

## TWO INTRODUCTIONS TO THE PSALMS

### *The first and the second psalm*

The composition of the Book of Psalms originally began with the third psalm, as the first and second psalms have been attached at a later stage as introductions. At the first sight both psalms seem completely unrelated to each other, the effect of the juxtaposition of the two psalms are to highlight and hold together the two key concepts of Torah and kingship. Especially in Deuteronomy Torah and kingship are related, therefore some scholars identify Deuteronomic influence at the beginning of the Psalter.<sup>1</sup>

The first psalm is built around an antithetic parallel between the righteous man and the wicked man as a central structure of the text, the most basic decision of how to live: whether to live in the fruitful way of the righteous or the perish way of the wicked.<sup>2</sup> Psalm one speaks of a life focused on Torah and the second verse begins with a strong contrast: the righteous or the happy man does not participate in the lifestyle of the wicked, rather than he or she desires and delights in the Torah, in the divine instruction. The place of the Torah in the life of the blessed man is developed through metaphors. He is like a tree, as everything he does, it prospers.<sup>3</sup> The righteous and the wicked terminologies occurs more often in the Book of Psalms than in any other book in the Hebrew Bible, therefore these introductory terms play a prominent role in the whole Psalter.<sup>4</sup>

The second psalm is presented as a royal psalm and it is associated with the coronation of the king. This psalm also presents two paths in life although it does not use the same terms of the righteous and of the wicked. Similarly, those who oppose YHWH and YHWH's anointed will perish. Perhaps psalm two was edited to bring in line thematically with psalm one.<sup>5</sup> The central theme is the kingdom of God who was the universal king and his earthly representative was the Davidic king.<sup>6</sup> David appears in the psalms as a righteous sufferer and as the Lord's anointed. He suffers at the hands of the wicked, which are identified with the enemies and he cries out to God for help, but he represents the heavenly king on earth as

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, 2014, 352.

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann-Bellinger, 2014, 27-31.

<sup>3</sup> Wallace, 2009, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, 2014, 530.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, 2014, 531.

well.<sup>7</sup> The second psalm reflects a deep understanding of God's covenant with David and Davidic dynasty, the promise that God will establish his universal rule over the earth, although the subject of the second psalm is neither David, nor Solomon.

In the ancient Near East kings considered themselves as divinity, who are here against the Lord and his annointed. The confrontation is parallel with the wicked in the first psalm. This confrontation takes place at individual level and in the second psalm is enlarged at communal, national stage, where the kings meditate on rebellion, but not on God's law. The Bible records the destructive forces of nations and rulers, in which the prophets addressed their oracles against these nations, some of which were oppressors, like: Aram, Assyria, Babilonia, while others were trouble makers, like: Edom, Moab, Ammon.<sup>8</sup>

The second psalm is more frequently cited in the New Testament than any other.<sup>9</sup> It was favoured by the apostoles as confirmation of Jesus' messianic, glorious return with power and authority. The first century church applied this messianic psalm as an explanation of the crucification of Chirst by the rulers: Jesus is the fullfillment of this second psalm.

The didactic first psalm begins with a beatitude, אֲשֶׁר־י formula and is followed by second prophetic psalm which closes with אֲשֶׁר־י, a beatitude as well.<sup>10</sup> The concluding verse brings back to the connection with psalm one, that holds the two text together.<sup>11</sup> The first psalm addresses with instruction to the individuals, the second psalm addresses to community or nations, in which the Lord reigns over the nations. Both psalms forms a deep fundamental dependence on God.<sup>12</sup> Psalm two portrays national terms while psalm one illustrates individual terms, namely: the contrast between the righteous, who are open to God's rule and the wicked who make their own plans in opposition to the reign of God. In psalm two God is the real ruler, who laughs on the opponents, as the righteous laugh at the defeat of the evildoers. The second psalm with the affirmation of the Lord reigns is a powerful confirmation of faith and hope.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the first and second psalm introduce the whole Psalter

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<sup>6</sup> Craigie, 1983, 65-69.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, 2014, 535.

<sup>8</sup> Gaebelin, 1991, 64-71.

<sup>9</sup> Keil-Delitzsch, 1988, 89-90.

<sup>10</sup> Keil-Delitzsch, 1988, 89-90.

<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann-Bellinger, 2014, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Brueggemann-Bellinger, 2014, 36.

<sup>13</sup> NIB, 1996, 689-690.

for a call to live under God's reign, which can provide real happiness to the individual, as well as to the nations.

The *אֲשֶׁר־י* formula is concentrated mainly in the book of Psalms and some in Proverbs. It occurs most frequently in Book I, Book V and in each of the closing psalms in Books I–IV.<sup>14</sup> A psalmic beatitude typically has the form: "*happy the one who,,*". Its terminology reflects the Hebrew wisdom literature and teaching. The first two psalms were intended to provide a double perspective to the introduction: psalm one provides wisdom and psalm two provides a prophetic approach to the book. The two psalms are perhaps joined together. The righteous are introduced as happy and blessed person. The expression of happy person is also related to the Torah, which means an instruction to a guided life and it is contrary to the wicked life, which will not prosper like the righteous.<sup>15</sup> The *אֲשֶׁר־י* introductory formula which appears frequently in the psalms to wish happiness, replaces the old blessing word *בְּרוּךְ* term of wisdom and the teaching of Torah.<sup>16</sup> The original use was an educational context. The highest obligation is to obtain for contact with certain group of people.<sup>17</sup>

The pairing of psalms one and two as an introduction to the Psalter brings Torah and God's reign into close connection. There is a contrast in each psalm. First psalm is between the righteous man and the wicked, while in the second psalm Yahweh's anointed king stands over against the rulers of the nations.<sup>18</sup> From the very beginning of the Psalter there is a concern of how human beings stand in relation to God in terms of two categories: the righteous, commended a life oriented and lived in God's will and contrary the way of the wicked. With these two opening psalms the Psalter is entered with two exhortations: study the Torah and acknowledge God as sovereign Lord, thus can be a truly happy and righteous person.<sup>19</sup>

The first two psalms are very different in forms, they are creating a so called "*Doppelportal*" to the whole Psalter.<sup>20</sup> Putting the two psalms together we can have the main themes of the book: first psalm is focusing on the way of the righteous and the second psalm on the victory of the Lord's anointed king over the nation. Throughout the Psalter these theme is tensioned.

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<sup>14</sup> Wallace, 2009, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Craigie, 1983, 58-62.

<sup>16</sup> Kraus, 1993, 114.

<sup>17</sup> Gerstenberger, 1988, 41.

<sup>18</sup> Wallace, 2009, 15-16.

<sup>19</sup> Brown, 2014, 369.

<sup>20</sup> Zenger, 2003, 52.

A strong contrast is on the ungodly whose life is worthless.<sup>21</sup> The psalmist observes that the people are divided into good and bad, godly men and evil doers.<sup>22</sup>

There is no superscription to the first two psalms, only from the third psalm. This is a clear evidence that both psalms were added in a later stage, to an already in use collection.<sup>23</sup> According to some ancient manuscripts the quotation in Acts 13,33 introduces Psalm 2,7 as the first psalm. Thus the first psalm may have consisted of the first and second psalms together. Such as in rabbinical tradition the two psalms were united as one. In any case the matter is without any importance, as the messages of both psalms stand on its own.<sup>24</sup>

According to Kraus opinion the first and second psalm are to be interpreted together to form a so called coronation liturgy, in which the king is ordered to read and keep the Torah, although in the first psalm there is no reference that the statements could refer to a king.<sup>25</sup> A wise person will avoid all interaction with the wicked men, separating from those whose intention is hostile to God. Otherwise the strict separation from the nations is a commandment from Israel's oldest period (Num 23,9).<sup>26</sup>

The first psalm is about the Torah, it is a wisdom psalm; the second psalm is about the messianic kingship, which is a royal psalm. These two songs are worthy introductions to the whole book.<sup>27</sup> Most scholars like Gunkel, Mowinckel agree that the first is a didactic poem, composed for educational purposes by wise men. Engnell, Soggin lean toward royal origin or use, linking the first psalm with coronation liturgy. It is common to list it to the wisdom psalm or Torah psalm.<sup>28</sup> The warning to the nations in the second psalm uses elements of national complaint with notice of enemy description. We can also designate a messianic hymn, or a royal psalm. Thus in the whole second psalm there are a puzzling variety of forms: lament, wisdom, royal ceremony and all are fused into one.<sup>29</sup> The first and second psalm form a prologue, a kind of reader's guide to understanding the psalms that will follow.<sup>30</sup> The first

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<sup>21</sup> Ross, 2011, 200.

<sup>22</sup> Oesterley, 1955, 119.

<sup>23</sup> Gerstenberger, 1988, 45.

<sup>24</sup> Gaebelin, 1991, 52-63.

<sup>25</sup> Kraus, 1993, 114.

<sup>26</sup> Kraus, 1993, 115.

<sup>27</sup> Tóth, 1978, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Gerstenberger, 1988, 42-43.

<sup>29</sup> Gerstenberger, 1988, 45-48.

<sup>30</sup> Limburg, 2000, 5.

word in the first psalm begins with א the last word ends with ן this offers from alef/A to tav/Z the living life of the godly.<sup>31</sup>

In conclusion, we can mention that both psalms identify themes, which are found throughout the whole Book of Psalms. These psalms and the entire Psalter offer a choice between two different ways of life.<sup>32</sup> The first two psalms sets the tone for an approach to the entire Psalter, it stresses the importance of the matter of life or death.<sup>33</sup> The first and the second psalm invites the readers to consider the Psalter not only a prayer book or a collection of hymns, but as a book of instruction as well. The first wisdom psalm is linked to the second royal psalm, thus linking is an introduction or an instruction to the messianic hope.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Limburg, 2000, 3.

<sup>32</sup> NIB, 1996, 683.

<sup>33</sup> Gaebelin, 1991, 52-63.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, 2014, 155.

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