On Seeing Christ in the Psalms

Towards a Christology of the Psalter with Especial Emphasis on Psalms 1 & 2

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My family and I live in a Victorian house in downtown Toronto. One of the things that drew us to buy this old home was the entrance, which consists of two nicely sculpted wooden doors with stained glass panels that make up the upper half of each door. The first door is attractive, but mostly utilitarian; it has such aesthetic features as square wooden panels, but mostly it just keeps out old man winter. The second door is especially lovely; people often comment on the beveled glass and especially on the round, ruby-like glass buttons that form an inner frame to a cluster of diamond- and square-shaped glass pieces. It provides visitors with the same favorable impression of the house that it provided my wife and me when we first saw it. Perhaps more than any other feature of the house, it was this entrance that captured our interest and sparked our imaginations as to the potential the whole house had to become our home. (Otherwise the house, formerly a rental property, was a bit run down.) The rest is history; we packed up our belongings and made this red-brick Eastlake type house into our home, a place that we prayed might become a haven for our three kids and two dogs, along with four boarders and a stream of guests.

Over the past twenty-five years, Old Testament scholars have come to reflect on the beauty and significance of a similar set of double doors that leads to a haven of spiritual refreshment and solace within the Bible itself. The spiritual home is the Book of Psalms and the two doors that elegantly lead into it are Psalms 1 and 2. Simply put, Psalms 1 and 2, in addition to having their own discrete exegetical roles, are also "The Introduction" to the Psalms by virtue of their placement at the beginning of the book (more on this below).

In this essay, I want not to exegete Psalms 1 and 2, but rather to highlight they role they play as an Introduction to the Psalms. This is important because, as with any other Introduction to a book, Psalms 1 and 2 provide important clues about how the Psalms as a whole are to be read, prayed and also preached. It is important also because the rediscovery[1] that an initial Psalm (or Psalms) could play an introductory role is quite new. Finally, as I hope to show, the role Psalm 2 plays as introductory opens a door (quite literally given our analogy) for reading the

[1] The view that Psalm 1 was introductory was common among interpreters prior to the 20th century. Examples of commentators include John Calvin, the editors of the Gutenberg Bible, and Perowne (1878 [volume 1, p. 105]).

whole Book of Psalms as a book about God's Messiah. This will lead quite naturally to a quest to see how well (if at all) Jesus fulfills that expectation.

Let us concede for now that Psalms 1 & 2 are the Introduction and that Psalm 2 introduces us to a messianic theme to the Book of Psalms. This leaves us with Psalm 1. What introductory role does it play? What is its distinctive message as the first part of our Introduction? As anyone can see by reading it, Psalm 1 concerns the value of meditating on God's "law." And to what does "the law" in Ps. 1:2 refer? The context of Psalm 1, including its placement at the beginning of the Psalms, provides a likely answer. The "law" refers to the five-book structure of the Book of Psalms as a whole (Psalms 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150). These "Five Books" echo the five-book Torah (or law book) of Moses, the Pentateuch, suggesting that the Psalms are, like the Pentateuch, a sort of law-book upon which one can meditate for spiritual benefit.[2] Psalm 1 is thus like a sign hanging on the first entryway door. It says something like: "Ponder the things in this house to your joy and benefit; neglect them to your peril." This role is somewhat analogous to the more conventional Introduction to the Book of Proverbs (Prov. 1:1–7), which also has the theme of deriving benefit from studying that poetic book.

I hope that by now readers will have begun to see some of the significance that Psalms 1 and 2 have for understanding the Psalms as a whole. Before exploring more of the riches these psalms offer, I want to provide some background to this new understanding that will help the reader to understand what we have explored so far, and to prepare the reader for what lies ahead. Two background issues merit consideration. Each will be considered in turn.

I. What Evidence Exists that Psalms 1 and 2 are Introductory? Are There Other Psalms that Signal such Things as a Conclusion or Climax to the Psalms?

What then (briefly and summarily) is the evidence that Psalms 1 and 2 have a role to play as the Introduction to the Psalms? And, more generally, what is the evidence that the various psalms in the Psalter have consciously been organized to form a sort of book-like "argument"? Each question will be asked in turn, starting with the more general question.

2 I sometimes say, too simplistically, to my Divinity students that whereas the Pentateuch is *prescriptively* God's law as it pertains to *behavior* and belief, the Psalms are *descriptively* God's law as it pertains to *experience* and belief.

The editors' introductory essay to this volume has already referred to the phenomenon of a purposeful ordering to many of the psalms.[3] While not all scholars agree that the psalms have been intentionally ordered, most scholars would agree on the following evidence:

1. The demarcation of the Psalms into a collection of five books implies that some thought has been given to organizing the Psalms into a coherent (Pentateuch-like) whole. In other words, the Book of Psalms has likely been shaped to echo the Pentateuch, the five-volume Law of Moses.

2. Books I–III (i.e. Psalms 1–89) of the Psalter place relative emphasis on the role of human (i.e. Davidic) kingship in God's plans, whereas Books IV–V (i.e. Psalms 90-–50) place relatively more emphasis on divine kingship. (An important corollary to this point is that psalms attributed to king David, including many of the so-called messianic psalms, occur more frequently in Books I–II than in IV–V.)[4] Indeed, historically speaking, the order of Books I–III became authoritatively fixed prior to Books IV–V .[5]

3. There is in general a spiritual-psychological progression within the Book of Psalms. In other words psalms of hurtful complaint (often called Lament Psalms) eventually give way to Psalms of praise as one progresses through the book.[6]

4. Several "Hallelujah" psalms (i.e. Psalms 146–50) cluster at the end of the book, as if to conclude it. Since Psalms 146–150 conclude the book, Psalm 73 is the midpoint of

[3] They write (p. ?): "Psalms 1–2 introduce the whole Psalter, meditating on the path of obedience to the Law of the Lord and God's sovereignty and appointed king. Book I continues with Psalms 3-41, which emphasize God's covenant with David."

[4] A few scholars, believing that Israel's hope in a human, messianic king is discontinued in Books IV-V, being completely replaced by an emphasis alone on God's kingship, have found it hard to reconcile the messianic theme of Psalm 2 with that psalm being an introduction to the whole book of Psalms. (These scholars usually interpret Psalm 2 to affirm more generally the sovereignty of God more than His rule specifically through the agency of the messiah.) However, Psalms 110 and 132 attest to the continuation of the messianic beyond Books I–III (indeed right through to Book V), thus obviating the problem.

[5] This is evident from some of the Qumran manuscripts where the sequential order of the psalms is still in flux beyond Psalm 89.

[6] The progression was noted in traditional (older) scholarship as well.

the Psalter. This psalm seems appropriate as a mid-way psalm, reflecting on the perspective of Psalm 1.[7]

5. A detailed study of a collection of temple hymns from ancient Sumer and of other pertinent data offer corroborative evidence for believing that the Psalms were purposefully arranged.[8]

We come now to our initial more specific background question: what evidence is there that Psalms 1 and 2 are implicitly the "Introduction" to the Book of Psalms? Several lines of evidence are outlined below:

1. Unlike almost every other psalm within Books I–III, Psalms 1 and 2 bear no title or superscription (for example, "to the choir director. A psalm of David.").[9] The intended effect appears to be that Psalms 1 and 2 are *themselves* the heading, superscription or "introduction" to the Psalter.[10]

2. Although they differ in subject matter, Psalms 1–2 have several features in common. These include the following. The word "meditate" in Psalm 1:2 is the same word in Hebrew as "plot" in Psalm 2:1.[11] Both psalms contrast a pious individual with a godless mob. Both contrast the fixed nature of the godly individual with the fleeting mobility (and ultimate demise) of the

7 This psalm begins Book III and relates how the psalmist was able to overcome a personal crisis of faith that arose from observing the apparent prosperity of unbelievers. He did this implicitly by recognizing that faithful believers (the "pure in heart," v. 1) are not exempted from pain and suffering. (I owe this observation to Clinton McCann.) The psalmist did this also, and more obviously, by having a moment of revelation when, upon visiting the sanctuary complex, he came to realize that the godless end life in terror, not knowing God, whereas he was blessed beyond imagination through daily experience of God's comfort, counsel and "nearness." For more on Psalm 73, see for example Clinton McCann, "Psalm 73: A Microcosm of Old Testament Theology," in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy*, ed. Kenneth G. Hoglund, *et al*. (JSOTSup 58; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), pp. 247–57.

8 Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBL Dissertation Series 76; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 13–138.

9 Nowhere else in these books do two consecutive psalms occur without a superscription. Only four other psalms omit a superscription (10, 33, 43, and 71), likely due to their connectedness to the preceding psalm.

10 Compare Genesis 1:1-2:4a which, preceding the framework of headings, "these are the generations of x" seems similarly to be an Introduction to the Book of Genesis, if not to the whole Pentateuch.

11 A word in English that suffices in both contexts is "muse." The word conveys the notion of murmuring, either for the purpose of absorbing God's teaching (as in Psalm 1) (compare the imagery of the modern-day orthodox Jew wearing the tephilim on his forehead, moving his head back and forth, and murmuring devoutly as he reads the Torah), or grumbling (as in Psalm 2) (likely with a view to plot cunningly).

wicked.[12] Also, both psalms have the Hebrew word-cluster "perish the way" at or near end. Most importantly, Psalm 2 ends in the same happy way (literally) that Psalm 1 begins: "Happy is the one who/are those who . . . ." Although the word "happy" is in itself important,[13] its significance for us here in that the Old Testament often marks a coherent unified unit through the repetition of the same word at both the beginning and end of that unit. In short, this framing device implies that Psalms 1 and 2 can also be understood as a single entity.[14] This factor alone likely accounts for numerous cases in history where Psalms 1 and 2 have been interpreted as a single psalm, including one manuscript tradition of Acts 13:33 in which Psalm 2 is referred to as Psalm 1, which can easily be explained if Psalm 2 was thought to be the continuation of Psalm 1.

3. Psalm 2 bears a number of clear similarities to the second last psalm, Psalm 149 (cf. Psalm 149:2, 7–9). This suggests that neither the second nor the penultimate psalm has been placed coincidentally, but rather with reference to the other.

4. Psalm 1 has several grammatical features that are more characteristic of prose than of poetry. Why is this important? Since we don't normally think of hymn collections (which the Book of Psalms is) as introductory, the profusion of prose-like features in Psalm 1 might well be a clue that it plays the double role of hymn (poetic) and introduction (normally prosaic). In other words the prose-like traits of Psalm 1 signal its role also as an introduction to the book. These prose traits are the definite article, the relative pronoun and several particles like "therefore," and "but rather."[15] To be sure, many of these grammatical features (especially the definite article) are

[12] Psalm 1:1 conveys mobility by referring to the wicked at one time "walking," at another "standing," and at still another "sitting." No less mobile is the imagery of v. 4 which reads literally: "Not so, [with] the wicked, but rather as the chaff that the wind blows away." (As the literary scholar Robert Alter has noted, the wicked are here not afforded the dignity of being even the subject of a verb!) All this stands in stark contrast to the imagery of the godly man being rooted like a tree. Psalm 2 has the wicked (kings) making a vane effort to (literally) "take a stand" (v. 2a) against the Lord and his anointed, paralleled in the next line with reference to them attempting vainly together to "be established (or founded [as a temple])" against the same. Their desire to break free of servitude to Judah, expressed by "let us tear off their yoke, let us cast away their ropes from upon us," similarly conveys a wayward disdain for that which provides security. This stands in stark contrast to the notion of fixedness conveyed by references to the One who "sits in heaven" and who Himself "has established" (compare similar usages of this word in Prov. 8:23 and 2 Chron. 29:35) his son upon Zion, His holy mountain.

[13] Jews in the first century A.D., likely including Jesus and the disciples, were familiar with a Greek translation of the Old Testament which renders the Hebrew word "happy" in Psalms 1:1 and 2:13 as *makarios*/*makarioi* (singular and plural respectively). This is the same Greek word that Jesus used in the Beatitudes and which we know through the *KJV* as "blessed."

[14] For a lengthy assessment of the evidence both in favor and (ultimately) against seeing Psalms 1 and 2 as a single entity, see John T. Willis, "Psalm 1—An Entity," *ZAW* 91 (1979): 381–401.

[15] These prosaic features include the following: 1) the definite article (v. 1: "happy is *the* man . . ."; v. 4: "not so with *the* wicked"; v. 4: "but like *the* chaff . . ."; v. 5: "in *the* judgment . . ."); 2) the relative pronoun

found elsewhere in the psalms. However, in no other psalm of similar or even greater length are so many of these prosaic features found together. And further, nowhere else in the Psalms can the prose particle "but rather," which occurs twice in Psalm 1 (vv. 2 and 4), be found.

To summarize, there is ample evidence that Psalms 1 and 2 have intentionally been placed at the beginning of the book in order to introduce it. To fully understand the importance of these psalms one needs to do more (though not less) than an exegesis of each in its own (original) historical-grammatical context. It is this other "canonical" understanding that we are exploring in this essay.

II. Can a Psalm Have Valid Meanings in Addition to the Meaning Intended by the Original Author?

What we have learned about the importance of the editorial placement of Psalms 1-2 presents a challenge to a commonly held rule of thumb (at least within some circles of biblical interpretation) that a text can properly mean today only what its author intended it to mean when he wrote it. The challenge with both Psalms 1 and 2, however, is that *two* divinely led people have strongly affected the meaning of each psalm. First is the person who in each case wrote the psalm (meriting the sort of grammatical-historical exegesis that is modeled elsewhere in this volume). And second is the person who, likely at a much later time, decided that each psalm should be placed at (or, in the case of Psalm 2, near) the beginning of the Psalter (meriting the canonical/positional approach that is followed in this essay). In situations like this where editorial placement is relevant, the traditional interpretive focus on authorial intent must be adapted to reckon also with the meaning of the later—but clearly intentional, important and inspired—work of the person(s) who put the finishing touches on the Book of Psalms by arranging the order of Psalms such as 1 and 2 (as introduction), 73 (as midpoint), and 146–50 (as conclusion), and likely others as well.

What I am doing is coming clean by confessing a mode of interpretation that I have already implicitly invoked. An example of this slightly different (or supplementary) approach to grammatical-historical exegesis can be found in the argument made earlier in this essay that the word "law" in Psalm 1 now has as its primary point of reference the law-like five-book collection

(v. 1: "the man *who* . . . "; v. 3: "*which* yields its fruit . . ."; v. 3: "and all *that* he does prospers"; and v. 4: "like chaff *which* the wind blows away . . ."); and 3) several particles (v. 2: "*but only* [or *but rather*] in the law . . ."; v. 4 "*but only* [or *but rather*] like the chaff . . ."; v. 5: "*therefore* wicked ones will not stand . . ."; and v. 6: "*For* the LORD knows . . .").

that comprises the Book of Psalms as a whole.[16] This interpretation implicitly gives credence to what seems likely to have been the intended meaning *not of the original author*, but rather of an inspired compiler of this part of the Book of Psalms. The intended meaning of the original author of the psalm is not ruled out or deemed irrelevant; it contributes to the overall sense that the psalm conveys. But, given the importance place Psalm 1 plays as partly introductory to the Psalms as a whole, the latter meaning *in its context of placement as introduction* should be allowed to trump that of the original writer. Thus, the "law" to which Psalm 1 *now* refers is likely the five-book Pentateuch-like collection that is the book of Psalms. Sometimes then there is, as here, a split focus to the question of an author's original intent between the intent of the one who originally wrote the poem and the intent of the one who later assigned it a particular place and role within a biblical book.

To my mind the issue of seeking the true meaning of a text is best addressed by asking a different hermeneutical question: *Not* "what is the original intention of the author?" but rather "*how does the text in its present context want the reader to interpret it*?" I find this to be the most helpful interpretive question that one can ask of a biblical passage. This is not just because it nicely handles the problem of a split focus between the intent of an author and that of a later compiler. It is preferable because we cannot always be sure what the intent of the original author was.

To ask this different hermeneutical question is not as radical or different an approach as some might judge. For one thing, this question seeks to moor the quest for meaning in a similarly objective way to authorial intent. And for another, it avoids the impression that the Bible, often not divulging authorial intent, might be deficient by not providing the all-important clue to its own interpretation. And for still another, it leaves room for God as the ultimate Author of scripture to reveal through his Word subtleties of meaning that transcend the limited perspective (and intention) of the human biblical writer.[17]

[16] I remember raising this interpretative question in my days as a student at Dallas Theological Seminary in the late 1970s. The issue came up in a similar discussion of Judges 4-5. Here is the problem: if the student of the Bible is to seek after only the intended meaning of the original author, whose intended meaning is the student to follow? That of the original composer of Judges 5 who likely lived in the 12th to 11th century B.C.? Or that of the composer who for his own purposes later included Judges 5 into the narrative framework of the Book of Judges?

[17] One further example is the Trinitarian allusion allegedly inherent in the words of Genesis 1:28:"Let us make humankind in our own image." As comparison with the Ugaritic texts strongly suggests, the original human writer was likely thinking of God addressing what we today might call a parliamentary chamber of angels. However, throughout the centuries Christian interpreters such as John Calvin have seen an obvious correspondence between the plurality of "us" and the plural (triune) nature of God. The point is this: surely God, unbeknownst to the original human wrtier, is no less aware of the correspondence between the plural language of "us" and his being than were theologians like Calvin to infer it.

Allow me to indulge in one more homey illustration like the one with which I began this essay. As often as our family can, we escape from the summer heat and humidity of Toronto by going to a cottage at a place called Eagle Lake, a three-hour drive north of the city. In this cottage there hangs from the ceiling a wagon wheel that has been converted into a chandelier. The old wagon wheel lies flat and has around the rim three anchored chains that extend upwards to converge at the ceiling. Light sockets sit on the upper edge of the rim and wiring runs inconspicuously through the links of the chain up into the housing of the ceiling fixture that provides the light with electricity.

To my mind, Psalm 1 is a lot like this chandelier. Just as the chandelier was originally a wagon wheel with its own original purpose in relation to the wagon to which it belonged, so Psalm 1 had a purpose intended by its original author. So, just as the form or shape of the wheel betrays its original role as part of a wooden wagon of yesteryear, so the method of Form Criticism has helped biblical scholars to identify the form of Psalm 1 as a wisdom psalm and to identify its original role as a poem that functioned within Wisdom circles in ancient Israel, perhaps within a context of training scribes for service within the royal administration and temple (this is the stuff of historical-grammatical exegesis). But as it now hangs from our ceiling, the wagon wheel has been adapted for an entirely different purpose—to be a chandelier. Moving beyond its original purpose, Psalm 1 is a wagon-wheel cum chandelier that now serves to shed light on the purpose of the Psalms as a whole.

The same analogy can be applied to Psalm 2**.** In its earlier wagon-wheel incarnation Psalm 2 may have been part of the liturgy for a coronation ceremony for a king of Judah. On this understanding the ceremony was a dramatic affair that visualized (and perhaps ritually enacted) such things as the implications the king's rule would have for nations foolish enough to oppose the Lord's anointed. A key focus would also have been on ritually confirming the Lord's adoption of the king as his appointed ruler and son, in keeping with God's covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7.

As dramatic as that wagon-wheel phase in the life of Psalm 2 may have been, it can hardly be compared to the chandelier phase. That phase came long after the time when God's judgment fell upon Judah, resulting in the temporary demise of Davidic kingship in Judah. This coronation hymn for a king, like the wagon wheel, fell out of service for a long time. But the theology of the hymn remained true and its hyperbole came more and more to reflect the God-given, historical hope in an Almighty messiah who would bring God's rule to Judah and who would judge the nations. In its chandelier phase as introduction, Psalm 2 now casts a bright and powerful beam that sends messianic shimmers throughout the Psalter as a whole.

III. Back to Psalms 1 and 2 in their Role(s) as Introduction to the Psalms

With the challenging issue of evidence behind us, and also the problem of single versus multiple meanings to a text, we are in a good position to ponder further what this double-introduction is trying to tell us about the message of the Psalms as a whole. Here I propose simply to summarize a few representative views that I think are in keeping with how Psalms 1 and 2 want to be heard. First, though, a clarification is needed**.** As introduction(s), Psalms 1 and 2 can each be heard *independently* of the other, but also *together*. In light of this I will first offer views on the meaning of Psalm 1 independently. Views on Psalm 2 as an independent introduction shall follow. And finally shall come views on the message of Psalms 1 and 2 *together*—a double-barreled introductory message.

Category A: Psalm 1 (Alone)

> "Israel reflects upon the psalms. . . to learn the 'way of righteousness' which comes from obeying the divine law and is now communicated through the prayers of Israel." (Brevard Childs.[18])

> "Psalm 1. . . sets the tone of the collection in terms of the choice between the life of the righteous and the wicked. In addition, with its reference to Yahweh's instruction (v. 2), it directs the community to view the Psalter as teaching about the life of faith." (W.H. Bellinger, Jr.[19])

> "Here at the threshold of the Psalter we are asked to consider the teaching that the way life is lived is decisive for how it turns out . . . . This first beatitude prompts the reader to think of the entire book as instruction for life and commends a kind of conduct that uses the Psalter in that way." (James L. Mays.[20])

[18] Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 513–14. In his later *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (1985), Childs describes the Psalms as a guide to the obedient life and stresses the relation of the Psalms as an affirmation of life over the threat of death.

[19] W. H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), pp. 129–30.

[20] James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, ed. James L. Mays *et al*.; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 40–41.

Category B: Psalm 2 (Alone)

"Psalm 2 addresses the question of the community of faith faced with the problems of a history made by nations contending for power; its word to faith is the announcement of the messiah into whose power God will deliver the nations." (James L. Mays.[21])

"As a result [of placing Psalms 1 and 2 as introduction] the theme of how Yhwh's *mashiah* will conquer all opposition and rule the world from Zion must be considered as one of the broad, overarching themes of the Psalms, in whose light all the ensuing lyrics, including the royal psalms, should be interpreted." (David C. Mitchell.[22])

Category C: Psalms 1 and 2 Together

"[W]e. . . learn that this book will speak to us of individuals and their way and destiny but also of kings and nations and their conduct and fate. . . . Psalm 1 may be a word of instruction to the king or other rulers and leaders even as Psalm 2 is a word of assurance to the individual member of the community of faith. . . . The way of the Lord's instruction and the rule of the Lord's anointed are the chief clues to what matters in all of this." (Patrick Miller, Jr.[23])

"Those who engage in such meditation [as in Psalm 1] will find joy in so doing, and will be well nourished and productive, like trees planted by the riverside. But this theological reflection is not done in isolation. It takes place in the context of a world where nations plot and engage in war, a world, nevertheless, ruled by the Lord and where those who are hurting can find refuge in God." (James Limburg.[24])

"Just as Psalm 1 and 2 call our attention to the main idioms within the subject matter of Jewish Scripture—the Torah (Psalm 1:2), the prophetic promise and

21 Ibid., p. 44 (compare also p. 48).
22 David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms* (JSOTSup 252; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 245.
23 Patrick Miller, Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), p. 91.
24 James Limburg, "Psalms, Book of," *ABD* V, p. 535.

> judgment of God (Psalm 2:6–12), and the wisdom of God (Psalm 1:1, 2–6)—so this phrase [i.e. "happy are all who take refuge in him"] at the end of Psalm 2 is an editorial effort to demarcate a specific sub-theme for the laments that predominate in the first half of the Psalms." (Gerald T. Sheppard.[25])

To my mind the interpretations in each category above resonate with how these texts as introduction want to be heard. As for my assessment of these, I would like to return to the analogy of the two doors with which I began this essay.

Firstly, as illustrated in categories A and B above, we ought to think of entering the two front doors of the Psalter *independently*, as if entering one of two doors that stand side by side. On this understanding the double Introduction provides the reader with the option of reading the Psalms from the perspective of either Psalm 1 or Psalm 2. The person who enters through Psalm 1 (as in category A) is to faithfully meditate on the Book of Psalms for the purpose of growing into a deeply rooted and spiritually productive person who follows the way of life and avoids the path of evildoers. Alternatively, the one who enters through Psalm 2 (as in category B) is invited to read the Psalter as a book that deals with God's plan to exercise sovereignty over the entire world through his begotten Davidic son, the Messiah. In either case, the Christian reader stands to benefit immensely from meditating on the Psalms.

Secondly, though not as in category C, we ought also to think of entering these two doors as if they existed *in relation to each other*, as if one led to the other in a single narrow hallway such that one must first go through one door *and then* the next. From this perspective the reader cannot encounter one psalm without the other; in other words, the type of understanding reflected in *both* categories A and B above must be invoked. To read the psalms for the purpose of personal spiritual growth (the way of Psalm 1) is thus to be told in the very next psalm that the messiah's reign is the means by which God executes his plan to bring salvation or judgment. So too, to read the psalms as messianic (the way of Psalm 2), one must first "sign on" to the plan of personal growth and the avoidance of evil advocated by Psalm 1. Indeed, given the placement of Psalm 1 prior to Psalm 2, the messiah cannot be the subject matter of the entire Psalter independently of the call of Psalm 1 for dedication to God's law. This concept merits elaboration briefly.

To this point we have been thinking of Psalm 1 as non-messianic, relating as it does to the importance of meditating on God's instruction or "law." The real messianic psalm, so we

[25] Gerald T. Sheppard, "Psalms: Or, 'How to Read a Book that Seems Intent on Reading You'," *Theology: Notes & News* (October 1992), p. 17.

have seen, is its next-door neighbor Psalm 2. However, there is a sense in which Psalm 2 affects Psalm 1 such that it too can be understood as messianic**.** As it stands beside Psalm 1, Psalm 2 casts a messianic shadow over Psalm 1 such that it too can be seen to address the messiah. The shadow I am referring to can best be seen and understood by recalling a passage from the Book of Deuteronomy.

In Deuteronomy 17, God's plan to allow Israel to have a king is discussed. God ordains that king not amass wealth, horses and wives. Rather, his primary duty is described in the following way:

> 18 When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. 19 It shall remain with him and *he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes*, 20 neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel.[26]

God's anointed king is not above the law. The law applies as much to him (or more so) than to anyone. My point: given that Psalm 2 already establishes the introduction as indisputably messianic, Psalm 1 might also have been placed at the beginning to emphasize this royal mandate upon the messiah.[27] In this way, then, Psalm 1 might be not only a chandelier inviting the ordinary person to prosper through meditation on God's law, as we saw in category A above, but also a chandelier that complements the messianic chandelier of Psalm 2 by inviting the messiah to take up his divinely appointed role to meditate on the law (Psalm 1; cf. Deut. 17:17–19).

Thirdly, as in category C above which integrates both psalms into a single message, we can think of entering these two doors as if they were *bound together as one*, much as a screen door is adjoined at the frame to the main door.[28] On this understanding there is an implied connection between the righteous individuals in both psalms (the one obedient to torah in Psalm 1 and the Davidic king of Psalm 2) as well as the wicked (the anonymous chaff in Psalm 1 and the conspiring nations of Psalm 2). Implicitly as well, the happy *both* avoid the influence of the godless (Ps. 1:1) and take refuge in the Lord (Ps. 2:13).

[26] *NRSV* (with emphasis added*)*.

[27] A similar connection has been observed also by Miller, who writes: "Psalm 1 placed before Psalm 2, therefore, joins Deuteronomy in a kind of democratizing move. . . . While Psalm 2 invites the reader to hear the voice of the Lord's anointed in the following psalms, Psalm 1 says that what we hear is the voice of *anyone* who lives by the Torah, which may and should include the king." (Patrick D. Miller, "The Beginning of the Psalter," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* [ed. J. Clinton McCann; JSOTSup 159; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], p. 91.)

[28] I confess to being less enthusiastic about this approach. The psalms are different enough in character to "want to be heard" less as one than separately.

IV. *How to Read the Psalter Messianically*

Most present-day Christians will agree: It is more difficult to read the Book of Psalms as a whole from a messianic perspective (the way of Psalm 2) than from a devotional perspective (the way of Psalm 1). In light of this, I want to share a few *general* insights on seeing the messiah (for Christians, that is, Christ) in the Psalter. I call these insights general because they arise from consideration of factors apart from Psalms 1 and 2, which have been our focus thus far.

One of the most helpful discussions on reading the Psalms messianically comes from the 19th century Anglican scholar J. J. S. Perowne whose Psalms commentary still draws the attention of reprint publishers.[29] Perowne advocates reading the psalms as "typologically prophetic."[30] Reading the psalms typologically allows one to read the psalms as any other Type in Scripture, namely with a view to focusing on that which corresponds to Christ and to overlooking that which does not. In this way a psalm such as Psalm 41 (which contains the words applied to Judas in John 12:18, "he who eats bread with me has lifted up his heel and turned against me") can be seen to echo the agony of Jesus despite the fact that the psalm also contains a confession of personal guilt from sin which cannot easily refer to Jesus (see v. 4). Perowne suggests verse 4 simply be overlooked as part of the type that doesn't apply (much in the same way, I would add, that in seeing the typological application to Christ of the serpent lifted on the pole in Numbers 21, we instinctively know not to equate Christ with the serpent, a symbol of sin and evil.) Now to be sure, this sort of "picking and choosing" what applies to Jesus and what does not won't do much to convince a sceptic that the psalms apply to Christ. But, as Psalm 1 reminds us, our purpose in reading the Psalms is not primarily apologetic (in the sense of defending the faith), but devotional and, as Psalm 2 reminds us, Christological.

Other general ways to see Christ in the Psalms include being open to different ways in which the psalms (or parts thereof) might apply to Christ. For example, most of Psalm 22 is best Christologically read as words said *by* Christ himself, whereas Psalms such as 72 are best read as words *about* Christ and his kingdom. And, regarding parts of psalms that contain cries for

[29] J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms: A New Translation with Introductory Notes Explanatory and Critical* (4th edition; 2 vols. in 1; Reprint ed; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1966 [orig. 1878]).
[30] Ibid., pp. 43–55 (esp. pp. 43, 49). Perowne writes (p. 49): "Now, the Psalms are typical. They are the words of holy men of old—of one especially, whose life was fashioned in many of its prominent features to be a type of Christ. But just as David's *whole* life was not typical of Christ, so neither were all his words. His suffering and humiliation first, and his glory afterwards, were faint and passing and evanescent images of the life of Him who was both Son of David and Son of God. But the sorrowful shadow of pollution which passed upon David's life, *that* was not typical. . . ."

vengeance, even these can be read messianically a) as part of the Type that does not apply to Christ, b) as a legitimate prerogative that Christ thankfully chose not to exercise, or c) as awaiting fulfillment at the return of Christ as judge.

There are still other general ways to see Christ in the psalms. For example, it is helpful to take seriously the inseparability of the experience of the individual psalmist and that (typologically and prophetically) of the later Christ, and to see that inseparability as testimony to Christ's solidarity with human suffering and to the Christian's with His. It is also helpful to understand the messianic character of the Psalms not too narrowly. Note, for example, what one scholar says about Martin Luther's later, more mature understanding of how the psalms relate to Christ:

> Luther's approach to the psalms is notable, particularly because it is Christ centered. For him, all aspects of Christian life, including the psalms, relate to Christ. Even the psalmists' down-to-earth requests for protection and thanks for deliverance Luther applied to his own circumstances and life as a Christian**.** The psalmists asked for blessing and gave thanks for blessings as members of the covenant people of God, relying on God's grace, trusting his promises, worshiping in his temple, receiving his forgiveness. Yet all of these—covenant, grace, promise, temple, and forgiveness—found their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Christ "is himself the God whom we are exhorted to worship." When the psalmist exults that God's "love endures forever," Luther responds that *Christ* "stands hidden" in that phrase.[31]

As this reference to Luther illustrates, present-day Christians have a lot to learn from believers in times past who quite naturally saw Christ reflected in most Psalms.

V. Is it Really Appropriate to Read the Whole Psalter Messianically?

It may seem like giving too much weight and influence to Psalm 2 to suggest, as I am, that it casts so long a shadow (or, better, light) over the book of Psalms such that the whole book can be read messianically.[32] However, evidence from early Jewish and Christian history indicates that the Book of Psalms was read in this full-blown sort of way. One episode in this history comes from the Septuagint, a prominent Greek translation of the Old Testament that came into use in the third century B.C. and was broadly influential through the time of Jesus and the early church.

[31] Bruce A. Cameron, "Preface," to *Psalms: With Introductions by Martin Luther* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), p. 4.

[32] I do not mean to imply that the Book of Psalms is to be read *only* as messianic. Other ways, many based on the grammatical-historical approach modeled elsewhere in this book, abound to the benefit of the reader and in keeping with how the book was edited.

Interestingly, the words found at the head of many superscriptions, "for the choir director" were translated into Greek as *eis to telos* which means, "pertaining to the end," "concerning fulfillment," or the like.[33] Since this notation is very often followed by the words "of David," readers of the Psalms in Greek would read "of David" in conjunction with "concerning fulfillment." I think it is very likely that this influenced readers of the Psalms to understand the Psalms of David to be read no longer simply as hymns but as *prophecies*. Prophecies about what? Most likely: "of (the) David" who is yet to come, God's messiah.

Another line of evidence from Jewish history comes from the Dead Sea Scrolls. Among these scrolls was found a variant version of the Book of Psalms (the best known of which is 11QPs$_a$) that bore an appendix that included 2 Samuel 23:1–7. Interestingly this passage in Samuel is one of a few texts in the Old Testament that refers to David as a prophet. In addition to referring to David, the main subject matter of the preceding psalms, as a prophet, the appendix includes a tally of the number of psalms that he wrote. An implication arising from this addition to the Psalter is that 11QPs$_a$ bears witness to an element within Judaism (roughly at the time of Christ) that understood at least some of the Psalms to be David "prophecies." As with the Septuagint cases, it is easy to imagine that the fulfillment of these Davidic prophecies was thought to lie with a son of David who was yet to come.

Finally, a third line of evidence comes from Luke's testimony concerning the apostle Peter in Acts 2. Interpreting Pentecost for the bewildered crowd who just witnessed it, Peter cites the prophet Joel. What often goes unnoticed is that Peter, without batting an eyelash, goes right on in vv. 25–35 to cite another prophet, king David (v. 30), and then cites from two psalms (Psalm 16:10 and 110:1) as if they were prophecies.

To back up, my point has not only been that Psalm 2 has become a messianic psalm, but that through its role as Introductory, it paints the entire Book of Psalms with a messianic brush. This broad messianic brushing was implicitly condoned by the apostle Peter, and continued by Christians throughout history, who instinctively knew to read the Psalms as if they had ultimately to do with Christ. Given this ancient historical tradition within Judaism first of reading the Psalms messianically, Christians cannot rightly be accused of misreading the Psalms by reading "Christ" (the messiah) back into the book.[34] Rather, the earliest Christians were continuing a practice of messianic exegesis begun within Judaism long before Jesus.

[33] For an accurate and accessible translation of the Septuagint version of the Psalms, see *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under that Title: The Psalms* (translated by Albert Pietersma; Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[34] Although Christians take the three terms messiah, Christ and Jesus to by synonymous, Jews prior to the time of Jesus (and since) obviously did not. In other words when I use the terms messianic and

VI. How Does Jesus Fare in a Whole Reading of the Psalter Messianically?

We have seen evidence that the Book of Psalms was organized to be read as testimony concerning Israel's expected messiah. This leads to an important question: What kind of messiah might the Book of Psalms as a whole expect? At least for Christians the question becomes more specific: How well does Jesus live up to those expectations? Here then is a selective walk through the book, with a view partially to answering that question.[35]

Psalm 1 is a doorway through which the messiah must first successfully pass. The king must diligently study God's law (v. 2; compare Deut. 17:18–20). Such a king would perhaps from his youth be found in the temple, listening to the teachers and asking them questions. The teachers in turn would be "astonished at his understanding and answers."[36] He might even offer his own version of the beatitudes of Psalm 1, proclaiming such things as "Happy are those who . . . ."[37] His teachings might reflect such strength and maturity that common people would observe that his teaching was uniquely authoritative.[38]

Psalm 2 expects the messiah to be one whom rulers would oppose and be glad to be free of (v. 1–2). He is after all, according to God's own declaration, "My Son" (v. 7). He is one with whom God is well pleased. By placing his own begotten son as king of the Jews in Zion (v. 7), God has put the destiny of all nations in his hands (v. 8). All authority in heaven and earth is given to him (v. 8). Lords of the nations are told to put their trust in him (v. 12b), to revere him with trembling joy (v. 11), or else to face his wrath and perish (v. 12a).

Immediately after comes Psalm 3 and after it dozens of others that speak of the Davidic king suffering (3–7, 12, 13, 22, 25–28, 35, 38–40, 42–44, 51, 54–57.) So prominent is this theme of suffering that present-day scholars categorize these psalms as "Lament Psalms."[39] These

christological to describe a Jewish hope before the time of Jesus, those terms do not refer to Jesus but to a hoped for messiah.

35 Of course anyone's pre-understanding of the Messiah (including my own) cannot help but affect his or her reading of the Psalter. For a similar attempt, see James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), pp. 99–107.

36 Luke 4:46–47 (*NJKV*).

37 Compare Matthew 5:1–10.

38 Compare Matthew 7:28–29.

39 I find it surprising that few scholars take these psalms as testimony of the suffering of the messiah. (Many New Testament scholars judge from the absence of evidence for any *expectation* of a suffering messiah in Jesus' time that there was no Jewish *literature* regarding the suffering of the messiah. A radical, but not uncommon extension of this view is that the early Church, in desperation to explain the crucifixion, read the lament psalms back into the memory of the life of Jesus. But, why is it that Jesus' followers are allowed this innovation, but not the master rabbi who inspired them? This is all the more strange given that

laments are too many to rehearse. Perhaps the best way to illustrate the flavor of these laments in relation to Davidic kingship is to note that one of the main schools of scholarly interpretation understands them originally to have been prayers made by the king, often on behalf of his people, and ritually reenacted within the Temple. The prominent scholar of the Psalms, John Eaton, a proponent of this view, summarizes the content of the Lament psalms as follows:

> In symbol the king was beset by enemies from all quarters and brought to the realm of death; his humble fidelity was thus proved and Yahweh answered his prayer, exalting him above all dangers and foes. While the order of the ceremonies and texts remains uncertain, the chief elements of the royal suffering and exaltation are strongly attested, as is also the close relation to the assertion of Yahweh's own kingship. [40]

Psalm 72 celebrates the majesty, eternality and universality of the reign of the son of David. Psalm 89 does this also, but significantly, includes a rude interruption in which God rejects his anointed one. Enemies and other passers-by shame and dishonor the king, casting his crown and throne to the dust (vv. 39, 44). The psalmist asks why God has seemingly forsaken his covenant with David (v. 49). This is clearly a moment of profound disillusionment. Hopes for a promised eternal reign of the messiah has been dashed by an unexpected tragedy.

After the shocking disclosure of the messiah's suffering, Moses appears on the scene (Psalm 90).[41] The psalms that follow Psalm 90 (especially Psalm 91 that immediately follows) give assurance that all is well. Moreover, Psalms 110 and 132 resurrect the notion of the messiah. He appears despite the seeming finality of Psalm 89.

True, all is well (including hope in the messiah), but something has changed. From Psalm 90 onwards, there is a change in emphasis away from the kingly rule of the son of David towards a focus on the king as Yahweh himself. This change comes soon after the messiah's downfall. Thus, Psalms 93, 95, 96 and 97 all proclaim: "Yahweh reigns!" It is as though something happened subsequently to Psalm 89 to instill belief in the kingly rule of God not so much through his Son, but as Himself. Note however: by making this transition from human to divine kingship, the Psalter has created a seemingly impossible challenge for any king who would aspire to fulfill the messianic hope that

the earliest traditions are uniform in attributing the notion of a suffering messiah, not to the church, but to *Jesus*.)

[40] John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (Second ed.; The Biblical Seminar; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1996), p. 133.

[41] In each of the synoptic gospels Moses meets with Jesus (in the transfiguration) in the pericope that follows Jesus' disclosure that the messiah must suffer (Mark 8;31–9:13; Matt. 16:21–17:13; Luke 9:22–36).

Psalm 2 sets up for the whole book. Now, only a messiah who was *both* the human son of David *and* God Himself could fulfill that hope.

Judaism in Jesus' day did not expect a messiah who would be both human and divine. Were such a messiah to appear at this time (as Christians believe he did), he would likely have had a difficult time with the religious authorities. He might also have spent a lot of time defending his unexpectedly divine identity by alluding to Psalms such as Psalm 110, which implies that the son of David would be David's "lord" who occupies a place at God's right hand. More so—and ironically—were such a messiah to appear at this time, something else would have happened that the Psalms further speak about, but that the Jewish establishment expected no more than the messiah's divinity: the messiah would suffer. Any claimant to something so unexpected as a *divine* messiah would very likely face persecution and perhaps even death at the hands of his own people (and others), which of course was the fate of Jesus.

Wolfhart Pannenberg, Reinhold Niebuhr and others have observed that Jesus could not have appeared as a messiah to the Jews if the Jewish people were not in turn looking for such a figure.[42] This is true. But what happens when a messiah comes whose understanding of the nature of the messiah differs from that of his Jewish contemporaries? This would be a recipe for conflict and would pose a problem for the acceptance of the true messiah. Were he to be the true messiah of God despite this different expectation by the Jews, something would need to happen to confirm the identity of that messiah for the Jews and for others. And this is precisely what Christians affirm that God did through the resurrection of Jesus. Luke puts it eloquently when he quotes from the sermon of Simon Peter after Pentecost:

"This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

'The Lord said to my Lord,

"Sit at my right hand,

until I make your enemies your footstool."'

Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him *both Lord and Messiah*, this Jesus whom you crucified."[43]

[42] See Mays, *The Lord Reigns*, p. 99.
[43] Acts 2:32–36 *NRSV* (emphasis mine).

What a privilege for Christians to proclaim the Good News of a Messiah who was both a son of David and David's LORD.