

ENTERING AND LEAVING THE PSALTER THROUGH PSALMS 1 AND 150¹

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*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 ...²*

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 Genesis to Revelation, there is a constant interplay between primordial time (*Urzeit*) as in the Garden of Eden, and eternity (*Endzeit*) as in the Heavenly City.

There are several intriguing relationships between the beginnings and endings of biblical books. Job offers one example, Isaiah, another. The Book of Psalms is yet another.

At first sight, however, it seems that Psalms 1 and 150 are very different. Psalm 1 is about the welfare of an individual Jew whose exclusive place is within the ‘congregation of the righteous’. Psalm 150 has a more universal vision, where ‘all those who have breath’ are called upon to ‘praise Yah’.

A vivid way of illustrating these differences is through art. I offer here two pairs of images. The first pair is from the *Eadwine Psalter*, a highly influential twelfth-century Psalter associated with Christ Church, Canterbury, England, where we see so clearly the comparison between the single pious Jew in his *tempietto*, and the crowd of worshippers gathered around a pipe organ.³ The second pair is Marc Chagall’s depictions of Psalms 1 and 150, where again the contrast is between silent prayer and jubilant worship.⁴

So why try to demonstrate the relationship between Psalms 1 and 150 if they are so different? One answer is that they actually share some similarities; another answer is that their differences

¹ This paper is a different adaptation of a chapter in a *Festschrift* for a well-known British Hebrew Bible scholar, Hugh Williamson. See S.E. Gillingham, ‘Entering and Leaving the Psalter: Psalms 1 and 150 and the Two Polarities of Faith’ in *Let us Go up to Zion. Essays in Honour of H.G.M. Williamson on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (eds. I. Provan and M.J. Boda), SVT 153, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012, pp. 383-93.

² T.S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’ Part V; taken from *T.S. Eliot Collected Poems 1909-1962*, London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2002, p. 208, lines 6-8 and 16-17.

³ The pipe ‘organ’ has huge bellows with four men working on them, whilst two others play them. This is very different from the Hebrew word *‘ugab* which could be translated as ‘flute’ or ‘pipe’. It certainly informs us about music in the Middle Ages. On each side groups of people praise God with trumpets, harps and cymbals.

⁴ Chagall’s window on Psalm 150 in Chichester Cathedral with its reds and blues evoking a very different world from Psalm 1.

are complementary. Furthermore, if we extend the beginning of the Psalter to include both Psalm 1 and Psalm 2, and if we extend the ending of the Psalter to include Psalms 146-150, the relationship between the beginning and ending of the Psalter is clearer still. And if we also compare just Psalms 2 and 149, the relationship is even more apparent.

So firstly we shall look at Psalms 1-2 and 146-150 as ‘bookends’ to the Psalter; we shall then look at Psalms 2 and 149; and finally we shall focus just on Psalms 1 and 150.

Entering and Leaving the Psalter through Psalms 1-2 and 146-150

Psalms 1 and 2 are closely connected psalms. An initial observation is that, unusually, neither psalm actually addresses God. Psalm 1 addresses an elect community of faith; Psalm 2 addresses first the nations, then the people, then perhaps the king, and again the hostile nations. A second observation is that neither psalm has a title. It is likely that Psalm 2 is earlier, because it is about the king (verses 2 and 6) and was placed here to give the Psalter a specifically royal emphasis. It is equally likely that Psalm 1 is later because it refers to the ‘Torah’ as an entity (verse 2); it was placed here to emphasise the Mosaic Law at the very beginning of the Psalter, demonstrating that these five ‘Books of David’ mirror the five ‘Books of Moses’. Together Psalms 1 and 2 share a Prologue to the Psalter as a whole: each concerns the typical problems of evil, with Psalm 1 suggesting the answer is contemplation and isolation from the wicked, and Psalm 2 advocating a more violent response in opposing hostile nations.

The compilers brought these psalms together to show that these two responses offer complementary views of the Psalter as a whole. They certainly display several linguistic correspondences. Psalm 1 begins ‘Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked’ and Psalm 2 ends (using the same Hebrew word, אָשֶׁר) ‘Happy are all who take refuge in him’. Additionally, the seat of the scoffers in 1:1 becomes the seat where God is enthroned, in 2:4, using the same Hebrew verb יָשָׁב. The Hebrew word for meditating on the Torah in 1:2 is the same word (הָגָה) used for the plotting of the nations in 2:1. The ‘by day’ in 1:2 becomes ‘this day’ in 2:7. Finally, in 1:6 we read that the way of the wicked will *perish*; in 2:12 it is the foreign rulers who will *perish* in the way, in each case using the same Hebrew words דָּרַךְ and אָבָד.⁵

What of the relationship between *Psalms 146-150*? These are all united by the Hebrew word Hallelujah, which begins and ends each psalm. 150 is a fitting conclusion, using הַלְלוּ־יְהוָה throughout the psalm to create ten calls of praise.⁶ In Jewish liturgy, Psalms 146-150, known as the *Hallel* (along with 145) are recited in the preparatory material of the daily morning service, as part of *Pesukei d’Zimra*. This emphasises the importance of praise of God at the start of every day. Similarly in monastic prayer, every morning, Psalm 148–150 are used at Lauds (alongside Psalms 67 and 51).

Psalms 146-150 also cohere as a theological collection. Firstly, they develop further the theme of the kingship of God found in Psalms 144 and 145, although now with no reference to David or indeed to any human king: God alone is King. This theme is explicit in Psalms 146:10 and 149:2; here praise is an act of defiance against foreign rule. A second theme is the importance of justice for the poor and oppressed: unlike foreign kings, YHWH’s cosmic rule raises the weak and deposes the mighty (Pss. 146:7; 147:2).

⁵ Ps. 2:12 may well have been an added by the compilers to bring the two psalms closer together. See S. Gillingham, *A Journey of Two Psalms. The Reception of Psalms 1 & 2 in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁶ The second of these in 150:1 is actually ‘praise God’ (הַלְלוּ־אֱלֹהִים).

These five psalms create an interesting progression. Psalm 146:1-2 speaks more personally of 'my soul' praising God; 147:12 refers to the entire congregation being part of this praise; in 148:1-3, 7-8 the whole cosmos is invited into this liturgy; 149:1-2 marks out the role of 'Israel' within this cosmic song; and 150:1 develops the expanded vision in 148, bringing both heaven and earth into repeated paeons of praise.

So how do *Psalms 1-2* and *146-150* create an appropriate introduction and conclusion to the Psalter? First, they offer contrasting visions of God's future dealing with humankind. Psalms 1-2 are more aware of the power of evil over the individual (Psalm 1) and the community (Psalm 2), and so refer explicitly to coming judgement, whether on individual sinners (Ps. 1:5) or on other nations (Ps. 2:8-9). Psalms 146-150 offer glimpses of the existence of evil on a more cosmic scale (Pss. 146:5-9; 149:6-9) but, by contrast, God's purposes here are ultimately for the good of his creation.

Another correspondence concerns the tension between God's particular choice of Israel and his universal care for all humankind. The emphasis is more explicitly on Israel in Psalms 1 and 2, guided by the Torah, and with a Davidic covenant (Psalm 2). Yet universalism is expressed in God's power over human wickedness and evil (Psalm 1) and over all foreign nations (Psalm 2). This universal emphasis is more explicit at the end of the Psalter, in the calls of praise to all the rulers of the earth (Pss.146:5-7; 148:11-12; 149:7) and to all the created order (Pss.146:5-7; 147:9-11; 148:11-12). But even here we see a particular place for Israel, in the references to Zion (Pss. 146:10; 147:12; 149:2), to Jerusalem (Ps. 147:2, 12), to Israel herself (Pss.147:2, 19; 148:12; 149:2), and even to Jacob (Pss. 146:5; 147:19). Hence the beginning and ending of the Psalter relate to each other in complementary ways.

Entering and Leaving the Psalter through Psalms 2 and 149

National and political concerns are more pronounced in these two psalms and so there are several correspondences. In Psalm 2:9 the promise to the king is that he will break the power of the nations with a 'rod of iron' (*בְּסַבָּט בְּרִזְלֹ*) whilst in Psalm 149:8, the nobles of the nations are to be bound in 'fetters of iron' (*בְּכַבְּלֵי בְּרִזְלֹ*). And just as Psalm 149:2 begins with a call to the children of Zion 'to rejoice' in God who is their King so Psalm 2 ends with a call to the people of Zion to 'rejoice with fear', each using the verb *שָׂמַח*. God's judgement is over all the nations of the world (Pss. 2:1-3 and 149:7, 9) and all are accountable to God (Pss. 2:10 and 149:8). Zion alone will inherit God's promises (Pss. 2:6 and 149:2, each using 'Zion'). So these two psalms emphasise God's particular promises to his people, both at the start and the end of the Psalter.

Entering and Leaving the Psalter through Psalms 1 and 150

Psalm 1 is a carefully constructed composition. It has three quatrains with two bicola in each; it uses Aleph as the first letter of the first word and Tau as the first letter of the last word, signifying order and completion. Psalm 150 is also carefully constructed; it is of almost equal length to Psalm 1, and could be divided, as Psalm 1, into three quatrains with two bicola in each. Its identical beginning and ending ('Praise Yah!') is akin to the use of letters 'Aleph and Tau in Psalm 1.

Initially it might seem that the quiet murmuring of the law in Psalm 1:2 (using the verb *הגה*) could not contrast more with the jubilant sounds of the music in Psalm 150:3-5. Psalm 1 suggests a private setting, shunning the song and dance of public worship, whilst Psalm 150 reverberates with the joy of liturgy, as we saw in images from the *Eadwine Psalter* and by Marc Chagall earlier. In

Psalm 1:2, we perceive only silent reflection in the prayerful study of Torah. In Psalm 150: 3-5 we hear the full array of orchestral accompaniment: wind instruments ('trumpet' and 'pipe'), strings ('lute', 'harp' and 'strings') and percussion ('tambourine', 'clanging cymbals' and 'loud clashing cymbals'). God's presence is found both in silent prayer and exuberant praise.

Yet Psalm 150 has not always been about 'exuberant praise'. The initial reticence to singing to musical accompaniment in synagogues after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE resulted in the recitation, not singing, of this psalm. Furthermore, early Christians also wrestled with musical accompaniment and singing in worship, primarily because of pagan associations, so in the early monastic tradition Psalm 150 was chanted at Lauds, not sung. Hence, incongruously, in early Jewish and Christian tradition the use of Psalm 150 was not too dissimilar from Psalm 1.

There are other similarities. Each psalm has a didactic intention. In Psalm 1 this is to teach the congregation about studying and praying the Torah; in Psalm 150 it is to encourage the community to give thanksgiving and praise to God. Moreover, in Psalm 150 that tenfold call to praise (*Hallelujah*) points to the Ten Commandments; the blowing of the *shofar* in verse 3 also reminds us of Mount Sinai. Hence although the Torah is prominent in Psalm 1 it is not entirely absent in Psalm 150.

Each psalm shares allusions to Temple worship. The private meditation of the blessed man in Psalm 1 keeps him as safe as a tree by running waters (verse 3); this evokes the image of the trees in the Temple courts.⁷ Psalm 150 offers paeons of praise which reverberate from the Temple outwards. The worshippers are summoned, perhaps by the Levitical singers in the inner courts, with the *shofar*, harp and lyre; the dancing and tambourines suggest roles played by women and lay-people worshipping in the outer courts.⁸ Furthermore, Psalm 150 suggests not only the music of the earthly Temple but also the paeons of praise within the heavenly Temple. The 'blessed man' in Psalm 1 does not refer explicitly either to an earthly or heavenly Temple: his eyes are firmly fixed on an earthly congregation, but the allusion through those fertile trees in the Temple is there. The Torah is dominant in Psalm 1, and the Temple is evident in Psalm 150, but there are suggestions of each, in very different ways, in both psalms.

There are differences. Psalm 1 seeks security of faith in his congregation; Psalm 150 strives to move the community of faith into the wider world. Each psalm enhances its own perspective by using different names for God. Psalm 1 refers twice to God as *Ha Shem* (verse 2: 'the law of the Lord'; and verse 6: 'for the Lord knows ...'). Psalm 150 praises God as 'Yah' – a shortened liturgical term – at the beginning and end. The praise in the heart of Psalm 150 is however addressed to 'El' – the Creator and King whose sanctuary is both in heaven and on earth, who now takes on the attributes of YHWH, performing his 'mighty deeds' (עָשָׂה גִבּוֹרֹת: verse 2) throughout Israel's history. These two terms for God, the one distinct to Israel and the other more universal, fit ideally with the tone of the psalm, just as the use of *Ha Shem* fits the tenor of the first psalm.

It would be fitting at this stage to play two contrasting musical compositions, each, like the images offered earlier, testifying to the complementary nature of the two psalms. If time allowed, I would almost certainly have chosen Thomas Tallis for a setting of Psalm 1, because this represents its unadorned private piety, and I would have selected Igor Stravinsky's twentieth-century setting for Psalm 150, as this demonstrates the vibrancy of this psalm. Each would have shown how music is another medium which takes us beyond the words themselves. But time is short, and we must finish with yet more words.

⁷ See also Pss. 52:8 and 92:12.

⁸ See D.J. Human, "'Praise beyond Words.' Psalm 150 a *grand finale* of the Crescendo in the *Psalter*." *TS* 67/1 (2011): <http://hdl.handle.net/2263/17117>.

Conclusion

Psalms 1 and 150 serve as different gates into and out of the Book of Psalms. Psalm 150 could not have been placed at the beginning, and Psalm 1 could not have been used at the end. The journey of faith in the Psalter is from the community of faith to the cosmos beyond it, exemplified by the quiet meditation of Torah and the deafening praise from the Temple. Walter Brueggemann has explained the differences between Psalms 1 and 150 as a focus on ‘obedience’ and ultimately on ‘praise’.⁹ Psalm 1, he contends, stands for a more works-orientated faith and Psalm 150, a more trust-orientated attitude of praise. He observes that the rest of the Psalter moves between these polarities of faith, and the final resolution is of trust over works. This offers an interesting paradigm. It might be complemented by my own proposal, that in Psalm 1 we find a faith focused on the Jewish community marked by the Torah, and in Psalm 150 we discover a celebratory Temple faith which embraces the entire cosmos.

I end with a reference to a contemporary British poet and friend, Malcolm Guite. His collection of 150 poems was composed during the lockdown of Covid-19; each is fifteen lines long, and set out in five tercets of *terza rima*, imitating a ‘miniature Psalter’. The title *David’s Crown* indicates that this is a ‘corona’ of psalms, whereby the last line of one psalm is the same as the first line of the next. This is a play-on-words of *Corona Virus*: most of the psalms mirror the ‘twists and turns of human experience’ whilst living in isolation through the pandemic.¹⁰ Here is Malcom Guite’s version of Psalm 150:

For buried seeds the time has come to flower,
To blossom into victory and praise.
So praise God in his firmament of power
Whose only power is love: the power to raise
The dead to life, the power to restore
The lost, and turn our long lament to praise.
Oh praise him in his noble acts and for
His great redemption. Praise him with the sound
Of trumpets. Tune your music at the door
He is about to open. Beat the ground
With light and loosened feet, for all his ways
Are glory, and all places hallowed ground.
So come and bring him all your nights and days,
And come into his courts with joyful song,
Come to the place where every breath is praise.

Guite fashions the last line of Psalm 150 so that it is the same as the first line in Psalm 1. So Psalm 1 begins:¹¹

Come to the place where every breath is praise,
And God is breathing through each passing breeze ...

And so we move from Psalm 150 to Psalm 1 and forward to Psalm 150 again – in a complete corona. This practice of praying through the Psalter as a whole is shared by Jews and Christians, and as we learn this discipline, we will discover, like the poet T.S. Eliot cited at the beginning of this paper, that ‘What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning.’ So although studies of the Book of Psalms in *Bibelwoche* have ended after some twenty years, they have in fact only just begun.

⁹ See W. Brueggemann, ‘Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon’, *JOT* 50 (1991), pp. 63-92.

¹⁰ Guite 2021: xiii-xv. Psalm 150, following, is found on p. 150.

¹¹ Guite 2021: 1.

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