KING AND COMMUNITY: JOINING WITH DAVID IN PRAYER

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1. Introduction

The psalms have been the core of the prayer life of the Church over its entire history, and one could say the same for the Synagogue in different but not unrelated ways. How these ancient prayers have commended themselves, and been commended by others, to countless faithful people seeking to speak to God in moments of either desperation or elation is an intriguing question. In the case of the psalms of praise, the fact that in many of these the voice of the psalmist speaks directly to the community or congregation aids in the appropriation of these words by a later and larger community. But what about the private world of the laments where more often than not we hear only the psalmist’s voice speaking to a mostly silent deity? Is it simply a matter of association generated by later hearers/readers/prayers that allows a wider appropriation of these psalms? My present question is: are there factors internal to the Psalter that encourage this process of later appropriation and use? What are some of the aspects of this collection of psalms that allow it to get under the skin of faith communities and take pride of place in their prayer life?

2. Significance of the Superscriptions

One aspect of the collection important for addressing my question is the matter association of David with the psalms. A few scholars have examined this traditional association and discussed the significance of it for psalms’ interpretation. Some have argued for a significant place for David the king and royal theology in the shaping and interpretation of the whole Psalter.¹ They have suggested that David should be seen

¹ E.g. G.H. Wilson, “The Use of the Royal Psalms at the “Seams” of the Hebrew
as the archetypal prayer in the psalms, a model of prayer and piety for the larger faith community which follows him. Their arguments are often based on the evidence of the superscriptions referring to David or evidence from the few psalms which refer to him in the body of the text. In his essay on psalm titles, he sees them as ‘an early reflection on how the Psalms as a collection of sacred literature were understood.’ The titles provide ‘general parallels between the situation described in the Psalm and some incident in the life of David.’ Added late in the post-exilic


2 Cf. Mays, ‘David of the Psalms’, and Rendtorff, ‘Psalms of David’. Also note J. Luyten, ‘David and the Psalms’, in: L. Leijssen (ed.), Les psaumes: prières de l’humanité, d’Israël, de l’Église. Hommage à Jos Luyten, Leuven 1990, 57–76. The MT attributes 73 psalms to David by means of the superscriptions while the LXX attributes a total of 84 psalms to him. The Qumran scroll 11QPs predicts credits David, in a summary statement, with the composition of 4050 psalms. Even as early as the 2nd century BCE, Excl. 47:8–10 possibly credits David with all the psalms. In the New Testament Psalms 2 and 95 are both attributed to David even though neither is directly associated with David in the MT (see Acts 4:25–26 and Heb. 4:7 respectively). In some of the Qumran scrolls other non-canonical psalms are attributed to him. In the Babylonian Talmud in the first half of 2nd century CE, Rabbi Meir considers that David uttered ‘All the praises which are expressed in the book of Psalms’ (b. Pes. 117a), quoted in Cooper, ‘The Life and Times of King David’, 117. Cooper cites many other traditions along this line (ibid., 117–8). The psalms which mention David in the body of the psalm are: Pss. 18, 78, 89, 132, and 144.


period, Childs sees them as analogous to later ‘full-blown midrash’, and a source of formerly unknown information for the reader who now has an insight into David’s inner life. Childs puts this work down to a ‘pietistic circle of Jews whose interest was particularly focused on the nurture of the spiritual life.’ In the final shape of the Psalter, Childs suggests the psalms have been taken out of their earlier cultic setting and become a source of spiritual guidance amidst the troubles and joys of life. The superscriptions in the psalms have not always received the attention they might deserve, but is it just their presence that affects the place of the psalms in tradition or are they part of a more complex situation regarding the reception of the Psalter?

3. Individual and community

A second aspect of the Psalter relevant to my question is the relation of individual and communal foci in the psalms. In his 1992 article entitled ‘The Shape of the Book of Psalms’, Gerald Wilson suggested some interpretive implications derived from what he called the ‘indicators of shaping’ in the Psalter. Among them was the suggestion that ‘the shift from lament to praise within the Psalter is accompanied by a related shift in which the focus moves from the individual to the community.’ Wilson based his suggestion on the distribution of psalm types, noting that a ‘communal voice’ is more pronounced in the second half of the Psalter. While one could take issue with the detail of Wilson’s argument, his general point is correct. There is within the Psalter a shift in emphasis from a focus on the individual to communal concerns. But it is not solely the result of the distribution of psalm types in the sequencing of psalms. Some psalms have been reworked to include collective features.

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7 ‘Psalm Titles’, 149.
8 Childs, Introduction, 521.
10 ‘Shape of the Book’, 139.
Marko Marttila argues for a ‘collective redaction’ of the Psalter based on single psalms scattered throughout the whole.\textsuperscript{12}

4. A Complex Process

I want to build on these two aspects in addressing my question. I would suggest that in the final shape of the Psalter we see the product of a complex and long process which encourages later hearers/readers to take these psalms as their own. This process has a number of parts.

One involves the gradual reshaping of the Psalter towards the realms of corporate prayer, although the strong individual tone of many psalms remains. This has in part been achieved through short editorial additions to older psalms, wider supplementation of others, and the use of psalms composed from the beginning from a national viewpoint.\textsuperscript{13} Another part of this process involves the attribution of psalms to David, mainly through the superscriptions added to some psalms relating to situations in the life of David. A third part involves the juxtaposition of certain psalms within the final collection focused around verbal or thematic connections.\textsuperscript{14} What results in the final form is a collection of prayers that clearly stands as David’s collection but which actively invites both the ongoing community of faith as a whole and individuals within it to join in his prayers, and to take them as exemplars for prayer in the common experiences of life. The process that gave this shape to the Psalter, stretches from the penning of some psalms to the final stages of collection and its interpretation. Moreover, the results of this process are evident from the very beginning of the Psalter, and

\textsuperscript{12} Collective Reinterpretation, 36. The main psalms he deals with are Pss 22, 69, 89, and 102, with attention to a few isolated passages in other individual psalms. While many psalms were undoubtedly used for music in worship in both the first and second temple periods, in his view the Psalter contains ‘many psalms that have more likely belonged to private meditation rather than to the established cult’ (ibid., 34). See his n. 102 for a list of those with similar views.

\textsuperscript{13} See also Marttila, Collective Reinterpretation, 26–7.

pervade its every twist and turn as it unfolds before the hearer/reader and prayer.

In what follows I wish to illustrate ways in which the hearer/reader is drawn into the psalms to make them their own prayers and songs. I will focus on the beginning of the Psalter to show that this process is evident, contrary to Wilson’s argument, right from the start of the collection.

5. Psalm 1 and Psalm 2

The close connection of Psalms 1 and 2 and their possible editorial function in the Psalter has long been recognised. As well as introducing the Psalter and some major themes Psalms 1 and 2 also help direct the reader in terms of whose prayers these are and whose they can become.

Psalms 1 and 2 each present a case of contrast: between the blessed man and the wicked in Psalm 1, and between Yhwh’s anointed king and the rulers of the nations in Psalm 2. In each case, the latter party takes counsel against or seeks to ensnare the one favoured by Yhwh. In the end, however, the wicked and the nations either perish or face that possibility. In the midst of this contrast there is also comparison. The blessed man in Psalm 1 meditates on the torah, while the few words we hear from the king in Psalm 2 are a quotation of the divine statute. Moreover, the unspecified יִשָּׁבֶת (‘the man’) in Psalm 1, could be understood in a royal context given connections between Ps. 1:2 especially and the law of the king in Deut. 17:18–20 and the injunction on Joshua in Josh. 1:7–8. This strengthens the already close association with Psalm 2. However, the identification of ‘the man’ is not conclusive. While Psalm 1 allows a royal interpretation, it does not demand it and this uncertainty leaves the psalm open to further questioning and interpretation.

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16 See especially Grant, The King as Exemplar, 41–70.
Another point of comparison between the psalms reinforces this openness. Both psalms end with the individual (human) subject being included in the larger company of the faithful. The anonymous blessed man in Psalm 1 clearly becomes one of the righteous whose way is known by \textit{Yhwh} (v. 6). The path is open for him to become a model for that group, and for his present experience of 'blessedness' to embody the future hope of the 'company of the righteous' (v. 5). Likewise the king, whose earthly authority and power are established in Psalm 2, is, in the end, drawn into the company of ‘all’ who take refuge in \textit{Yhwh} by the completion of the \textit{inclusio} between Ps. 2:12c and Ps. 1:1a. The king becomes part of a larger company, which could even include the nations and their rulers if they accept the invitation to choose the way of \textit{Yhwh} extended to them in 2:10–12b. Moreover, the description of the king so far in this psalm shows that he too finds his refuge in \textit{Yhwh}, the one who grants him authority, power and sonship. The effect of the \textit{inclusio} in 1:1 and 2:12c, therefore, is to say that the king is not only vice-regent to \textit{Yhwh}, but is a model for those who take refuge in \textit{Yhwh}. The Davidic kingship is drawn back into the circle of those who neither partake of the conversations of conspiracy nor are cowered by them. \textit{Yhwh} is their refuge and his \textit{torah} their constant delight. The ideal king is also the ideal Israelite, a faithful servant of \textit{Yhwh}. Through contrast and comparison in these introductory psalms, the parallel roles of king and the unnamed, individual Israelite are brought together.

Thus, the possibility for the prayers of the Psalter to have application for the hearer/reader beyond the context of the psalmist has been built into the introductory psalms of the final collection. This took place most likely in the very last stages of compilation of the Psalter, and by means of both placement of psalms and the employment of an \textit{inclusio}. However, the process of application of these prayers to later faithful hearers/readers is not limited to this.

6. Psalm 3

In the case of Psalm 3 the insertion of a lengthy superscription, possible editorial additions to the psalm and the employment of ambiguity of meaning of verbal forms all play a part in the application of the psalm to the community beyond the psalmist. In Psalm 3 we are introduced both to the collection of laments that dominates the first book of Psalms and the association of the psalms with David in particular.
The superscription in Ps. 3:1 relates the psalm to David’s flight from his son Absalom (2 Samuel 15). This provides a specific context for reading the first person singular pronouns throughout the first eight verses. The psalm draws near to a close in v. 8 with a plea for deliverance, for Yhwh has smitten the cheek of ‘my enemies’ and shattered the teeth of the wicked. The use of the perfect form of the verbs in v. 8b can suggest a past action consistent with looking back in the psalm to the past words of David. But the perfect verb form is used elsewhere of a hoped for action by God (e.g. Ps. 31:5–6). This ambiguity softens the distinction between past and present/future allowing a later reader, who knows how David eventually overcomes Absalom, to make the psalm his own. The psalm concludes (v. 9) with a statement of confidence in Yhwh’s deliverance and a request for Yhwh’s blessing upon ‘your people’. This verse, which some see as a late editorial addition, is doubly important. It provides the vow of praise so familiar at the end of laments and broadens the effect of the prayer. The blessing is invoked not on the psalmist, David, but on Yhwh’s people. The psalm, therefore, is developed specifically so that it has significance beyond David and Absalom. The liturgical tone of this final verse allows the psalm in its entirety to become part of the community’s prayer (cf. 2 Sam. 6:18).

The differences between the psalm and the narrative account of David’s flight from Absalom also suggest more than a simple historical connection between Psalm 3 and the story in 2 Samuel. Through these the hearer/reader is drawn into a conversation around the context for such a prayer and encouraged to see connections with other situations. The interpretation of David in this psalm as the forerunner

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18 See also Martilla on Ps. 3:9, Collective Reinterpretation, 144–6.
19 These include the fact that while the psalmist calls for Yhwh to act, in 2 Samuel David himself overcomes Absalom. In 2 Samuel, David shows mercy for his enemies (see 2 Sam. 19:18b–30), but in the psalm he seeks their humiliation (cf. 2 Sam. 18:5 etc. and Ps. 3:8). The term ‘holy mountain’ (Ps. 3:5) is not used of Jerusalem or the temple mount in or before David’s time (cf. 2 Sam. 15:25). David’s ‘enemies’ in 2 Samuel include trusted companions and family, not just the political opponents of the psalm. David undertakes a humiliating retreat from Absalom in 2 Samuel, which is not suggested in the psalm. Finally, in 2 Samuel David’s flight is connected to his sinful acts (2 Samuel 11). Sinfulness is not hinted at in the psalm.
of Christ in his sufferings and death by early Christian interpreters is an example of such a connection. The route taken by David in his flight from Absalom, through the Wadi Kidron (2 Sam. 15:23) and up the mount of Olives (2 Sam. 15:30), supports the later comparison to Christ in his agony.

Finally, additional connections between Psalm 3 and Psalms 1–2 tie the beginning of the Psalter together. The psalmist in Psalm 3 is the king of Psalm 2 who now takes refuge in Yhwh as Ps. 2:12 urges. Psalm 3 gives an example of what taking refuge can mean, in terms of both situation and trust required. The king (as the psalmist) becomes the exemplar of those who take refuge. He also becomes the intercessor for all others who would take refuge in Yhwh, as we see shortly in Ps. 5:12.

7. Psalm 7 and Psalm 8

The link between David and other faithful individuals as those who take refuge in Yhwh is made more explicit in Psalm 7. Up to this psalm references to those who take refuge in Yhwh have only been made in a general way (Pss. 2:12; 5:11). Now in Psalm 7 David is brought into focus by the second superscription which ties the psalm to a specific event in the king’s life, albeit a little obscure in this case. David explicitly, as the psalmist, includes himself in that group who take refuge and as such becomes a model for them (7:2). David builds this prayer on a two-fold righteousness—his own and God’s. In the end, however, it is the righteousness of Yhwh that sustains him (v. 18). In the course of the psalm the language changes slightly from very personal language about David’s own situation in vv. 2–8, to language in which David pleads for vindication from God who judges all with righteousness (vv. 9–18). His personal plea for deliverance is gradually seen in the context of all who are righteous or repent.

20 E.g. references to the ‘wicked’ (Ps. 3:7; cf. Ps. 1:1, 5 and 6); the counsel of the wicked in Psalm 1, an example of which is given in Psalm 3, namely that there is no deliverance in Yhwh, and the reference to the ‘holy mountain’ in Pss. 2:6 and 5:5.

21 A number of elements in Psalm 7 relate it to Psalm 2 and support a royal context: alignment of ‘the peoples’ (μιμάλ) against Yhwh and his king (Pss. 2:1; 7:8); the futility of the endeavour (2:4; 7:15–16); the defeat of the enemies (2:9; 7:12–13); Yhwh as sovereign of all the earth (2:7; 7:8–9); Yhwh protects the king (2:8; 7:7); the offer of mercy to enemies (2:11–12; 7:13); and Yhwh as refuge for king and people (2:12; 7:2).
The vow of thanksgiving at the end of Psalm 7 (v. 18), especially with the promise of the praise of Yhwh’s name, is taken up in the first psalm of praise in the Psalter, Psalm 8, which opens and closes with the psalmist addressing Yhwh as ‘our sovereign’, thereby drawing the community into his praise of the divine name, majestic in all the earth. At the heart of the psalm the psalmist contemplates the place of humankind collectively, using the words מַאֲנָה and μνα, in the great scheme of things (v. 5). His interest is not focused so much on the insignificance of humans, but, rather, on the attention and concern Yhwh gives to them and on their high status from Yhwh’s perspective in spite of their lowliness (v. 6): they are a little lower than divine—yet crowned with glory and honour (דָּוָּד וְעֵדֶם)—given dominion over all—all things are under their feet.22 The symbols of God’s dominion in creation may seem to belittle humankind, but the divine gift of dominion raises those insignificant creatures to royal status. The democratization of kingship language in this passage again draws others to share the wonder expressed by David, the king whose name stands again at the head of the psalm.

The use of the word דוּבֵד in Psalm 8 is also instructive. In the preceding laments דוּבֵד has been variously used. In Ps. 3:4, Yhwh was David’s דוּבֵד, but in Ps. 4:3 and 7:6 David’s own דוּבֵד (English versions: ‘soul’, ‘body’, ‘honour’) was threatened. David, like other human beings, suffered and was in both mortal and spiritual danger. Now in Psalm 8 we see that humankind’s ‘glory’ דוּבֵד comes not from position in the world, but from God. It is human standing before God that is important. What was proclaimed in Psalm 7 is reiterated here in stronger, more general terms. Depending on how we translate Ps. 8:3, even the weakest and most defenceless of humans, babes and infants, not only praise Yhwh above the heavens, but can be strength against Yhwh’s enemies. The same is true for the king, who, in the lament psalms became weak and vulnerable, but who now praises Yhwh’s majestic name. Yhwh as creator is seen as true refuge for the weak. As psalmist, David stands again in a representative role. The answer to David’s plight, and to that of humans in general, is found in the praise of God.

22 ‘Glory and honour’ are attributes usually associated with God (e.g. Pss. 19:2; 29:1–2, 9; 96:3–6; 104:1, 31 etc.) while ‘glory’ is also used for the king (Ps. 21:6). The language of ‘dominion’ is used in relation to both God and human monarch (cf. Pss. 22:29, 72:8; and 145:3). Cf. the royal language in vv. 1 and 9.
8. Psalms 9–10 and 14

In the case of the broken acrostic that is Psalms 9–10 it is the internal shaping of the psalm that opens it up to community use. The initial individual thanksgiving in Psalm 9 comes to completion in vv. 12–13 where David invites the whole congregation (pl. imperative) ‘to give praise’. As thanksgiving turns to lament in 9:14–19, the language speaks generally of the ‘poor’ and ‘afflicted’ etc. In this David, as the psalmist, now speaks as one of the ‘poor’ in general, not from a position of privilege. David, thus, models for all one who asks יְהוָה to raise him up from ‘the gates of death’ so that he might praise יְהוָה in ‘the gates of daughter Zion’, the gates of life and the place of vindication.

The same end is achieved in Ps. 9:18–19 where the parallel use of ‘wicked’ and ‘nations’ in these verses allows the plea to operate at both the individual level and the national. David is seen in both personal and royal roles and the psalm is free, therefore, to operate at either level. Overall in these two psalms, when treated as a unity, there is movement from the prayers and petitions of an individual to that one’s prayers and petitions on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Thus, Psalms 9–10 lead from David’s prayers for his own deliverance, to his prayers on behalf of the oppressed and poor. His confidence is in the eternal sovereignty of יְהוָה (Pss. 9:10–11; 10:16). As he exercises his own trust in יְהוָה and intercedes for others (10:12, 15, 17–18), he invites them to participate in his prayer (9:14–15). His prayer for himself and others becomes a model for the faithful.

Psalms 14 concludes an initial sub-section of Book 1 of the Psalter. While defining the genre of the psalm is difficult, there are clear community and nationalising concepts at the end of the psalm with reference to the ‘company of the righteous’ in v. 5 and a prayer for deliverance for the whole nation in v. 7.

9. Grouping of Psalms

The close associations of adjacent psalms or small groups early in the Psalter could be developed. Several scholars have already drawn

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attention to the associations of the group Psalms 15–24.\textsuperscript{25} There is a clear association in this cycle between the themes of true obedience and piety and human kingship with Psalm 19’s emphasis on \textit{torah} surrounded by royal psalms (Psalms 18, 20, 21). At the core of the cycle is the message that it is \textit{Yhwh} who is the king of glory for Israel (Ps 24:8, 10), a theme repeated later in Book IV (Psalms 93–99) and in the concluding praise in Psalms 145–146. P.D. Miller refers in passing fashion to the king in Psalms 15–24 as ‘Yahweh’s trusted servant and model Israelite’.\textsuperscript{26} One could, I believe, develop this comment further. I would argue that there is in this collection too clear evidence for the king being held up as a ‘model’ for piety and faithfulness before the community and of the psalms being shaped in such a way that the community is encouraged to take his prayers as their own.

10. \textit{Conclusion}

I hope this is sufficient to suggest that the tradition of the psalms as being both David’s prayers and those of the community is fostered deliberately within the collection itself. It is the result of a multi-faceted process building on aspects of composition of some psalms and developed through editing and the shaping of the collection. The prayers of David, prayed later again as the prayers of the community of faith, became the vehicle whereby that community found identity, hope and new life.\textsuperscript{27}


\textsuperscript{26} ‘Kingship, Torah Obedience, and Prayer’, 139.

\textsuperscript{27} Cf. also De Claisse-Walford, \textit{Reading from the Beginning}, 7–8, 29.