KING, MESSIAH, AND THE REIGN OF GOD: REVISITING THE ROYAL PSALMS AND THE SHAPE OF THE PSALTER

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It is well over twenty years since my early work that suggested certain royal psalms have been employed editorially in the shaping of the Psalter. That initial statement in The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter (1981/1985) was followed by an expanded discussion in “The Use of the Royal Psalms at the ‘Seams’ of the Psalter” (1986), reiterated in a broader context in “The Shape of the Book of Psalms” (1992), and further developed in “Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalms” (1993). Let me begin by offering a brief restatement of the thesis offered in these works. I will then proceed to a discussion of some of the issues that have been raised in the intervening years, and offer some new insights along the way.

REVIEW OF THE THESIS

The basic idea advanced in my early work is that certain royal psalms (in particular Psalms 2, 72, and 89) have been intentionally placed at the seams of the first three books (Psalms 2–89) in order to shape the understanding of those segments of the Psalter as an Exilic response to the loss of the Davidic monarchy. This response offers agonized pleas for deliverance and intends to foster hope for the restoration of the Davidic kingdom and the fortunes of Judah. The first of these psalms (Psalm 2) refers to the establishment of the Davidic covenant and cautions the would-be rebel nations of the world to

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submit themselves to the power of Yahweh’s king enthroned in Zion. At the conclusion of the second book (which has been combined with the first into a collection of “Prayers of David”)

5 the Solomonic Psalm 72 invokes the continuation of divine blessing on subsequent generations of Davidic monarchs who, it is hoped, will live “as long as the sun” and will rule “from sea to sea, and ... to the ends of the earth.”

At the conclusion of the third book, however, Psalm 89 hurls an almost frantic accusation at Yahweh for his failure to live up to his covenant promises by preserving the Davidic kings and kingdom. The first three books thus end with a stinging rebuke of God’s incomprehensible rejection of David, and a demand that he rouse himself to faithfulness to restore his promises (89:46-51).

It is further posited that the last two books (Psalms 90–150) were added at a later point as part of the final redaction of the Psalter, a movement that reflects the concerns of the sages, and intends to offer a response to the questions and hopes raised in the earlier books. The intent is to redirect the hopes of the reader away from an earthly Davidic kingdom to the kingship of Yahweh. This final shaping of the Psalter is accomplished in part by: (a) placing wisdom psalms (or at least psalms influenced by the wisdom tradition) in primary positions that bind the earlier collection together with the later one; and (b) by providing the whole Psalter with an extended conclusion. This is particularly evident in the placement of Psalm 1 as an introduction to the whole Psalter, the use of Psalms 90 and 107 to introduce the last two books, the placement of Psalm 145 to conclude the body of the Psalter proper, and to precipitate the concluding hallel (Psalms 146–150).6 In addition, the shift of focus to the Kingship of Yahweh rather than humans is accomplished by foregrounding the Yahweh Malak psalms (Psalms 93, 95–99) that form the core of the first answering book (Book Four, Psalms 90–106), and indeed of the whole Psalter in its final form.

The result is a Psalter that recalls the foundational pre-monarchical

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5 This is the effect of the only true postscript in the whole Psalter (72:20): “The prayers of David, son of Jesse, are ended.” The fact that this postscript follows the doxology that concludes the second book of the Psalter (42–72) suggests the first two books have been combined into a collection of “Davidic” prayers.

6 See the discussion of this final redaction in Gerald H. Wilson, “Shaping the Psalter,” 72–82.