What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from…
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph…1

Beginnings and endings hold a continuous fascination in poetry and fiction, both ancient and modern: the linear intersects with the cyclical, evoking both time and eternity, as much of Eliot’s *Four Quartets* seeks to convey. Within Scripture, from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation, there is an integral relationship between *Urzeit* and *Endzeit*, which Hermann Gunkel’s work on the mythical *Chaoskampf* at the beginning and ending of these two books argued over a century ago.2

The relatively recent interest in the canonical shaping of the Hebrew Bible has similarly resulted in a new focus on the beginnings and endings of particular scrolls. An obvious example, in a text which has preoccupied Hugh Williamson for several years, is Isaiah: scholars such as Christopher Seitz, Paul Smith, Marvin Sweeney, David Carr and Anthony Tomasino have each demonstrated in different ways that parts of the first and last chapters of Isaiah deliberately echo one another. They refer to examples such as the play on “heaven and earth” (1:2/66:1); the anti-cultic polemic (1:10–20/66:1–6); the personification of Zion (1:21–26/66:7–13) and her judgment and redemption (1:27–31/66:14–17); and the consummation of the wicked by fire (1:31/66:24). The vocabulary in particular verses suggests that, in 1:29–31 at least, there may be some deliberate connections: examples include הָגְנַת and אלה־הָגְנַת in 1:29–30 and 66:17; בִּחְרָתִים in 1:29 and בחרי in 66:4; and יָשָׁה in 1:29 and יָשָׁה in 66:5. Whoever was responsible for the final stages of the scroll of Isaiah seems to have been

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concerned to end with the beginning and begin with the ending.³ Hugh Williamson’s commitment to the ICC series ends at Isa 27 and so will never reach the last chapter, but he has written at length on Isa 1, and here he makes the same point.⁴

However, Pss 1 and 150 do not conform to this pattern. The disparity is to some extent modified if we take a larger introductory unit (i.e. reading Pss 1 and 2 as one, given that neither has a superscription and both have several examples of corresponding language), and similarly presume a longer conclusion to the Psalter (taking as one unit the Hallel in Pss 146–150), but the differences between the very first and very last psalms are still rather marked. Psalm 1 is about the welfare of an individual Jew and his place within the ‘congregation of the righteous’ (בעדת צדיקים). In Ps 1 the insularity is reflected in the references to the wicked and the righteous (vv. 4, 5 and 6) revealing that the psalmist belongs to an inner community of law-abiding pious Jews—if not the Hasidim, then a party quite like them who separated themselves from other members of their community. The vision of Ps 150 by contrast could not be more universal, illustrated by the very last verse which calls on ‘all those who have breath’ to ‘praise Yah’ (כל הנשמה תהלל יה). Israel’s identity no longer seems to be demarcated by the community of faith; rather, its raison d’être takes its starting point from the whole of the created order and from the God who infuses it with his presence.

Yet the extent of the difference between the first and last psalms does depend on where the ‘bookends’ of the Psalter really are. If we assume the beginning and ending really comprise Pss 1–2 and Pss 146–150, or Pss 1–2 and Pss 149–150, and not Pss 1 and 150 on their own, that contrast is modified.


⁴ See H. G. M. Williamson, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1–27, Volume 1, Commentary on Isaiah 1–5 (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2006), 11: “The most impressive [correspondences]… are confined to vv. 29–31 and possibly 2–3.” Other similarities are due to “author(s) of the latter [i.e. chs. 65–66] rounding off the work as a whole with a sense of closure.” This was probably the work of a redactor, “framing his assemblage with conscious reference to the ending of the book which he was thus introducing.”