to the Davidic king and "all nations being blessed through him" (72:17).<sup>52</sup> Psalm 72 carries on the motifs of 66–68 that the nations bow down to and praise Yahweh, and share the benefits of his just reign, because of what they see he has done in and through his people—but such hope is not separated from present distress.

The two psalms with the next greatest number are 9 and 44 (each seven times), psalms which speak mainly of the "nations" as those defeated on entry into the land or those that are now enemies and threatening, and so to be defeated. This is a reminder, already noted above regarding 145–150, that those who persist in opposing Yahweh's purposes, remaining "wicked", suffer defeat.

A contrast is 47, which has six instances. Here are brought together the past where Yahweh

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<sup>50</sup> Wright, *Mission*, 234.

<sup>51</sup> In the following I refer only to psalms that specifically speak of "nations/peoples". The fact that such explicit vocabulary is throughout the book is significant. To these could be added the many references to 'enemies' and the 'wicked', but they may be internal or external to the people of God, just as 'righteous' potentially includes people from the 'nations'. Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 168, observes that:

Early Davidic psalms do not mention the possibility of some righteous among the nations who will escape this judgment, but in the light of the programmatic statement inviting them to serve the Lord (2:11), it cannot be ruled out.

<sup>52</sup> See above for previous discussion of this verse.

subdued nations under us,  
 peoples under our feet [47:3(4)],  
 the present affirmation of faith that  
 God is the King of all the earth...  
 God reigns over the nations [47:7–8(8–9)],  
 and the unexpected  
 The nobles of the nations assemble,  
 the people of the God of Abraham,<sup>53</sup>  
 for the kings (or ‘shields’) of the earth belong to God [47:9(10)].

For MT עַם אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם “people of the God of Abraham” LXX has μετὰ τοῦ θεοῦ Ἀβραάμ “with the God of Abraham”. Some thus see a case of haplography and so emend to ...עַם עַם “with the people...”<sup>54</sup>. MT as it stands however makes sense, especially given reference to Abraham and use of the early name of God, associated with Jerusalem at the time of Abraham, עֲלִיּוֹן ‘*elyôn* “Most High”.<sup>55</sup> A similar unexpected statement of equal inclusion is in 87, also a psalm of Zion, where after a list of nations<sup>56</sup> to be recorded as “those who acknowledge me” (87:4),

The LORD will write in the register of the peoples (עַמִּים ‘*ammim*):  
 “This one was born there [i.e., Zion]” (87:7; cf. v. 4).

Such openness to others fits what has been argued above on Psalms 93–100 but may be seen in the very opening of Psalms where the one “blessed” is the generic אִישׁ (‘*is* “person”), set over against rebellious “nations”. Similarly Psalm 8 refers to the generic אָדָם ‘*ādām* “human being, earthling”. There is the potential for all

<sup>53</sup> Omitting NIV’s “as”, to reflect MT where the phrases are in apposition.

<sup>54</sup> E.g., BHS, P.C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco, Texas: Word, 1983). 347; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59, A Commentary* (trans. Hilton C. Oswald; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 466.

<sup>55</sup> E.g., McCann, “The Book of Psalms,” 869; Wright, *Mission*, 490. For עֲלִיּוֹן see Gen 14:18–22; Deut 32:8.

<sup>56</sup> Predominantly in Psalms ‘nations’ are nameless. Other than mention of Egypt and neighbouring nations in psalms remembering the exodus and entry into the land of Canaan, the naming of specific nations is seen only here and in 60:8 (10) = 108:9 (10); 68:31 (32); 83:5–8 (6–9) and 137:1, 7–8. Psalm 87 stands out with its geographical spread and positive expectation.

humans to “be blessed” and to share in authority through delighting the Yahweh’s “instruction”.

## Conclusion

In summary, the ‘nations’ feature in various ways in Psalms. They are an integral part of motifs and the story-line that are commonly seen behind the canonical structure. One cannot speak of “following God’s way” and kingship without including the nations. Worship that fosters individual trusting obedience looks out to the ‘nations’ and Yahweh’s glory in all the earth. What is sung now in worship has eschatological fulfilment, seen by the eyes of trust: Yahweh is sovereign over all nations and all nations are to give glory to him. Those who acknowledge him participate in blessings while those who persist in rebellion will perish. Especially after 89 focus is on Yahweh as King, with a somewhat muted but real place for the Davidic king: 110 strongly reinforces the importance of the king, affirming the programmatic perspective of 2, while the Davidic inscriptions of 138–145 leading into the concluding ‘Hallelujah’ psalms ensure the place of David. In the present God’s people face opposition and at times defeat or scorn, and so there are cries to God, but these are based on his rule over all nations. Visions of the future shape the present.

How to live without political, economic or military power? How to live as a minority, subject to foreign powers and surrounded by dominant cultures? Jews in the Second Temple period and beyond faced such questions. Some similarity may be seen in issues faced by churches today, whether in countries that once experienced the political power of Christendom or elsewhere, all living now as minorities, often marginalised. Miroslav Volf contends that “the church has two malfunctions: idleness and coercion... His vision is for a thoughtful faith, practised with integrity in community”<sup>57</sup>.

Jewish faith and life amongst the ‘nations’ was sustained and resourced through corporate worship and private meditation using the book of Psalms. The answer of Psalms is not to retreat into a private world, waiting for some dramatic change. Instead they boldly affirmed allegiance to the God of all nations, relativising the attraction and permanence of empires, and reflected on how to follow God’s ways, using Psalms as ‘instruction’. They sang of opposition and of the apparent success of foreign ways – and in

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<sup>57</sup> Sophie Timothy, “Miroslav Volf to visit,” *Eternity* 43 (Dec 2013):3.

worship found their answers. The variety of psalms gave language to express diverse experiences, hopes and agonising cries in the midst of the pressures of life in the empire – and the same variety of psalms would not let them forget God and the nations.

The psalms provided a full range of possibilities. The ‘nations’ may be ‘enemies’ who were defeated in the past or threaten in the present, but they are people who are called to give glory to God and follow his ways. They could persist in being ‘wicked’ and so be perish, or else come in worship and allegiance to Yahweh as ‘king’ and to his ‘anointed one’ and so share blessing as part of God’s people. There was eschatological promise of God’s glory being recognised in all the earth.

Through constant singing of and meditation on the whole Psalter, they remembered that, irrespective of how the ‘nations’ acted, God’s people are to follow his ways, for all other ways are doomed to fail. They are to “meditate on his *tôrâ*” – and *tôrâ* was never separate from their relationship with the God of the universe.<sup>58</sup> As God’s people they live out now the cosmic rule of God, and so “delight in his ways”. Throughout the constant mention of the ‘nations’ reminded them that God had called them to “the obedience of faith” for the sake of the nations.

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<sup>58</sup> In Psalm 119 seven synonyms are used as well as *tôrâh*. In every case, except vs. 49, 128 which are commonly emended following the versions, there is a relational possessive: “your” (almost all), “of Yahweh” (v. 1), “his” (vv. 2, 3), “of my God” (v. 115).