

“A groundbreaking and innovative piece
of research . . . that will open up new
vistas of study and preaching.”
—Walter J. Kaiser Jr.

THE
FLOW
OF THE

Psalm

DISCOVERING THEIR
STRUCTURE AND THEOLOGY

O. PALMER
ROBERTSON

“Here is a groundbreaking and innovative piece of research and study that will open up new vistas of study and preaching to the whole body of Christ from the beloved treasury of the Psalter. . . . Professor Robertson has convincingly argued that there is a distinctive progression across the five books of the Psalter. . . . What Robertson has done for us is to include in this book five diagrams, along with his text, to show how Torah Psalm 1 and messianic Psalm 2 supply us with the major themes that are then developed across the whole Psalter with the grouping of significant psalms along the way. . . . The impact that this view of such a Psalter structure will have on New Testament perspectives and studies should be enormous.”

—**Walter C. Kaiser Jr.**, President Emeritus, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“What a pleasure to read! O. Palmer Robertson’s scholarly but accessible *Flow of the Psalms* demonstrates that there is an orderly thematic arrangement for the seemingly ‘most miscellaneous of the sacred books’ (Augustine)—the Psalms. Showing us the genius of the book’s structure and the interconnections between structure and substance, Robertson makes the overall theological message of the Psalms come to light. His fresh and insightful work on this majestic book of Scripture is sure to expand your mind, warm your heart, and open your mouth to join with all creation in shouts of ‘*Hallelu-YAH*.’”

—**Douglas Sean O’Donnell**, Friends of QTC Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies and Practical Theology, Queensland Theological College, Brisbane, Australia

“The book of the Psalms: a random collection of individual poems or a well-structured composition with a specific theological message? While an average Bible reader gets the impression of the former, several biblical scholars in modern times have attempted to discover the latter—but mostly in vain. This new book offers a courageous and thought-provoking proposal to read the Psalter afresh. Palmer Robertson argues that the Psalms exhibit a deliberate architectonic structure and an organized development of thought progression from the beginning to the end. Pivotal to his argument is a new evaluation

of the function of the two ‘poetic pillars’ (Pss. 1 and 2), with Torah and Messiah as organizing themes of the Psalter. In my opinion, the author is successful in defending the idea of a great number of inter-connections in structure and theology in the Psalms. The redemptive-historical development of confrontation–communication–devastation–maturation–consummation is quite helpful, as is the emphasis on the function of memorization of the Psalms by means of, for example, acrostic psalms. This book is written in a lucid and attractive style and reads as the report of an exploratory expedition. Robertson’s joy of discovery is contagious, as is his love for God’s Word that inspired him. It is therefore my hope and expectation that the teaching of this book will enrich many readers, both laymen and scholars.”

—**Eric Peels**, Professor of Old Testament Studies and Rector of the Theological University Apeldoorn, The Netherlands

“Very few evangelical scholars have mastered Old Testament studies to the level of O. Palmer Robertson. His expertise is evident in this work on the Psalms. More than this, he interacts with modern scholarship without compromising his commitment to the full authority of Scripture. And best of all, his work is easily understood and available to serve pastors and other church leaders as they preach and teach Christ from the Psalms. This book is undoubtedly one of the very best studies of this part of Scripture.”

—**Richard L. Pratt Jr.**, Founder and President, Third Millennium Ministries

“With his customary clarity and insight, Robertson presents a Psalter that is at once theologically rich, historically relevant, and practically impactful. His approach is largely redemptive-historical and canonical, which provides him with multiple advantages as he explores the shape and coherence of the Psalter as a poetic anthology and its place within the larger biblical story of redemption. Robertson’s often-creative interpretation is nevertheless attuned to contemporary scholarship, which he presents in a manner accessible to laymen and preachers.”

—**John Scott Redd Jr.**, President and Associate Professor of Old Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C.

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O. PALMER ROBERTSON


P U B L I S H I N G
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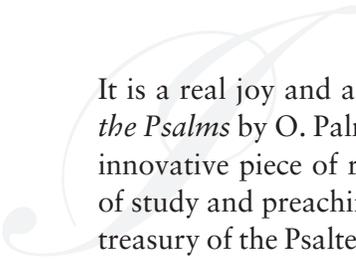
In memory of
Gwenette Phillips Robertson
1934–2014

With beauty outwardly and beauty inwardly, she displayed the grace of Christ through all her life. Her love of music, her love of singing, welled up from a heart filled to overflowing with the love of Christ.

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FOREWORD



It is a real joy and a privilege to write the foreword to *The Flow of the Psalms* by O. Palmer Robertson, for here is a groundbreaking and innovative piece of research and study that will open up new vistas of study and preaching to the whole body of Christ from the beloved treasury of the Psalter. Many of us over the years have come to appreciate the numerous books and articles that have come from the labors of Dr. Robertson. Currently, he divides his time between Uganda, where he serves as Director and Vice Chancellor of the African Bible University, and Cambridge, England, where he spends the balance of his time in study and research of the Scriptures. His new project on the Psalms will introduce us to a whole new avenue of thinking and ministering for the glory of our God.

The book of Psalms has been one of the great sources of blessing to the body of Christ. Yet for all too long now, the book of Psalms has been treated by many scholars and lay readers as a sort of hodgepodge collection of individual poems randomly placed together with no planned pattern of arrangement or purpose to the whole book. This is not to say that some have not attempted to see whether the five books into which the Psalms are divided offer some type of organization. Alas, the conclusion has usually been that if such an intentional structure exists, it is a mystery, or that the Psalter is a collection without any sort of rhyme or reason.

Recent introductions to the Old Testament have even gone beyond giving up on finding how all 150 psalms are linked together; these studies have insisted that a particular psalm is not even to be interpreted by the psalms that border it. Thus, every psalm is said to stand alone, its neighboring psalm having little or no impact on its meaning or its placement at that point in the book of Psalms. But Professor Robertson

has convincingly argued that there is a distinctive progression across the five books of the Psalter.

This should not be a surprising turn of events for those who hold the Scriptures to be a revelation from God, for there is a divine unity, purpose, and plan to all that God has disclosed in his Word. Our God is not the author of randomness or confusion; he is the God of order. Nevertheless, the current trend is to place modern emphasis on the diversity, plurality, and isolated individualism of scriptural texts. The complaint is that there are just too many topics and that the picture is just too complex to argue for a deliberate flow of the biblical materials so that they form a picture moving toward a goal and purpose even though the materials might stretch, as is the case with the five books of the Psalms, over some five hundred years. But for that matter, the whole Bible was authored by some thirty-nine or forty writers over a period of fourteen to fifteen hundred years. Yet what they wrote was with a single plan, which I have elsewhere labeled the *promise-plan of God*.

In like manner, Professor Robertson has pointed to such structural items as the placement of acrostic psalms and the strategic coupling of a messianic psalm with a Torah psalm, but he has also gone on to point to the grouping of psalms by topics, such as the kingship psalms, innocent-sufferer psalms, specified-enemy psalms, *Yahweh Malak* (“Yahweh is King”) psalms, Psalms of Ascents, and *Hallelu-YAH* psalms, along with specific messianic psalms that give further indication as to how the Psalter is structured.

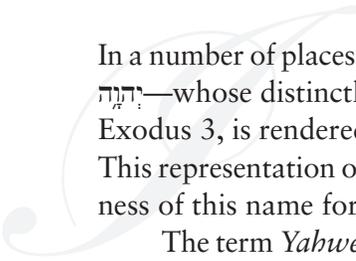
Even though the flow of the Psalms is not purely chronological, there is a relative ordering in the time sequences marked out in this work. Slowly, a number of recent studies are beginning to show that the whole Psalter has an intentional structure. But what Robertson has done for us is to include in this book five diagrams, along with his text, to show how Torah Psalm 1 and messianic Psalm 2 supply us with the major themes that are then developed across the whole Psalter with the grouping of significant psalms along the way. His narrative moves from “Confrontation” in Psalms 1–41 (Book I), as David met a multitude of enemies while attempting to establish the Lord’s kingdom of righteousness and peace, to “Communication”

with foreign nations and peoples, with his use of *Elohim* as the name for God instead of *Yahweh* (Pss. 42–72; Book II). This led to the “Devastation” of the people for their lack of faith, as described in the seventeen psalms of Book III (Pss. 73–89). Book IV (Pss. 90–106) has at its core *Yahweh Malak* psalms (Pss. 92–100), which anticipate the rejuvenation of Yahweh’s kingdom in the “Maturation” of God’s plan in the flow of the Psalms’ theology and narrative. Finally, Book V (Pss. 107–150), comprising the final forty-four psalms of the Psalter, gives us the “Consummation” of the flow of the Psalms. Psalm 118, a messianic psalm, is coupled with Psalm 119, a Torah psalm, to once again point to the major structural unit in the Psalms announced in Psalms 1 and 2. The *Hallelu-YAH* finale in Psalms 146–150 serves as the pinnacle of this climactic collection. Both Psalms 110 and 118, two focal messianic psalms, give us some of the best revelations of the sufferings and glory of the Messiah. Not surprisingly, the New Testament quotes these psalms, along with Psalm 2, more extensively than any others.

The Flow of the Psalms has a host of themes and avenues for further thought and reflection. Its coupling of the Torah and messianic themes throughout the Psalter points to the heart of the matter. The impact that this view of Psalter structure will have on New Testament perspectives and studies should be enormous. At the very least, this fresh reading of the Psalter in its structural flow should give a new insight into this poetic book of Scripture that has long been regarded as isolated collections of unrelated themes. The biblical-theological context of the book of Psalms calls us to heed it in our own thinking and to teach it to those to whom we minister.

Walter C. Kaiser Jr.
President Emeritus
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South Hamilton, Massachusetts

EDITOR'S PREFACE

In a number of places throughout this work, the divine name *Yahweh*— יהוה—whose distinctly covenantal meaning was revealed to Moses in Exodus 3, is rendered *COVENANT LORD* or *LORD OF THE COVENANT*. This representation of *Yahweh* communicates the principal distinctiveness of this name for God.

The term *Yahweh* sounds awkward in English and communicates little to the reader. Substitutions such as the hybrid *Jehovah* and the capitalized *LORD* or *LORD* do little to communicate the uniqueness of this term. *Yahweh* is *distinctly* the LORD OF THE COVENANT, the COVENANT LORD.

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To Steffen Jenkins. Steffen generously and graciously shared with me all his resources of knowledge about current studies in the Psalms and their structure.

To my wife, Joanna. Joanna has been my most loving critic, whose red-pen markings have contributed much to the final form of this book.

O. Palmer Robertson
Tyndale House
Cambridge, England
May 1, 2014

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1. Throughout this volume, the asterisk (*) indicates a grouping of psalms whose titles do not all specifically refer to David or some other individual.

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INTRODUCTION

More often than not, people perceive the book of Psalms as a random collection of individual poems on a variety of topics. With this assumed framework for reading, it is understandable that little awareness exists in terms of a comprehension of the book's total message, its specific emphases, or any flow of the book's structure and theology from beginning to end.

The difficulty of grasping some structural order in the Psalter is by no means a modern problem. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, after setting forth a commentary on the Psalms condensed to over six hundred pages, opens his treatment of Psalm 150 with the following acknowledgment:

Although the arrangement of the Psalms, which seems to me to contain the secret of a mighty mystery, hath not yet been revealed unto me, yet, by the fact that they in all amount to one hundred and fifty, they suggest somewhat even to us, who have not as yet pierced with the eye of our mind the depth of their entire arrangement, whereon we may without being over-bold, so far as God giveth, be able to speak.¹

Augustine proceeds to speak extensively of the significance of 150 as the number of the Psalms, of the difficulty of understanding the division into five books when there is actually only one book, and of the significance of the three groups of fifty psalms each that

1. Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 8:681.

advance from penitence (Ps. 50) to mercy and judgment (Ps. 100) to praise (Ps. 150).

In the middle of the nineteenth century, one insightful commentator who treasured the revelations of God in the book of Psalms anticipated more recent discussions. This particular author was fully aware of the challenge of a comprehensive understanding of the book of Psalms. He provides an honest summary of the problem by describing the book of Psalms as

the most miscellaneous of the sacred books, containing a hundred and fifty compositions, each complete in itself, and varying in length, from two sentences (Ps. 117) to a hundred and seventy-six (Ps. 119), as well as in subject, style, and tone, the work of many authors, and of different ages; so that a superficial reader might be tempted to regard it as a random or fortuitous collection of unconnected and incongruous materials.²

Rejecting various efforts to reconstruct the psalms in some order that might provide greater coherence to the Psalter, this author suggests that studying the order in which the book presents itself will prove to be the most productive approach. Even if all the elements that link one portion of the book to another might not be immediately apparent, enough clues are evident to supply some overall awareness of the genius of the book's structure. As a matter of fact, the more a person studies the total message of the Psalms, the more convinced he becomes that a greater number of interconnections in structure and theology exist in the book than will ever be fully uncovered.

The authors of a recent commentary on the Psalms describe their approach to the Psalter, explaining in the process why their introduction to the whole book is being reserved until the third volume dealing with Psalms 1–50 has been completed:

2. Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Psalms: Translated and Explained* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1864; repr., n.d.), 3. J. A. Alexander was the son of Archibald Alexander, the founding professor of Princeton Theological Seminary in 1812. In this commentary, J. A. Alexander acknowledges his indebtedness to the three-volume commentary of E. W. Hengstenberg on the Psalms.

Because we do not regard the Psalter, as some other commentators have, as nothing but a “storage cabinet” for individual psalms, but rather as a successively developed, but nevertheless compositionally structured entity whose form gives an additional dimension of meaning to each individual psalm, the “introduction” can be meaningfully composed only when we have analyzed all the individual psalms.³

Taking into account the structure of the Psalter makes two significant contributions to the interpretive process: (1) it has the potential of uncovering internal connections among the various psalms; and (2) it provides additional light to each individual psalm on the basis of this internal structuring. Both these elements have the potential of uncovering the richer meaning of the Psalter as a whole as well as with respect to its various parts.⁴

Obviously, it is impossible to know exactly how the final form of the Psalter came together. Yet we can be fairly certain of some things. Essentially all evidence points to the fact that David composed a great number of the psalms in about 1000 B.C. We know from their content that some psalms were composed as much as five hundred years later, since they describe responses to Israel’s exile and restoration (Pss. 137, 126). We know that at least one earlier arrangement of the psalms was made before the final form of the Psalter, as indicated by the postscript of Psalm 72. This concluding notation of the psalm says, “The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended” (Ps. 72:20), and yet the Psalter contains a number of psalms attributed to David after Psalm 72. We know that an editor or editors arranged the collection of 150 psalms into five “books” of significantly uneven size, with forty-one psalms in Book I (Pss. 1–41), thirty-one psalms in Book II (Pss. 42–72), seventeen psalms in Book III (Pss. 73–89), seventeen psalms in Book IV

3. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Eric Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), xi.

4. Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1995), 227, propose that the “primary literary context” for the study of a psalm is “not the psalms that border it, but the psalms that are generically similar to it.” They further observe: “Except under rare circumstances, it is inappropriate to exegete a psalm in the literary context of the psalms that precede and follow it.” Yet the many structural elements within the Psalter encourage careful consideration of a particular psalm’s setting in the context of the psalm grouping in which it is found.

(Pss. 90–106), and forty-four psalms in Book V (Pss. 107–150). We also know that someone selected and distributed certain Davidic psalms into four major groupings across the five books, and quite likely chose at some points to leave earlier groupings intact.⁵ Further, we know that some person or persons put together the entirety of the book as we now observe it.⁶

So who was this final editor/author/organizer or group of editors who constructed the final form of the Psalter? How did he or they do this work? We cannot know with certainty the answer to these questions. But to make this procedure more concrete, let us imagine that this person was someone like Ezra the scribe. If not Ezra, it could well have been some person or group of persons similar to Ezra.

So let us imagine our “Ezra” or some grouping of individuals similar to Ezra in the exilic and/or postexilic period of Israel’s redemptive history as the final organizer(s) and editor(s) of the Psalter.⁷ We know some things about Ezra. Like Paul his New Testament counterpart, he was a scribe of the law. Ezra is described as a priest and a teacher “well

5. Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 5, makes the valid point that the “prior existence” of individual collections “must have inhibited the editorial exercise of freedom in the final shaping of the psalms.” Given the limitations of current sources, it is virtually impossible to reconstruct the historical process that was involved in rearranging Psalter materials. But it may be assumed that the integrity of the various psalms was scrupulously maintained.

6. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 1, offer a much more detailed hypothesis of the formation of the Psalter, including references to numerous composers, editors, collectors, and redactors who placed and re-placed individual psalms according to certain ideas, created their own psalms, sharpened and deepened theological profiles, drew from several partial psalters put together at different times, and finally shaped the book of Psalms as we now have it by a many-layered process rather than in a single action. These authors suggest that the first collection resembling Psalms 3–41 might have originated in the “late preexilic period,” which would be as much as three hundred years after David, while the “final redaction” may be dated between 200 and 150 B.C. While many of their proposals make significant contributions to the analysis of the Psalter’s structure, conclusions about specifics in the process of the Psalter’s development must generally be regarded as tendentious in character. Solid evidence of particulars that made up the process over the five hundred years of the Psalter’s development is simply not available.

7. Various proposals have dated the Psalter’s completion as late as the second century B.C. or into the first century A.D. Even John Calvin in his comments on Psalms 74 and 79 leaves open the possibility of Maccabean psalms. *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 2:159, 281. But nothing inherent in the Psalter compels a date later than the time of Israel’s return from exile, down to about 400 B.C.

versed in the Law of Moses, . . . a man learned in matters concerning the commands and decrees of the LORD for Israel” (Ezra 7:6, 11). He was a man who had “devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). By *Law* or *Torah* is not meant merely the five books of Moses. Even these books must not be perceived as codifications designed to dictate every thought and action of the pious. *Law* or *Torah* was an elastic word that could include history, prophecy, poetry, and wisdom. This person, whoever he was, must have loved the whole of the Torah of the Lord, including the Psalms.

So our imagined “Ezra” first appears during the exile in Babylon. He might have been taken into exile as a young man with the first captives, like Daniel and Ezekiel. Or he might have been born in exile. But by the divine appointment of his life course, he stands among the celebrated scholars of God’s Word in his day. He might even have authored some of the sacred writings, such as the books of Chronicles. Some years later, he appears among the leaders of Israel’s worship who return to the Land of Promise.

Now into his hands, or the hands of a person or people like him, is placed the responsibility of ordering services for seeking God’s face in worship among the Judean exiles in Babylon, and later in Judea after the return from exile. At his disposal is the collection or collections of psalms that have been handed down to him. For four to five hundred years, from the days of David in about 1000 B.C. to the events of Israel’s tragic exile and meager restoration in around 586 and 536 to 515 B.C., these precious psalms have led God’s people through every imaginable experience.

His task may be compared to that of a modern-day friend of a bride who has been asked to arrange the flowers for a wedding ceremony. It will be a large gathering. A thousand people might be in attendance. So will the person responsible for this artistic presentation in behalf of his close friend thoughtlessly arrange his collection of flowers into a shapeless mass, place them into a commonplace clay pot, and be done with the job? Of course not. His floral arrangement must be carefully crafted to enhance the beauty of every lily, rose, and iris.

In a similar way, the final editor (or editors) of the Psalter would have been quite deliberate in the arrangement of the assembled treasury of psalms. Very likely he (or they) would have accepted some arrangements that traditional usage had already established. But then he/they would have been quite deliberate in the placement of every psalm and grouping of psalms.

In considering the present arrangement of the Psalter, we see that a large grouping of psalms known to be David's has been positioned in the forefront of the collection. This grouping reflects the confrontation of David with numerous and varied enemies as he seeks to establish his messianic kingship (Book I, Psalms 1–41). Next our editor presents psalms declaring the victories of the Lord over the nations, while also depicting communications with the nations that climax in the prospect of a worldwide reign of David's son Solomon (Book II, Psalms 42–72). Then he offers a realistic picture of the conflict with the mighty “horns” of foreign powers that ultimately ends with the devastation of his people and the casting of Messiah's crown to the dust (Book III, Psalms 73–89). In response to this tragic note, he situates the stately psalm of Moses as a pivotal centerpiece of the Psalter. This majestic psalm thus serves as his introduction to the fourth book of the Psalms that leads God's people into a more mature perspective on the coming of the kingdom (Book IV, Psalms 90–106):

Lord, you have been our dwellingplace through all generations.
Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and
the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. (Ps. 90:1–2)

Having affirmed the Lord's dominion across the ages, he then places together a grouping of psalms that chant a favored refrain: “*Yahweh Malak*” (“The LORD is King”) (Pss. 93, 96, 97, 99). In his final book, he calls for expressions of thanks and praise that serve as his climactic theme (Book V, Pss. 107–150). In recognition of the ongoing significance of David's role as the original creator of the Psalter, he has reserved a select number of David's psalms suitable to the time of Israel's exile (Pss. 138–145), which is the moment of the nation's history in which this editor has done the majority of his work. Our imagined ultimate

Psalter editor concludes this last book with a “*Hallelu-YAH* finale” that brings the whole collection to its climactic end (Pss. 146–150).

This abbreviated analysis of the arrangement of the Psalter is obviously an oversimplification. But that the book of Psalms has a structure should not be disputed. All the constituent elements of its magnificent complexity might never be discovered. But the architectonic structure clearly deserves further investigation. First consideration may be given to the basic structural elements in the Psalms.

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