



Anzu Revisited: The Scribal Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter

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I. INTRODUCTION

IN THE INTRODUCTION TO *THE INTELLECTUAL ADVENTURE OF ANCIENT MAN*, HENRI and H. A. Frankfort describe myth in the ancient near east as the result of humankind's search for "intellectually satisfying" answers to basic questions of existence: "How did my world come into being?" "How do the gods affect what happens to me?" "Has life always been the way it is?" "Will it always remain the same?" The Frankforts call the process of arriving at answers to these questions "speculative thought."

We may say that speculative thought attempts to underpin the chaos of experience so that it may reveal the features of a structure—order, coherence, and meaning.¹

In ancient Mesopotamia, the rainstorm that ended a drought was not explained as the result of a change in certain atmospheric conditions. Rather, the giant bird-god Anzu devoured the Bull of Heaven, whose hot breath had scorched the land, and then spread its wings over the sky to form the black rain clouds. Mesopotamian society fulfilled its need to structure the phenomenal world by personifying natural forces as gods. The intervention of Anzu was an "intellectually satisfying," if numinous, explanation for the coming of rain to end a drought.

¹Henri Frankfort, H. A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen, and William A. Irwin, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1946, 1977) 3.

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We twentieth-century scholars have much in common with the ancient Mesopotamians, for we too seek to underpin the chaos in our world and provide a structure, an explanation, that is “intellectually satisfying.” We smile knowingly at the story of Anzu, content that we now possess the correct “scientific” understanding of rain. We can explain the phenomenon and thus render the seeming chaos of atmospheric changes coherent. In the same way, biblical scholars are compelled to give structure and order to biblical texts in order to obtain “intellectually satisfying” meanings.

One biblical text that confronts the reader with seeming chaos is the Book of Psalms. It appears to be a miscellaneous compilation of poetry divided rather arbitrarily into five “books.” Twentieth-century scholars have spilled much ink in their efforts to “underpin the chaos” of this, the most popular book of the Hebrew scriptures. I believe that the Psalter in its canonical form has a structure, order, and meaning that was in every sense “intellectually satisfying” to the ancient Israelites for whom it was compiled.

Postexilic Israel lived in circumstances very different from that of its ancestors. Except for a brief time of independence during the second and first centuries B.C.E., the people lived continuously as vassals—first to the Persians, then the Greeks, and then the Romans—throughout the period of the second temple. Gone forever were the magnificent days of King David and the nation of YHWH that stretched “from Dan to Beersheba.” We may say that the postexilic Israelites were a people in crisis. They needed a new structure of existence that would give order, coherence, and meaning to the chaos of their lives.

I suggest that the editors of the Book of Psalms gave the postexilic community a means for popular expression of a new structure for existence, using the poetry and songs of ancient Israel. What was the new structure? With YHWH as their king, the ancient Israelites could survive as a cohesive entity within the vast empires of which they found themselves a part. Indeed, the Psalter “underpinned the chaos” in which the Israelites lived during the period of the second temple.

II. THE SHAPING OF THE IDEA

In 538 B.C.E., the Persians decreed that the Israelites in exile in Babylon could return to Jerusalem. They were allowed to rebuild their temple and restore their religious practice, but they remained vassals of the Persian state. Temple and cult were restored, but the nation-state which had been ruled by the Davidic dynasty was not. The postexilic community found itself in a situation that required it to find a new structure for existence that transcended national identity. Temple and cult, rather than king and court, had to be the center of life. Donn Morgan asserts that this new mindset is a fundamental key to understanding postexilic Israel; he views the history of the period as a “series of attempts to deal with the loss of these physical symbols of identity.”²

²Donn F. Morgan, *Between Text and Community: The “Writings” in Canonical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 32.

Temple and cult had, of course, been major loci for life in preexilic Israel. In all of the ancient near east, politics and religion were closely connected and difficult to define as separate institutions.³ But in postexilic Israel, temple and cult were the only institutions and were therefore the sole source of identity. The postexilic community needed an “intellectually satisfying” expression of confidence in this new structure.

When the ancient Israelites returned from exile, they brought with them their law, their national history, and other texts which were part of their cultural and religious tradition. Psalms (מִזְמוֹרֹת) appear to have been an integral part of the preexilic cult and continued to be important in the second temple cult. 2 Chr 29:20-36 gives the reader a postexilic look back at temple worship in the days of Hezekiah. Verses 26-30 suggest that singers, musical instruments, and songs—“with the words of David and Asaph the seer” (v. 30)—were an important part of the cult ritual.

The exact process by which individual מִזְמוֹרֹת came together to form the Psalter is lost to the pages of history. I suggest that the canonical text grew from individual psalms to small groupings of psalms to larger collections,⁴ which an editor or editors joined to form the five books of the Hebrew Psalter.⁵ What was the design strategy of the final editors? Can we discover an internal shape, an “intellectually satisfying” structure within the Book of Psalms? If so, then we can conclude: (1) that the editor(s) structured the book to a purposeful end, and (2) that we may define that end.

I will begin by examining the canonical text of the Psalter. I note here my indebtedness to Gerald Wilson,⁶ whose outline of the Psalter I have adopted. I depart from Wilson’s analysis at the point of the rationale for the shaping of the Psalter, for I maintain that the editor(s) sought to persuade a disenfranchised, postexilic ancient Israelite community that it could remain a unified, cohesive entity within the empires to which it was vassal. Ancient Israel could transcend its “non-nation” status and survive.

III. THE SHAPE OF THE PSALTER

Books One through Three (Psalms 1-89) are different from Books Four and Five (Psalms 90-150) in three points of style. First, in Books One through Three 83

³See for example, Henri Frankfort’s excellent treatment of the subject in *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948, 1978).

⁴William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990) 10, outlines the following collections:

Davidic collections	Pss 3-41; 51-72; 138-145	Kingship of God	Pss 93-100
Korahite collections	Pss 42-49; 84-85; 87-88	Psalms of praise	Pss 103-107
Elohistic collection	Pss 42-83	Songs of ascents	Pss 120-134
Asaphite collection	Pss 73-83	Hallelujah psalms	Pss 111-118; 146-150

⁵The fivefold division of the Psalter is an early tradition in Judaism. For example, James Sanders, in *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1967) 14, states that the Psalms scrolls from Qumran are divided into five books, and their content and order is very similar to the Masoretic text.

⁶Gerald Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985).

of the 89 psalms refer to an “author” in their superscriptions. Fifty-six of them name David as that author, and an additional 24 are attributed to members of David’s court. In contrast, of the 61 psalms in Books Four and Five, only 19 specify an “author.”⁷

Second, in Books One through Three “royal” psalms are located at the “seams” or divisions between the books.⁸ Psalm 2 stands just before Book One’s lengthy collection of psalms ascribed to David. Psalm 72 divides Books Two and Three, and Psalm 89 separates Book Three from Book Four. Only at Psalm 41, which stands between Books One and Two, do we not find a royal psalm.⁹ Gerald Wilson posits a plausible explanation for the disruption of style. He suggests that from an early time the ancient Israelite cultic community viewed and used Books One and Two, which are composed almost exclusively of psalms connected with David, as a single Davidic collection. The editor(s) who inserted the royal psalms elsewhere in the text did not feel free to split the already-traditional unit by inserting a royal psalm after Psalm 41.¹⁰

Third, in Books One through Three the reader can follow a progression of thought in the structure of the books and in the psalms which are located at their “seams.”¹¹ At the beginning of Book One, the editor introduces the reader to two important themes in the Psalter. Psalm 1 praises the goodness of the instruction, the Torah, of YHWH. Psalm 2 outlines the promises of YHWH’s covenant with David:

I have set My king on Zion, My holy mountain....
Ask of Me, and I will make the nations your heritage
And the ends of the earth your possession. (2:6,8)

The remainder of Book One consists exclusively of psalms attributed to King David. Psalm 41, located at the “seam” between Books One and Two, though not a royal psalm, is a Psalm of David that celebrates David’s assurance of protection in the face of rebellion and enemies:

By this I know that You are pleased with me,
Because my enemy has not triumphed over me.
But You have upheld me because of my integrity
And set me in Your presence forever. (41:11-12)

⁷Sixteen of the 19 are attributed to David.

⁸See Gerald Wilson, “The Shape of the Book of Psalms,” *Interpretation* 46/2 (1992) 133f. Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 257f., maintains that the royal psalms “seem to suggest” a separate collection, which an editor placed throughout the Psalter “only as addenda.”

⁹Although Wilson attempts to press an argument for the “royal” status of Psalm 41 in *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 208ff., he later writes in “The Use of Royal Psalms at the ‘Seams’ of the Hebrew Psalter,” *JOT* 35 (1986) 87: “It is clear that Ps. 41, which concludes the first book, is not normally identified as one of the ‘royal’ psalms....It evidences no distinctly ‘kingly’ theme which would set it apart from other prayers for healing.”

¹⁰Wilson, “The Use of Royal Psalms at the ‘Seams’ of the Hebrew Psalter,” 87. See also Wilson, “Shaping the Psalter,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993) 72f. The postscript to Psalm 72, “The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended” (v. 20), supports Wilson’s argument.

¹¹See Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 209ff.

And Book Two is also very “Davidic.” Twenty-six of the 31 psalms in the book are ascribed to David or members of David’s court.

Psalm 72, which closes Book Two, is the only canonical psalm attributed to Solomon. In the psalm, the king petitions YHWH to continue to give favor to the king’s son:

Give the king Your justice, O God,
And Your righteousness to a king’s son.
May he judge Your people with righteousness...
May all kings fall down before him,
All nations give him service. (72:1f., 11)

Psalm 72 ends with a postscript: “The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended” (72:20). We may, then, summarize the movement of thought in Books One through Three:

The covenant which YHWH made with David (Ps 2) and in whose promises David rested secure (Ps 41) is now passed on to his descendants in this series of petitions in behalf of “the king’s son” (Ps 72).¹²

Book Three is still connected with David, but only one psalm (Psalm 86), is ascribed directly to him. The remaining psalms are attributed to members of his and Solomon’s royal courts. Book Three closes with Psalm 89, a plea to YHWH to remember the covenant with David:

Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said:
“I have set the crown on one who is mighty,
I have exalted one chosen from the people.
I have found David My servant;
With My holy oil I have anointed him.” (89:19f.)

But the covenant is broken:

But now You have spurned and rejected him;
You are full of wrath against Your anointed.
You have renounced the covenant with your servant;
You have defiled his crown in the dust...
How long, O Lord? Will You hide Yourself forever?
How long will Your wrath burn like fire?...
Lord, where is Your steadfast love of old,
Which by Your faithfulness you swore to David? (89:38f., 46, 49)

Psalm 89 is a turning point in the Psalter. It leads the reader back to Psalm 2, back to the covenant which YHWH made with David, and laments the failure of that covenant:

The Davidic covenant introduced in Ps 2 has come to nothing and the combination of three books concludes [in Ps 89] with the anguished cry of the Davidic descendants.¹³

Books Four and Five are very different from Books One, Two, and Three, and

¹²Ibid., 211.

¹³Ibid., 213.

focus the reader's attention in a new direction. The covenant—YHWH's promise to David of a perpetual throne—is broken; the Israelite community no longer has a king, the symbol of "statehood" in the ancient near east. How can ancient Israel, the vassal of a foreign empire, survive? The editor(s) of the Psalter give the postexilic Israelites an "intellectually satisfying" expression of their confidence in a new state structure. In Book Four, the reader learns that YHWH had always been king of the ancient Israelites—their guarantor of order, coherence, and meaning—and YHWH would continue to be king.

Psalm 90, with which Book Four opens, is the only psalm in the Psalter ascribed to Moses,¹⁴ the great law-giver of ancient Israel. It turns the reader's attention away from the Davidic covenant and monarchy back to the pre-monarchical days of ancient Israel:

Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations
Before the mountains were brought forth,
Or ever You had formed the earth and the world,
From everlasting to everlasting, You are God. (90:1f.)

Book Four contains a cluster of "enthronement psalms" (Psalms 93 and 95-99) which celebrate the kingship of YHWH over all the earth.

YHWH is king! He is robed in majesty. (93:1)

Let us come into His presence with thanksgiving.
Let us make a joyful noise to Him with songs of praise!
For YHWH is a great God,
And a great king above all gods.
In His hand are the depths of the earth;
The heights of the mountains are His also. (95:2-4)

Book Four answers the lament voiced and implied by the people in Psalm 89 at the end of Book Three: "'YHWH, where is Your steadfast love of old, which by Your faithfulness You swore to David?' How are we to continue to exist without David, without a king?" Gerald Wilson maintains that the answer Book Four gives is:

1. YHWH is King
2. YHWH was our refuge long before the monarchy existed
3. YHWH will continue to be our refuge now that the monarchy is gone.¹⁵

But the Psalter says so much more! YHWH is not simply a refuge. YHWH alone is the means by which the people can achieve structure, can "underpin the chaos" of their existence. The postexilic Israelites were vassals of one immense empire after another. They could in no way exist as a state in the only form of statehood they knew— with an independent king and court. Therefore, the key to survival as a people was to acknowledge YHWH as king. Book Four of the Psalter gives expression to that acknowledgement:

¹⁴Of the remaining 16 psalms in Book Four, 13 are untitled. Wilson, in *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 215, and "Shaping the Psalter," 75, suggests that editors/compiler may have passed over many untitled psalms they encountered while collecting works for Books One, Two, and Three. These "orphan" psalms, then, would have constituted a ready and pliable source for later editorial use.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 215.

1. YHWH is king – our guarantor of order and coherence
2. YHWH was our king – our guarantor of order and coherence – long before the monarchy existed
3. YHWH will be our king – our guarantor of order and coherence – now that the monarchy is gone.

The Psalter becomes, then, the “intellectually satisfying” popular expression of confidence in a new structure.

Book Four closes with Psalm 106, which recounts the long history of YHWH’s relationship with Israel from the exodus to the exile. It ends with a plea:

Save us, O YHWH our God,
And gather us from among the nations. (106:47)

Then Book Five abruptly opens with praise to YHWH for answering the plea:

O give thanks to YHWH for He is good;
For His steadfast love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of YHWH say so,
Those He redeemed from trouble,
And gathered in from the lands,
From the east and from the west,
From the north and from the south. (107:1-3)

Book Five is a crescendo of praise to YHWH, the king of Israel, from Psalm 107 to the climax of “hallelujahs” in Psalm 150.

I suggest, then, that the editors of the Psalter shaped various individual psalms and collections of psalms into a unified whole that takes the reader on a journey through the history of the nation Israel. The Psalter celebrates the majestic reign of David, laments the dark days of oppression and exile, and rejoices in the restoration of the glorious reign of YHWH and the surety that ancient Israel would continue to exist as a viable entity in the ancient near east. We can thus move beyond Gerald Wilson’s analysis of the editing of the Psalter. The message of the Psalter was clear to the inhabitants of postexilic Israel. It provided a disenfranchised, vassal community with an “intellectually satisfying” rationale for survival. YHWH is not simply a “refuge.” YHWH is king, with all the structure and security that that office entails. The chaos of life in postexilic, second temple Israel was now firmly underpinned with, in the words of Henri Frankfort, “the features of a structure—order, coherence, and meaning.”¹⁶

IV. THE SHAPERS OF THE PSALTER

Brevard Childs asks, “In what way does the final editing of the Psalter testify as to how the collectors understood the canonical material to function for the community of faith?”¹⁷ I maintain that the collectors—the editors—used the traditional cult material of ancient Israel to construct a popular expression of confidence

¹⁶Frankfort et. al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, 3.

¹⁷Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 512f.

in a new order. But are we justified in arguing that the Psalter, the “hymnbook of the second temple,” could be shaped into a seemingly “political” document?

Remember that the canonical Psalter apparently represents only a small selection of the total number of psalms which were in circulation in postexilic Israel.¹⁸ Through a long process of use and selection, certain individual psalms and collections of psalms gained popularity and became part of the corporate tradition of the people—that is, they became normative and authoritative. The Psalter was not a new piece of literature. The editors of the final form finished a process that had been going on for centuries. They gathered psalms and psalm collections that were already traditional and normative and shaped them into a constitutive document for the second temple community, a community in crisis. I agree with James Sanders, who observes that in a crisis situation, people tend to rely on the “old, tried, and true” to undergird the chaos of the situation and to maintain what he calls the “irreducible core of identity, that which can survive the crisis.”¹⁹

The content of the Psalter was familiar to the cultic community. Only its external form was new, determined by the exigencies of postexilic life. The editors shaped the traditional songs and poems of ancient Israel in order to give the second temple community a means for popular expression of a new rationale for existence—that with YHWH as king, the people could remain a cohesive entity.

Who were these editors who felt at liberty to gather and manipulate the traditional literature of ancient Israel? Robert Alter²⁰ and Michael Fishbane stress the pivotal position of scribes in the ancient world in general and in ancient Israel in particular. Fishbane writes:

Scribes received the texts of tradition, studied and copied them, puzzled about their contents, and preserved their meaning for new generations....they were, in fact, both students of and believers in the materials which they transmitted, and so were far from simple bystanders in matters relating to their clarity, implication, or application.²¹

Scribes were not simply passive tradents who preserved and passed along the traditions of ancient Israel. Their offices within the national administration put them in positions that allowed and even demanded that they interpret and shape those traditions. For the informed reader, the Hebrew Scriptures are an ongoing record of the reinterpretation and reshaping of tradition to successive generations of ancient Israelites. Scribes with a vested interest in the future of Israel were most likely the shapers of the psalmic tradition.

¹⁸Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll*, 87, writes that in the Dead Sea Psalms Scroll 11QPs^a, a prose insert in column 27 states that David composed 4,050 psalms and songs: “And he [David] wrote 3,600 psalms; and songs to sing before the altar over the whole-burnt perpetual offering every day, for all the days of the year, 364; and for the offering of the Sabbaths, 52 songs; and for the offering of the New Moons and for all the Solemn Assemblies and for the Day of Atonement, 30 songs. And all the songs that he spoke were 446, and songs for making music over the stricken, 4. And the total was 4,050.” In addition, the Deuteronomistic historian writes in 1 Kgs 4:32 that the songs of Solomon were 1,005.

¹⁹James Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 21.

²⁰Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

²¹Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1988) 23, 37.

V. CONCLUSION

What perception did the Israelite community have of the shape of the Psalter? The Psalter's external shape was that of a constitutive charter of the postexilic community, but its internal form was that of traditional cultic material. Brevard Childs maintains that, with the formation of the Psalter, "the original cultic role of the psalms has been subsumed under a larger category of canon."²² I suggest that the canonical Psalter, in fact, exercised a dual role in the life of the community. Individual psalms and collections of psalms were still used at ceremonies and festivals at the temple and, later, in synagogues. But the Psalter as a whole was read publicly²³ to remind the Israelites of a story – the story of the majestic reign of King David, the dark days of oppression and exile, the restoration of the glorious reign of YHWH, and the surety that Israel could continue to exist as an identifiable entity in a world it no longer controlled.

Both uses of the psalms were important to the ongoing life of the postexilic community and worked together in a reciprocal relationship. Their liturgical (or cultic) use influenced the meaning and significance of the psalms in their canonical (or constitutive) context, and their canonical use influenced the meaning and significance of the psalms in their cultic context. We may conclude, then, that in a very real sense, the community shaped the text and the text shaped the community. And the Psalter was "intellectually satisfying" for readers and hearers in each context in which they encountered it.

James Sanders asks a question that is of crucial importance to my interpretation of the function of the Psalter in postexilic Israel:

Why did Israel survive? That is the immense historical question that begs explanation. That which happened to some other victim nations [of Babylonian and Persian expansion] did not happen to Israel. Israel changed rather radically, to be sure, from being a nation with its own government and a highly nationalistic cult, to a dispersed religious community called Judaism. But the point is that Israel survived whereas others did not.²⁴

Israel survived because the postexilic community found an "intellectually satisfying" rationale for survival. As Anzu was an intellectually satisfying rationale for the rains that ended the drought in ancient Mesopotamia, so YHWH as king was an intellectually satisfying rationale for the continued existence of the nation of ancient Israel. The postexilic community had indeed found a way to "underpin the chaos of experience [and] reveal the features of a structure – order, coherence, and meaning."²⁵ ⊕

²²Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 513.

²³Wilson, in *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 207, maintains that the canonical Psalter was no longer simply a collection of cultic hymns, but that it was now a book "to be read rather than performed, meditated over rather than recited from." But in the ancient near east, literary texts were not read individually, but out loud before groups of listeners.

²⁴Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, 18.

²⁵Frankfort et. al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, 3.