

NSBT NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Answering the Psalmist's Perplexity

New-Covenant Newness
in the Book of Psalms



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This study's viability and method

My aim in this study could readily be misunderstood. It is neither to offer a primer on relationships between biblical covenants,¹ nor to provide my reading of the shape of the book of Psalms.² Rather, I seek to examine a particular question that lies at the intersection of these two areas of study. The question may be formulated as follows: *what is new about the new covenant, according to the book of Psalms?*

It is understandable that this undertaking might seem strange and difficult to justify even at the level of method. I will be seeking to adjudicate, from a *single* book of the *Old Testament*, on a major and long-standing debate that concerns the *new covenant* and involves the *whole of Scripture*. In addition, I will be doing so by building on the potentially shaky foundation of a recent consensus in the area of Psalms scholarship. Some explanations are called for before we can begin.

Problem 1: a single book for a whole-of-Scripture debate?

While it might seem reductionist to mine a single book in order to offer a 'verdict' on a debate that necessarily involves all of Scripture, I consider this to be a strength and not a weakness. In principle, if this exercise were undertaken (successfully) for all the canonical books, the aggregate result would be to provide the accuracy of biblical-theological understanding that has eluded (and divided) believers who claim to have equal respect for the authority of Scripture. If the only outcome of this study were to be enhanced accuracy regarding the flow of redemptive history as it emerges from one book of the Scriptures, that would be worthwhile.

¹ Cf. P. R. Williamson 2007; Hely Hutchinson 2022.

² Hely Hutchinson 2013b.

There are, though, reasons to believe that this biblical book has particular explanatory power. The Psalter has often been viewed as something of a 'mini-Bible': Athanasius, Basil, Luther, Calvin, Hooker and Henry spoke along those lines.³ If they were meaning that the book of Psalms is a microcosm of Scripture from a *systematic*-theological perspective, the same could also be argued from a *biblical*-theological perspective.

The legitimacy of our study does not depend on the veracity of the idea that the book of Psalms is a microcosm of Scripture, whether from a systematic-theological perspective or from a biblical-theological perspective. It is not my aim to defend either postulate. Yet there is a correlation between the potential reach of this study and the extent to which the Psalter may be viewed as a mini-Bible in a biblical-theological sense. If we are able accurately to present the stance on covenant relationships of this biblical book, that is already helpful as a contribution to anyone's quest to understand the message of Scripture. But what if this particular biblical book itself provides something of a synthesis of the entire scriptural stance on how covenants relate? The importance of this study would clearly be enhanced. Yet that question of whether the Psalter is a microcosm of Scripture can be examined by others, and the material in this book may help to that end.⁴

As we look to answer the question of new-covenant newness from the Psalter, I will be walking on a tightrope in one respect. On the one hand, I am convinced of the unity of Scripture and thus the need for the voice of the New Testament to be heard as it bears on the Psalms. On the other hand, I will be consciously avoiding the temptation to jump too quickly to the New Testament. Our main aim in this study will be to listen to the Psalter itself.

Problem 2: an Old Testament book for a new-covenant debate?

If it is deemed odd that an *Old* Testament book should be selected to address a *new*-covenant debate, considerations regarding the Psalter as a potential microcosm of Scripture are, again, relevant. But since, as I have just stated, this is not a critical factor for this study, I should mention my

³ Mays 1994: 1; T. L. Johnson 2003: 262–263; Nichols 1996: iv.

⁴ As also our brief study: Hely Hutchinson 2013b.

reasons for believing that the Psalter sets forth new-covenant theology.⁵ A little historical sensitivity may be necessary here: we should beware of confusing 'Testament' as it has come to be used in Christian tradition with 'covenant' as it is used biblically. There is no biblical basis for considering all the canonical books preceding Matthew's Gospel as constituting the 'old covenant'; and these same canonical books – that have collectively come to be known as the 'Old Testament' – contain much information that pertains to the *new* covenant.

With regard to the Psalter, the following initial pointers can suffice at this stage.

1. In 2005, I argued that the formula 'Give thanks to YHWH, for he is good, for his *hesed* (covenant faithfulness) endures for ever' 'is closely associated with the idea of covenant, and bespeaks, in particular, the anticipation of *new-covenant* fulfilment'.⁶ This formula is rooted in Jeremiah 33:11, part of the prophet's exposition of new-covenant realities in his so-called 'book of consolation' (Jer. 30 – 33). It plays an important part in the Psalter, especially in book 5. We will be presupposing that the demonstration contained in that 2005 article is robust.

2. The well-documented linguistic and thematic correlation between Isaiah 40 – 55 and parts of books 4 and 5⁷ makes it unsurprising that new-covenant theology should be present in those two books of the Psalter.

3. One key aspect of the new covenant as set forth in the Latter Prophets (e.g. Isa. 40 – 55; Jer. 30 – 33; Ezek. 34 – 37) is that it provides a definitive solution to the problem of the Babylonian exile. A key concern of the Psalter turns on the psalmist's perplexity in the face of that exile and YHWH's apparent disregard for his promises to David (Ps. 89); the two books that follow this psalm (books 4–5) provide a response to this (hence the title of this volume). These are the two books that will be the particular focus of our study.

⁵ Note the presence of the hyphen. We are not referring to the movement 'new covenant theology'.

⁶ Hely Hutchinson 2005a: 100; emphasis original.

⁷ Predating the rise of editorial criticism. See e.g. Feuillet 1975: 364–365.

4. Psalm 2, which serves an introductory and programmatic function for the Psalter, alludes to the Davidic covenant but exhibits a *new-covenant* outlook in its presentation of the messiah. I defend this assertion at the beginning of chapter 3.

Problem 3: a recent consensus in Psalms scholarship?

This study is predicated on the belief that the Psalter is a book with a message that is greater than the sum of its parts. But might I not be simply building on the shaky foundation of a recent fad among Psalms scholars? I do not deny the subjective judgments and speculation that have characterized some recent scholarly output in the area of Psalter shape, and I would not presume to suggest that I am immune from them myself. But interest in the arrangement of the book of Psalms has a rich and ancient heritage (which can be traced back to Hippolytus, Origen, Jerome, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine).⁸ If some generations have proven to be less interested in this aspect of Psalms study than our current one, this is not necessarily cause for alarm.

In a similar way, matters of biblical theology have come to be explored with greater vigour over the past forty years, and the new insights and emphases that this has yielded are (where they are correct!) cause for thanksgiving.⁹ In relation to the institution to which I owe so much, Moore College, the influential figure of T. C. Hammond was not associated with biblical theology in the same way as Donald Robinson, Graeme Goldsworthy and William Dumbrell. That the insights of the latter three scholars are relatively new is not, though, a reason to call into question their validity and usefulness.

In any case, it is not so much a question of whether one wants to ‘jump on this bandwagon’ (that of the configuration of the Psalter) as of whether one wants to take the Word of God seriously in its final form. It would not be possible to be wedded to a high view of Scripture and dismiss the notion of Psalter context. A simple reading of Psalm 72:20 confirms this (‘This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse’ [NIV]): this is, so to speak, an editorial footnote that we take seriously because it is breathed

⁸ Mitchell 1997: 33–40; Auwers 2000: 12–14; Jenkins 2020; 2022: 28–30.

⁹ Many of the volumes in the current series could be cited in this connection.

out by God himself (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16). There is, of course, room for discussion as to how far one goes in subscribing to the idea of an overarching message that is discernible from Psalter structure, but even the sceptics are persuaded of a certain degree of intentionality in the ordering of the Psalms.¹⁰ It is, for example, difficult to have no regard for Psalter shape when faced with a group of five psalms in a row that all begin and end with an identical call to praise YHWH (Pss 146 – 150). In fact, anyone who concedes that there is a ‘book’ of Psalms and is open to examining its constituent parts in their given order is necessarily an ‘editorial critic’ (or ‘canonical critic’). There are some parallels here with the Gospels, which contain clearly identifiable ‘pericopes’ (units of text) whose order nevertheless reflects the evangelists’ design.

My duty is to ensure that appropriate caveats and safeguards are built into this work – that I avoid fanciful readings that have no clear, objective basis in the data of this part of God’s Word. It should become apparent in what follows that I am essentially building on indicators of shape that are uncontroversial (I set out in appendix 1 a checklist of these main indicators). One of the assured results of editorial criticism is that Psalm 89 – the last in book 3 – plays a pivotal role in the unfolding of the Psalter with its anguished calling into question of YHWH’s covenant faithfulness.¹¹ This is a fundamental assumption for what follows in this book as we look to understand the answer to the psalmist’s perplexity. At least from the perspective of consensus convictions from the past few decades, there is nothing shaky about this foundation!

I should add a final point regarding method in relation to Psalter shape. At the turn of the twenty-first century, it was necessary to interact with the thesis of Gerald Wilson concerning book 5’s putative pessimism with regard to a human king.¹² But this pessimism has not been embraced by the scholarly consensus.¹³ Again, I have also decided to take

¹⁰ Longman 2014: 35–36; regarding Goldingay, see chapter 3 of this book, n. 70, and p. 64.

¹¹ The scepticism of R. D. Anderson (1994: 239) on this point may be considered to be answered by Hely Hutchinson 2013b and chapter 4 of this book.

¹² As we did for our doctoral dissertation (2006).

¹³ See e.g. Snearly 2016. Robertson (2015: 148 n. 3) explains: ‘Wilson’s effort to disregard the assurances of the Davidic promise as recorded in Psalm 132 . . . fails to reckon with the constant emphasis in the Psalms and elsewhere in Scripture on the merger of David’s throne with God’s throne. His disparaging treatment of the messianic promise in Psalm 110 . . . involves him in a laborious effort to avoid the focal thrust of the text.’ Wilson is not, however, entirely bereft of contemporary advocates: see Goswell 2020.

the 'risk' of interacting only minimally with views on Psalter shape that I believe are speculative and unconvincing; this is a risk inasmuch as it could give the impression that I endorse all the scholarly output in this area, but the gain will be a more streamlined focus on the topic at hand.

The key line of attack

I stated at the outset of this chapter that my goal is not to produce 'a reading' of the Psalter (I have done this, briefly, already).¹⁴ But inasmuch as one acts as a Psalter reader, one does find that close to the heart of the agenda of this scriptural book is the question of how covenants relate. In particular, the question of the permanence of the Davidic covenant in the face of the exile is explored. In line, then, with one of the Psalter's own concerns, my task will be to determine how the Davidic and new covenants fit together. Thus, my key line of attack in this study will be to ask what is new about the new covenant relative to the covenant with David. This will, though, require us to interact with the biblical covenants more generally and explore how they are interlinked.

The plan of this book

As we approach this question, we will have in mind six or seven points of view that have currency in contemporary evangelicalism. I will begin by setting out these models (chapter 2). The bulk of the book will then consist of an examination of the data of the Psalter that will allow us to assess the merits and demerits of those models (chapters 3–5). A significant consideration raised by a comparison of the models is the question of how the new-covenant believer relates to the Mosaic law, and so I will devote some space to this (chapter 6). In the conclusion, I will summarize the Psalter's perspective on covenant relationships and comment on how the models match up against our findings (chapter 7). At that concluding stage, I will also widen the scope to consider some New Testament data and draw attention to some theological and practical implications of our study.

¹⁴ Hely Hutchinson 2013b.

Three presuppositions

Primacy of the Masoretic Text

As we examine the Old Testament, I give pride of place to the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT), following the principle that Ernst Würthwein articulates as follows ('m' corresponds to the MT): 'As a general rule m is to be preferred over all other traditions whenever it cannot be faulted either linguistically or for its material content . . . [I]f a reading of m is rejected, every possible interpretation of it must first have been fully examined.'¹⁵

Post-exilic dating for the Psalter

I believe that the final form of the Psalter dates to the post-exilic period. As argued in appendix 3, it may be that the author of Chronicles¹⁶ creates a composite psalm from three psalms within the Psalter (I rule out dependence in the other direction but not the explanation of no dependence in either direction). If this is correct, the implications for the dating of the Psalter are significant. Given that the final doxology of book 4 is cited by the Chronicler, it is probable that the latter had access to the Psalter in its final form (we will have occasion to note the rapprochement between the closing doxology of the fourth book and that of the fifth book:¹⁷ it is likely to reflect the work of the same redactor). If 390 BC is an appropriate *terminus ad quem* (or latest date) for Chronicles,¹⁸ the Psalter reached its current form by the late fifth century BC (or very early fourth century at the latest) – two centuries before the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible). This view is markedly different from that of Gerald Wilson,¹⁹ who considers that the final form of the Psalter owes its origins to a period later than the destruction of the temple in AD 70; in my opinion, Wilson sets too much store by evidence from Qumran.²⁰

¹⁵ Würthwein 1980: 114. I follow the approximate order of the value of witnesses that he advocates (1980: 112).

¹⁶ It is possible that the author of the composite psalm is distinct from the Chronicler himself. In that case, we should recognize that the perspectives of the two authors are in harmony with each other: 'the editor of the hymn faithfully followed in the footsteps of the Chronicler' (Butler 1978: 149).

¹⁷ See p. 63.

¹⁸ Pratt 1998: 9–11.

¹⁹ E.g. Wilson 2002a: 26–30.

²⁰ On this matter of the order of the Psalms as found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, I line up behind Beckwith (1995: 1: '[t]he eccentric Psalms MSS from Qumran are probably liturgical

Placement in the Writings

I attach some significance to the placement of the Psalter in the last part of the tripartite Hebrew canon (Law, Prophets, Writings). This structure for the Old Testament is apparently reflected in Jesus' teaching (Luke 24:44) and is attested as early as the second century BC (in the prologue of Ecclesiasticus).²¹ It makes sense to follow this arrangement of the books.²²

This means that the book of Psalms follows the Latter Prophets. It is probably the book that *immediately* follows them. It *may* be more appropriate to consider that Ruth precedes the Psalter, but that has little bearing on this study. What should, however, be noted (for the purposes of our study) is that I will be presupposing in particular that Isaiah and Jeremiah precede the book of Psalms both chronologically and canonically. Less crucially, I will also be assuming that Chronicles is placed at the end of the Hebrew canon.²³

(note 20 *cont.*) adaptations') and McFall (2000: 225: '[w]hatever the Qumran sect did with its store of Psalms is probably confined to them').

²¹ It is also 'frequently mentioned in the Talmud' (Beckwith 1985: 110).

²² This approach is also favoured by, e.g., Van Pelt 2016.

²³ As reflected in Jesus' words in Matt. 23:35; Luke 11:51 (the martyrdom of Zechariah being not the last one chronologically but the last canonically, in 2 Chr. 24:20–21). For a full discussion of the order of the books within the Old Testament, see Beckwith 1985: 181–234. Jenkins (2022: 54) draws attention to the instability in the order of the Writings: 'Most mediaeval MSS have Psalms second, often after Chronicles, despite which the printed tradition settled on Psalms first.' For our purposes, the tripartite structure of the Hebrew canon is of far greater significance than the precise order of the books within the Writings.

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