

The Arrangement of the Psalms: Part 1

Over the past several weeks we have seen that the Book of Psalms is made up of several different types that each have a unique emphasis. We have seen a little bit of how they function as individual units but what, if any, is their relationship to one another? Does each one stand on its own or should they be interpreted in light of one another? The key components that help us find the meaning of any text are context and structure. Typically, by understanding the relationship of a passage to the material around it (context) and how that material is organized (structure) we can begin to make sense of its content.

If, however, we apply this approach to the Book of Psalms as a whole, would it help us or lead us astray? Further complicating this question is the fact the psalms were not composed by a single author. It is therefore legitimate to ask if there is any overall structure or if they are merely a haphazard collection.

The question of the arrangement of the Book of Psalms may also have implications for how we should understand the relationship of the psalms to the New Testament. The New Testament writers obviously understand the psalms to be messianic in character. Are they simply drawing from individual psalms that point to Christ or does their usage imply an overall messianic character? They often use the psalms in ways that could imply a connectedness. For example, it is very common that references to Psalm 8 in the New Testament appear alongside references to Psalm 110. Does that simply mean that the New Testament writers found it convenient to pair truths from those two psalms in their arguments or does it imply that there are Messianic connections between psalms within the Psalter itself? When Jesus, after His resurrection, tells His followers “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” (Lk. 24:44) does He simply mean that certain psalms were about Him or that the psalms as a whole were about him?

Either way, the New Testament writers were clearly deeply influenced by the psalms and the sophistication to which they apply them shows that their messianic character is deeply engrained the logic of New Testament. Let’s look at just a couple of examples from Psalm 110.

Psalm 110:1

“The LORD says to my Lord, ‘sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

Clause from Ps. 110:1	N.T. Reference	Summary
The LORD says to my Lord...	Jesus in Mt. 22:44, Mk. 12:36, Lk. 20:42 and then more explicitly Acts 2:29-36	Jesus is God and He is exalted
Sit at my right hand	There are nearly 20 New Testament references to Jesus being seated at the right hand of the Father.	Jesus is the anointed King and has supreme authority ruling from Heaven
Until I make your enemies your footstool	Hebrews 10:11-13, 1 Cor. 15:23-28 (especially 25)	Why has the return of Jesus not yet happened?

Psalm 110:4

⁴The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”

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Clause from Ps. 110:4	Hebrews Chapter 6-7 Reference	Summary
The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind	6:13-20	God's promises are unchanging / The intercession of Christ is sure and steadfast
You are a priest	7:1-22	Comparison of priestly orders
Forever	7:23-25	Unlike other priests, Jesus lives forever to make intercession.
After the order of Melchizedek	7:26-28 (7:1-10)	Jesus is an eternal priest of a covenant outside of the Law, illustrated by Melchizedek

We can see just from these two examples that although the Book of Psalms introduces very little in terms of new concepts, the way the psalms expand and connect the material from the Law and Prophets were very important to how the New Testament understands the Old Testament writers understood the Old Testament.

ARRANGEMENT OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS

The first question we must ask is if the order of psalms merely reflects the random effects of collecting material over a long period of time or if there is evidence of intentional editorial activity to organize them into a book that functions as a unit?

For much of church history there has been a debate about this. The most common conclusion seems to have been a sense that there is some kind organization to the psalms but that we can't quite figure out what it is. Some scholars suggested that somehow, they got out of order, but elements of the original arrangement could still be seen in certain places.

The church father Augustine, one of the brightest minds in the history of the church who lived from 354 to 430 said, "...the arrangement of the Psalms, which seems to me to contain the secret of a mighty mystery, has not yet been revealed unto me...".

Later, in the 19th century Old Testament scholar Franz Delitzsch said, "...attempts have been made to trace in the five books a graduation of principal thoughts, which influence and run through the whole collection. We fear that in this direction, investigation has set before itself an unattainable end."

When I was first learning how to interpret the Bible, my teachers advised me to interpret each psalm as an individual unit and to generally avoid seeking any connections between them.

In the last several years, however, there has been increased interest in biblical theology and the arrangement of the psalms.¹ Several scholars such as G.K. Beale, Walter Kaiser Jr., O. Palmer Robertson, Richard Belcher and several others have argued for stronger significance to the arrangement. This continues to be an area of active scholarship. O. Palmer Robertson's influential book *The Flow of the Psalms* was just published in 2015 and in September 2019 edition of the Journal of the Evangelical

¹ Biblical theology is the study of the process of God revealing Himself through the different eras recorded in the Bible. You can contrast this with Systematic theology which seeks to understand what the whole Bible teaches on any topic and their relationship to each other.

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Theological Society included an article by Peter C.W. Ho titled *The Shape of the Davidic Psalms as Messianic*.

I share all of this only to point out that there is a great deal we do not know about the arrangement of the psalms or its significance. Because of that we should be careful about getting too carried away by the details. I do, however, think that we know enough to say with confidence that the Book of Psalms, as a whole, has a messianic arrangement. If I am correct in that then the Psalter is prophetic not merely because there are individual psalms that contain prophesy but because they, in their entirety, organize the hopes, desires, and praises of Israel in such a way that they all “resolve” in Christ not only generally but specifically.

Evidence of Intentional Structure

There are several evidences of intentional structure. Some of the more obvious include the following:

1. The organization of the Psalms into 5 sections or books, each ending with a doxology shows there was some logic in the organization.
2. Psalms 1&2 and Psalm 150 appear to be deliberately placed as an introduction and conclusion to the book. We will come back to this next week.
3. There is evidence of organization in the alternations between evening and morning prayers establishing a rhythm for daily life.
 - a. Psalm 3 vs. 5 “I lay down and slept; **I woke again**”
 - b. Psalm 4 vs. 4 “**ponder... on your beds**”
 - c. Psalm 5 vs 3 “**in the morning** I prepare a sacrifice for you”
 - d. Psalm 6 vs 6, “**every night** I flood my bed with tears”
4. They are not in chronological order. Psalm 90 is probably the oldest.
5. They are also not just in order by author. Psalm 72:20 says “The prayers of David, the son of Jesse are ended” but there are additional psalms attributed to David later. This indicates that Psalm 72 ends only one set of David’s psalms and therefore some organization beyond simply grouping by author is involved.
6. In Book 1 each of the creation psalms is followed by an acrostic psalm suggesting intentional placement.
 - a. Acrostic Psalm 9/10 follows creation Psalm 8
 - b. Acrostic Psalm 25 follows creation Psalm 24
 - c. Acrostic Psalm 34 follows creation Psalm 33
7. There is evidence of arrangement in the way various sets of psalms often appear clustered together based upon author (i.e. Sons of Korah) or type (i.e. psalms of ascent), etc.

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8. The placement of the Messianic and Torah psalms appears intentional. Explicitly messianic psalms appear near the seams of each of the 5 books and in the largest two books they are always paired with a Torah psalm.

a.

Messianic Psalm	Torah Psalm
Psalm 2	Psalm 1
Psalm 18	Psalm 19
Psalm 118	Psalm 119

- b. We will look at this more closely later, but it is interesting to consider how each of these messianic psalms found in the “seams” connect to both the broad themes of those books as well as specific incidents in the life of Christ as the Psalter continues.

Psalm	Psalm Theme	N.T. Theme
Psalm 2	Coronation of the King	Baptism of Jesus (Mk 1:11 alludes to Ps. 2:7)
Psalm 41	Betrayal by a friend	Judas Iscariot (41:9 is quoted in Jn. 13:18)
Psalm 72	Righteous rule, abundance of grain, etc.	Ministry of Jesus. Notice how the people respond to the feeding of the crowds in Jn. 6:15
Psalm 89	Humiliation & destruction of the king	Crucifixion and Death
Psalm 110	Triumph of the Priest King	Resurrection/Intercession
Psalm 144	Final Triumph	Promised Return

We can see that there is evidence for an intentional arrangement. We do not wish to push the details too far, but we also see hints that there is an overall messianic flow or arrangement. We will look more closely at this next week.