

ERIC MCDONNELL

The Formation of Psalms 1–3 and the Arrangement of the Hebrew Psalter

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Mohr Siebeck

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Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

Isn't it true that we actually add things to the universe, the great plenum? And this is true, I would say, by the grace of God.¹

Voltaire famously opined that the preface is a stumbling block. The work should speak for its author, not the author on their own behalf.² Regardless, I take my cue from Luther and here sin boldly in my offering of this essential and supplementary graft of citations, some marked and others unmarked as such. It is true that we add things to the universe, and it's also true that we do so only by repetition, reiteration, and play, which by the secret and mysterious work of grace nonetheless add up to something new.

This monograph is a revised iteration of my Emory University dissertation, "Like Trees Transplanted: Context and Interpretation & The Beginning of the Masoretic Psalter," defended in May 2024. My thanks are owed to a great many whose contributions to my own universe are nothing if not the refractions of an undeserved and generous grace. My teachers at the University of Akron helped shape my appreciation of language and literature, none more so than Philathea Bolton. At Fuller Theological Seminary I encountered the teaching and work of Leslie Allen, Carly Crouch, John Goldingay, and Christopher B. Hays, who have informed my love of the Old Testament and its world. At Emory I have had the great privilege of studying alongside a welcoming and vibrant community of scholars, teachers, and students. My thanks are especially due to Geoffrey Bennington, Musa Dube, William Gilders, Steven Kraftchick, Joel LeMon, Sara McClintock, Roger Nam, Rune Nyord, C. L. Seow, Brent Strawn, Walter Wilson, and Jacob Wright, each of whom I am pleased to have had as my teacher. I am also grateful for the opportunities to work with Ryan Bonfiglio, William Brown, Joel Kemp, and Christine Roy Yoder during my time in the Graduate Division of Religion. Mark Smith graciously provided helpful notes and feedback on an early version of this project. My thanks are also due to my colleagues at the Society of Biblical Literature and SBL Press. Chris O'Connor provided invaluable support in my final year

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here? Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 114.

² Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*, selected and trans. H. I. Woolf (New York: Knopf, 1924), 48

of writing and Nicole Tilford heroically provided patient responses to innumerable Slack messages about the intricacies of SBL citation style. This project would not have been possible without the careful guidance and generous insights of Joel LeMon. I could not have asked for a better friend and advisor to see this project through to its completion. Finally, I extend sincere gratitude to the editors of *FAT II* and the production team at Mohr Siebeck.

In my earliest memories I am lying in bed, about to fall asleep, while my mother tells me stories of Abraham or Moses, David or Solomon. My interest in biblical interpretation is an inheritance from my parents – the deck was stacked before I ever came on the scene – both of whom are steadfast models of integrity and dedication as evident in their decades of service teaching children. I dedicate this work to them.

Tessa, Evelyn, Eleanor, and Luna: thank you for keeping me grounded and reminding me what it is here we're here to do.

The question of the preface, its hermeneutically outsized role in the literary whole and its status as a site of interpretive imposition, is germane to the question of Pss 1–3 and their literary function in the Masoretic Psalter. In these words, surely among the first of this project to be read by you, dear reader, and among the very final to be composed by me now in retrospect, I ask your pardon for the imposition I am placing on your interpretation of the work that follows. In its first iteration this text was a university dissertation. A new reiteration shapes this text as a monograph in a technical series that has played a significant role in new advances in the study of psalms and psalters. With the influence bequeathed to this early page in the book, marked with a Roman numeral and my own signature and a date, I offer an additional frame for what follows: a benediction.

It has been one of the great joys of my life to delight in and meditate on these psalms as a vocation. May you, the reader, receive that same joy in these pages.

Eric D. McDonnell, Jr.
Advent 2025

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Introduction: The Beginning of the MT Psalter and the Shape and Shaping Approach

*To understand a question means to ask it. To understand meaning is to understand it as the answer to a question.*¹

This project treats the history and literary functions of Pss 1, 2, and 3 in the context of the Masoretic (MT) Psalter.² In this introduction I situate my work within the scholarship on the MT Psalter, summarize the arguments herein as a necessary contribution in the discourse on Pss 1–3, and provide a brief retrospective by way of conclusion.

Biblical scholars often herald Gerald Henry Wilson’s *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* as the inaugural volume of a new and promising approach to the study of the psalms.³ In this monograph, first published in 1985, Wilson sought

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 383.

² I use the term “MT Psalter” specifically to refer to the iteration of the psalms collection as represented in MS B19^A, the basis for BHS. The different segmentations of Pss 114 and 115 in B19^A and BHS do not affect the analysis in this project. For a fuller discussion of the basis for prioritizing this manuscript for the present project, see chapter 3. I avoid the terms “Book of Psalms” or “the Psalms” (uppercase-P) in favor of the more precise “MT Psalter.” I use “psalter” (lowercase-P) in reference to other collections and arrangements of psalms. Elsewhere, I use “psalms” (lowercase-P) in reference to the psalmic compositions within the MT Psalter and the broader tradition of psalmody.

³ Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*; SBLDS 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985). The monograph was initially presented as the author’s dissertation at Yale under Robert R. Wilson in 1981. Accounts of the shape and shaping approach that treat Wilson’s monograph as essentially the inaugural volume include Gert T.M. Prinsloo, “Reading the Masoretic Psalter as a Book: Editorial Trends and Redactional Trajectories,” *CurBR* 19 (2021): 145–77; and David M. Howard Jr. and Michael K. Snearly, “Reading the Psalter as a Unified Book: Recent Trends,” in *Reading the Psalms Theologically*, ed. David M. Howard Jr. and Andrew J. Schmutzer, Studies in Scripture and Biblical Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2023), 1–35. Accounts that survey approaches predating Wilson but still privilege Wilson’s contributions to the shape and shaping discourse as seminal and essential include Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, “The Canonical Approach to Scripture and *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Book of Psalms: The Current State of Scholarship*, ed. Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, AIL 20 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 1–12; Peter C. W. Ho, *The Design of the Psalter: A Macrostructural Analysis* (Eugene, OR:

to demonstrate that the sequence of the MT Psalter was the result of purposive editorial activity.⁴ He identified in the MT Psalter a movement from a focus on human kingship toward divine kingship, largely dependent on his analysis of psalms at the “seams” of the MT Psalter.⁵ These psalms at the “seams” include those at the beginning and end of each of the MT Psalter’s five books, the doxologies concluding each book, and the strategically placed *torah* psalms (i.e., Pss 1, 19, 119) and royal psalms (e.g., Pss 2, 18, 20, 45). Wilson’s analysis of the MT Psalter in *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* was a watershed moment

Pickwick, 2019), 1–81; and Marco Pavan, “The Psalter as a Book? A Critical Evaluation of the Recent Research on the Psalter,” in *The Formation of the Hebrew Psalter: The Book of Psalms Between Ancient Versions, Material Transmission and Canonical Exegesis*, ed. Gianni Barbiero, Marco Pavan, and Johannes Schnocks, FAT 151 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 11–82.

⁴ Wilson’s monograph and subsequent publications are foundational for the development of the shape and shaping approach to the MT Psalter, though it is crucial to note that his insights did not emerge out of a vacuum. Most directly, the influence of James A. Sanders (see James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972] and James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984]) and Wilson’s teacher at Yale, Brevard S. Childs (see most especially Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], 504–25), is felt in *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*. Reviews of the shape and shaping approach typically cast the influence of Childs on Wilson’s monograph and subsequent work as determinative (e.g., Ho, *The Design of the Psalter*, 9; Pavan, “The Psalter as a Book?,” 26–27; and de-Claissé-Walford, “The Canonical Approach to Scripture,” 2–4). Wilson acknowledges his debt to Childs in the dedication to his monograph, in which he writes that Childs “taught me to respect the Canon” (*The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, vi). Retrospectives tend to miss, however, the decisive influence of Robert R. Wilson, the advisor for Gerald Wilson’s dissertation and another dedicatee whom Gerald Wilson credits with “guid[ing] this project through to its completion” (*The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, vi). Gerald Wilson’s comparative work with the Sumerian Temple Hymns and Catalogues of Hymnic Incipits (*The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 13–62) most directly shows the influence of Robert Wilson’s fascination with and command of comparative ancient Near Eastern texts in relation to the Hebrew Bible (e.g., see the approach in Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980]). Even still, the synchronic approach to the MT Psalter has a long and varied history that far precedes the scholarly trends of the 1970s and 80s. Pavan, for instance, begins his account of the exegesis of the MT Psalter as a whole (in contrast to exegesis of individual psalms) with the work of Franz Julius Delitzsch in 1846 (“The Psalter as a Book?,” 14). Prinsloo, as well, notes the significance of Delitzsch’s early contributions (“Reading the Masoretic Psalter as a Book,” 149). See also the discussion of similar approaches in rabbinical scholarship in David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms*, JSOTSup 252 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 15–65; as well as the account in Steffen Jenkins, “The Antiquity of Psalter Shape Efforts,” *TynBul* 71 (2020): 161–80.

⁵ “[I]t will be most important to look closely at the ‘seams’ between the collections where editorial activity should be the most evident” (Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 5).

in the study of the psalms and arrived at a moment when Hermann Gunkel's form-critical approach to the psalms still reigned supreme.⁶ Where Gunkel sought to investigate psalms primarily in light of their participation in a particular genre or form, Wilson's monograph and later work demonstrated the viability of analyzing psalms in light of their literary context in the MT Psalter.⁷ Wilson was not solely a synchronic reader of the MT Psalter, however. He utilized the tools of comparative and diachronic approaches to support his claims about the final form of the MT Psalter.⁸ To put it succinctly, Wilson showed an interest in both the shape and the shaping of the MT Psalter.⁹

A tidal wave of articles and monographs have followed in the wake of Wilson's contributions to psalms scholarship in an order of magnitude that is, in the words of Hermann Spieckermann, "nearly impossible to look through."¹⁰ Building from Wilson's work, numerous attempts have been made to identify an overarching theme or programmatic message in either the entirety of the MT

⁶ In Gunkel's form-critical approach, the investigation of a psalm's unique *Gattung* requires the researcher "to disregard" their own historical context in order to uncover "the contexts in which they [that is, the psalms,] were originally found" (Hermann Gunkel, *Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, completed by Joachim Begrich, trans. James D. Nogalski [Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998], 3).

⁷ See the development of Wilson's thought especially in Gerald H. Wilson, "Evidence of Editorial Divisions in the Hebrew Psalter," *VT* 34 (1984): 337–52; Gerald H. Wilson, "The Use of Royal Psalms at the 'Seams' of the Hebrew Psalter," *JSOT* 35 (1986): 85–84; Gerald H. Wilson, "The Shape of the Book of Psalms," *Int* 46 (1992): 129–42; Gerald H. Wilson, "Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of Psalms in the Psalter: Pitfalls and Promise," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann, JSOTSup 159 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 42–51; Gerald H. Wilson, "Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalms," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann, JSOTSup 159 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 72–82; and Gerald H. Wilson, "The Structure of the Psalter," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. David Firth and Philip Johnston (Leicester: Apollos, 2005), 229–46.

⁸ Wilson's use of a comparative approach is on display in his discussion of the Sumerian Temple Hymns and Catalogues of Hymnic Incipits (*The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 13–62) and the psalmic material at Qumran (Gerald H. Wilson, "The Qumran Psalms Manuscript and the Consecutive Arrangement of Psalms in the Hebrew Psalter," *CBQ* 45 [1983]: 377–88).

⁹ Prinsloo suggests that these dual interests of Wilson have been typically siloed in the movement that follows his work. Prinsloo argues that "North American scholars tend to focus on the *shape* of the Psalter, and their German counterparts on the *shaping* of the book," though he notes that in recent years "there are promising signs of dialogue and convergence between the two approaches" ("Reading the Masoretic Psalter as a Book," 148, emphasis original).

¹⁰ Hermann Spieckermann, "From the Psalter back to the Psalms. Observations and Suggestions," *ZAW* 132 (2020): 1–22 (here 3).

Psalter¹¹ or in one of the MT Psalter's various subcollections.¹² I make no attempt here to offer a comprehensive review of this immense amount of literature, though it is necessary to point out a few trends in the scholarship.¹³ A number of studies in the shape and shaping mold have shown an interest in both the diachronic and synchronic facets of the approach, especially in Germany.¹⁴ In the Anglophone world, however, many studies that champion a synchronic approach to the psalms in the tradition of Wilson's work betray a skepticism toward diachronic and redactional work on the MT Psalter. Nancy deClaissé-Walford, for example, compares the search for "strands of tradition," "original oral settings," or "redactional connections" in the MT Psalter to the dissembling of a fine watch.¹⁵ "We dissect it, lay it out before us, piece by piece," but when someone asks what the pieces do together and how they function to keep time "we try, we try our best, but we are unable to reassemble the watch, to restore it to the form in which we found it."¹⁶ The implication for

¹¹ E.g., Jerome F. D. Creach, *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, JSOTSup 217 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996); Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter*; and Nancy deClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997).

¹² E.g., Martin Leuenberger, *Konzeptionen des Königtums Gottes im Psalter: Untersuchungen zu Komposition und Redaktion der theokratischen Bücher IV–V im Psalter*, ATANT 83 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2004); Claudia Süssenbach, *Der elohistische Psalter: Untersuchungen zu Komposition und Theologie von Ps 42–83*, FAT II 7 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005); W. Dennis Tucker, *Constructing and Deconstructing Power in Psalms 107–150*, AIL 19 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014); and Stephen J. Smith, *The Conflict Between Faith and Experience, and the Shape of Psalms 73–83*, LHBOTS 723 (London: T&T Clark, 2022).

¹³ It is unnecessary to duplicate the excellent work on display in many of the literature reviews and retrospectives on the shape and shaping approach found in, for example, Prinsloo, "Reading the Masoretic Psalter as a Book"; Howard and Snearly, "Reading the Psalter as a Unified Book"; and Pavan, "Reading the Psalter as a Book?". For an account that discusses the shape and shaping approaches in the context of other dominating trends in contemporary scholarship on the psalms, see Eric D. McDonnell Jr., "The Role of Context in the Study of the Psalms," *CurBR* 23 (2025): 197–243.

¹⁴ Prinsloo's suggestion that such studies tend to emerge in Germany is not off the mark. See, e.g., Matthias Millard, *Die Komposition des Psalters: Ein formgeschichtlicher Ansatz*, FAT 9 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994); and the oeuvre of Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, most especially in their HThKAT commentaries on the MT Psalter (Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalmen 51–100*, HThKAT [Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2000]; and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150*, HThKAT [Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2008]).

¹⁵ DeClaissé-Walford, "The Canonical Approach to Scripture and *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*," 1–2. Her analogy is freely drawn from Robert E. Polzin, "The Ancestress of Israel in Danger," *Semeia* 3 (1975): 81–98.

¹⁶ DeClaissé-Walford, "The Canonical Approach to Scripture and *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*," 1–2.

deClaissé-Walford is clear. Diachronic approaches fail to appreciate the text as it stands in its canonical form. At their worst, such approaches irreparably mar the text.¹⁷ Others have suggested that a synchronic approach is “more objective” than a diachronic one because “diachronic investigations are often dependent on hypothetical stages of development” while a synchronic study focuses more clearly on “the text as it now stands.”¹⁸ In Robert L. Cole’s monograph-length synchronic reading of Pss 1–2, he goes so far as to suggest that a form-critical approach to the psalms in a diachronic mode is “fundamentally at odds” with a synchronic reading of the MT Psalter, and so the “debilitating influence of *Gattungsforschung*” must be rejected by the interpreter who wishes to understand the final shape of the text.¹⁹ Unfortunately, the persistent

¹⁷ DeClaissé-Walford’s skeptical view of diachronic criticism here is downstream from the complex views of Childs, especially in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. Childs lamented there that the historical-critical approach to the Hebrew Bible “has failed to relate the nature of the literature correctly to the community which treasured it as scripture” (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 41). It is off the mark, however, to suggest that Childs championed “an ahistorical approach” (Prinsloo, “Reading the Masoretic Psalter as a Book,” 148). Childs insisted that “it is a basic misunderstanding of the canonical approach to describe it as a non-historical reading of the Bible,” and instead his goal was “to relate the canonical form of the Old Testament to the complex history of the literature’s formation” (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 71). This latter point is lost on a number of Childs’s recent followers. On the complex relationship between Childs’s approach and historical-criticism, see John J. Collins, “Historical Criticism and the State of Biblical Theology,” *Christian Century* 110 (1993): 743–47; Christopher B. Hays, “Bard Called the Tune: Whither Theological Exegesis in the Post-Childs Era?” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4 (2010): 139–52; Daniel R. Driver, *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian: For the Church’s One Bible*, FAT II 46 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); Stephen B. Chapman, “Brevard Childs as a Historical Critic: Divine Concession and the Unity of the Canon,” in *The Bible as Christian Scripture: The Work of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz and Kent Harold Richards, BSNA 25 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 63–84; Colin Cornell, “Brevard Childs and the Treasures of Darkness,” *SJT* 71 (2018): 33–51; and the fuller treatment of Childs’s oeuvre in Robert G. Brown, *Childs’ Canonical Approach: A Critical Assessment*, StBibLit 182 (New York: Peter Lang, 2023).

¹⁸ Michael Searly, *The Return of the King: Messianic Expectation in Book V of the Psalter*, LHBOTS 624 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 51 n. 36. Roland E. Murphy’s comments on the interpretation of texts in light of their literary context is closer to the mark: “Hypothetical historical reconstruction is as inescapable in contextual interpretation as it is in the usual historical criticism that is applied to the Psalter” (“Reflections on Contextual Interpretation of the Psalms,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann, JSOTSup 159 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993], 21–28 [here 21]).

¹⁹ Robert L. Cole, *Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 37 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 8. Cole’s rejection of Gunkel and his legacy in scholarship on the MT Psalter severely hampers his approach. See the assessments in Richard S. Briggs, review of *Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter*, by Robert L. Cole, *RBL* (2014): <https://www.sblcentral.org/home/bookDetails/9054>; W. Dennis Tucker Jr., review of *Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter*, by Robert L. Cole, *RBL* (2015): <https://www.sblcentral.org/>

disparagement of diachronic studies among these champions of synchronic readings only serves to impoverish their work.²⁰ A more promising way forward is articulated in the work of Erich Zenger and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, who have together documented the way synchronic readings necessitate diachronic exploration.²¹ Zenger, especially, has emphasized the fruitful manner in which *Psalmenexegese* and *Psalterexegese* may cooperatively inform one another and so need not exist in opposition.²²

Less than a decade after the publication of his monograph, it was Wilson himself who began to express a certain reticence concerning some of the trends in synchronic readings of the MT Psalter that had emerged in his wake.²³ Wilson diagnosed a tendency to establish “self-fulfilling prophecies” in synchronic approaches largely based on “relatively trivial characteristics or phrases within the psalm,” thereby leading the interpreter toward “manipulation and circular reasoning.”²⁴ Too often, he remarked, scholars construct a hypothesis that guides interpretation toward predetermined conclusions, skewing data to fit a particular theme or structure.²⁵ A scholar takes the fact that a hypothesis can be supported with a minimal amount of evidence as a confirmation of that hypothesis’s truth.²⁶ And, even more insidious in Wilson’s view, “too often the necessary in-depth analysis has not been done.”²⁷ Wilson’s anxieties about the

home/bookDetails/9054; and Susan Gillingham, review of *Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter*, by Robert L. Cole, *JHebS* 17 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs.2017.v17.r16>.

²⁰ The perception that the historical-critical work of biblical scholars renders them incapable of appreciating the literary artistry of the text has made its way into more popular channels, as well. In his book on biblical poetry, Robert Alter characterizes biblical scholars as those who “rarely fall into” the category of “people who love poetry,” and as a result the scholarly analysis of the Hebrew Bible’s poetic corpus “tends to be guided by rather dim notions” (*The Art of Biblical Poetry*, rev. and updated ed. [New York: Basic Books, 2011], x, xv). Alter’s characterization of psalms scholars is regrettable and inaccurate.

²¹ In addition to their HThKAT commentaries, see especially Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Till Magnus Steiner, “Problems and Prospects in Psalter Studies,” in *Jewish and Christian Approaches to the Psalms: Conflict and Convergence*, ed. Susan Gillingham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 240–58.

²² Erich Zenger, “Psalmenexegese und Psalterexegese: Eine Forschungsskizze,” in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms*, ed. Erich Zenger, BETL 238 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 17–66.

²³ Wilson, “Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of Psalms in the Psalter.”

²⁴ Wilson, “Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of Psalms in the Psalter,” 44–45.

²⁵ “[T]oo many treatments of arrangement begin by setting forth a hypothesis to guide the investigation. Such working hypotheses, as we have seen, often distort the interpreter’s vision and prevent the true nature of the material from coming into focus” (Wilson, “Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of Psalms in the Psalter,” 48).

²⁶ “The articulation of a hypothesis that *can* be supported is taken as confirmation of the truth of that hypothesis” (Wilson, “Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of Psalms in the Psalter,” 48, emphasis original).

²⁷ Wilson, “Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of Psalms in the Psalter,” 48.

method he helped popularize are summed up in his description of the state of scholarship in 1993: “We stand on the borders of the promised land” – scholarship must proceed carefully “lest we be misled by our own preconceived notions to see giants where there are none,” and thereby wind up wandering in wastelands for 40 years.²⁸

More recent scholarship has suggested that the synchronic readings performed in the shape and shaping approach have indeed largely been wilderness wandering. David Davage (formerly Willgren), for instance, suggests that “the canonical approach has somewhat reached its limits, at least in its current form.”²⁹ Davage and others have forcefully questioned the viability of the synchronic approach to the MT Psalter that carries on in Wilson’s name, especially in light of the complexity of the psalmic texts discovered at Qumran and other manuscript evidence.³⁰ While in his work Wilson attempted to consider the comparative data available to him through the variant sequencing of psalms as attested in the remains from Qumran, subsequent synchronic readings – especially those that explicitly eschew diachronic analysis – have typically failed to take this still-emerging material data into account.³¹ Moreover, among interpreters who claim to prioritize a literary, synchronic reading of the final form of the text, there is a tendency to operate with little to no contact with the insights of literary-theoretical discourse. Once again, Davage has clearly sounded the alarm bells on this front. He argues that if a reading is to highlight the literary features of the text, then the interpreter ought to have

²⁸ Wilson, “Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of Psalms in the Psalter,” 51

²⁹ David Willgren, *The Formation of the ‘Book’ of Psalms: Reconsidering the Transmission and Canonization of Psalmody in Light of Material Culture and the Poetics of Anthologies*, FAT II 88 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 393.

³⁰ The literature is large and still growing. Among others, see Mika S. Pajunen, “Perspectives on the Existence of a Particular Authoritative Book of Psalms in the Late Second Temple Period,” *JSOT* 39 (2014): 139–63; Eva Jain, *Psalmen oder Psalter? Materielle Rekonstruktion und inhaltliche Untersuchung der Psalmenhandschriften aus der Wüste Juda*, STDJ 109 (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Eva Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Alma Brodersen, *The End of the Psalter: Psalms 146–150 in the Masoretic Text, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018); and William Yarchin, “Why the Future of Canonical Hebrew Psalter Exegesis Includes Abandoning Its Own Premise,” in *The Formation of the Hebrew Psalter: The Book of Psalms Between Ancient Versions, Material Transmission and Canonical Exegesis*, ed. Gianni Barbiero, Marco Pavan, and Johannes Schnocks, FAT 151 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 119–38.

³¹ Brent A. Strawn comments that Wilson’s work “was ground-breaking” in light of its use of 11QPs^a, but unfortunately “most recent work does not incorporate the latest developments subsequent to the publication of Wilson’s monograph in 1985” (“(Proto-)Masoretic Texts and Ancient Texts Close to MT,” in *The Hebrew Bible: Writings*, ed. Armin Lange and Emanuel Tov, vol. 1C of *Textual History of the Bible* [Leiden: Brill, 2017], 42–60 [here 57]).

a working knowledge of the literary-theoretical issues at play in such an approach.³²

This project is a contribution to the ongoing discourse concerning shape and shaping approaches to the MT Psalter. The misgivings a growing number of scholars have voiced concerning the legitimacy of synchronic readings of the MT Psalter are more than reasonable, and Wilson's warnings about the potential pitfalls in the very approach he spearheaded in the 1990s resound even more urgently these decades later. A synchronic analysis of the MT Psalter cannot afford to forgo the insights of literary-theoretical discourse.³³ Neither can it afford to forgo diachronic modes of investigation. The question this project asks is a synchronic one: What is the literary function of the psalms placed at the beginning of the MT Psalter, namely, Pss 1–3? The answer requires drawing from the wells of literary-theoretical reflection and diachronic analysis.³⁴ If the MT Psalter is to be read as literature, then clarity of theory and method is crucial. We must establish the nature of the literature.³⁵ We must analyze and describe the interpretive process as accurately and clearly as possible. Moreover, an attempt to eschew historical-critical questions in the

³² See Davage's discussion of the paratext (as mediated through Gérard Genette) throughout Willgren, *The Formation of the 'Book' of Psalms*; and in David Willgren, "Why Psalms 1–2 Are Not to Be Considered a Preface to the 'Book' of Psalms," *ZAW* 130 (2018): 384–97.

³³ By literary theory and literary-theoretical discourse, I am referring to the scholarship of those loosely connected with structuralist and poststructuralist movements, including Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Luce Irigaray, and Geoffery Benington, among many others. Paul de Man's succinct definition of literary theory is informative: "Literary theory can be said to come into being . . . when the object of discussion is no longer the meaning or the value but the modalities of production and of reception of meaning and value" ("The Resistance to Theory," *Yale French Studies* 63 [1982]: 3–20 [here 7]). In this project I rely foremost on the literary-theoretical reflections of Derrida, Genette, and Gadamer.

³⁴ This foundational axiom – that the shape and shaping approach to Pss 1–3 requires relying on literary-theoretical and diachronic reflection – sharply distinguishes the approach of this project from that of Cole in his *Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter*. Cole's approach is dominated by a hunt for keyword links between Pss 1 and 2 and an explicit rejection of the Gunkelian mode of psalms scholarship.

³⁵ See the helpful discussion and critique of the "narrativizing" impulse operative in many shape and shaping interpreters in Brent A. Strawn, "Too Tall a Tale, Or: Do The Psalms Really Tell 'Stories'?", *Word & World* 43 (2023): 321–32. Strawn writes that the "devastating outcome facing narratival approaches to psalmic poetry" – that is, those readings that project a metanarrative onto the MT Psalter – is that "such approaches can minimize or altogether miss the elements of poetry that are characteristic of it, especially in dense concatenation" ("Too Tall a Tale," 331). Such a devastating outcome obtains, in Strawn's view, because the nature of the psalmic literature as lyric poetry is not established in the narratival approach.

study of the shape of the MT Psalter is disingenuous at best and perniciously manipulative at worst. We cannot speak about the text and its shape without speaking about its context and its shaping. This project aims to charitably engage with the best of diachronic research on the psalms in service of its synchronic agenda.

Two related claims animate what follows. First, in the literary context of the MT Psalter, Pss 1–2 function as a paratext. That is, they form a two-part preface that introduces a set of themes intended to shape the reception of the ensuing psalms. Second, Ps 3 functions as a generic introduction to the individual lament form. The superscription of Ps 3 also introduces the name of David, the authorizing figure who looms large over the collection in its many superscriptions. Previous synchronic approaches to the beginning of the MT Psalter have tended to focus on just Pss 1–2. Yet the inclusion Ps 3 in this analysis is crucial for a number of reasons.³⁶ Psalms 1 and 2, in the larger context of the MT Psalter, are odd in terms of form and structure. Both psalms have eluded scholars' attempts at placing them within the standard genres of the MT Psalter.³⁷ Both psalms lack superscriptions, an unusual feature in the

³⁶ Analyses that highlight just the significance Pss 1–2 for the beginning of the MT Psalter include Patrick D. Miller, "The Beginning of the Psalter," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann, JSOTSup 159 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 83–92; Gianni Barbiero, *Das erste Psalmenbuch als Einheit. Eine synchrone Analyse von Psalm 1–41*, ÖBS 16 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 31–62; Pierre Auffret, "Étude structurelle du Psaume 2," *EstBib* 59 (2001): 307–23; and Robert Cole, "An Integrated Reading of Psalms 1 and 2," *JSOT* 98 (2002): 75–88. See also Susan Gillingham's reception-historical study of Pss 1–2, which argues for a number of synchronic conclusions (*A Journey of Two Psalms: The Reception of Psalms 1 and 2 in Jewish and Christian Tradition* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013]). Exceptions to this trend include Cole's later monograph (*Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter*) which includes a short chapter on Ps 3, and the later work of Beat Weber ("Herr, wie viele sind geworden meine Bedränger..." [Ps 3,2a). Psalm 1–3 als Ouvertüre des Psalters unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Psalm 3 und seinem Präskript," in *Der Bibelkanon in der Bibelauslegung: Methodenreflexionen und Beispiele*, ed. Egbert Ballhorn and Georg Steins [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007], 231–51; and "Die Buchouvertüre Psalm 1–3 und ihre Bedeutung für das Verständnis des Psalters," *OTE* 23 [2010]: 834–45). Cole examines Ps 3 primarily in the light of a number of lexemic and linguistic links that Cole argues are present between Pss 2 and 3. Weber's work is closer to my own, as he sees Pss 1–3 together as an "ouvertüre" to the MT Psalter, with Ps 3 playing a critical role as an introduction to the task of praying with/like David ("Die Buchouvertüre Psalm 1–3," 840–42). Friedhelm Hartenstein and Bernd Janowski's first fascicle of their multi-volume BKAT commentary on the MT Psalter treats just Pss 1–2, though they do suggest in passing some thematic resonance between Pss 1–2 and Ps 3 (*Psalmen*, BKAT 15/1 [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2012], 1–4).

³⁷ Psalm 1 is often categorized as a *torah* psalm, a group that includes just three texts (Pss 1; 19; and 119) which James Luther Mays has called "the problem children of the Psalter" ("The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter," *JBL* 106 [1987]: 3–12 [here 12]). Psalm 2 is typically categorized as a royal psalm, a designation which refers less to form than it does

context of the first division of the MT Psalter (Pss 1–41). Both psalms appear to espouse theological stances that more than a few interpreters have found to be at odds with the rest of the MT Psalter.³⁸ Psalm 3, on the other hand, is formulaic. It represents a common genre that appears throughout the MT Psalter, features a standard Davidic superscription, and harbors no surprises in terms of its theological or ideological content. Psalm 3, then, provides an important contrast in the context of a larger analysis that takes up the issue of two of the MT Psalter’s most unusual psalms. For the literary analysis offered here, Ps 3 helps elucidate the larger literary context in which Pss 1 and 2 are placed. In addition, there is a diachronic justification for including Ps 3 in the analysis of Pss 1–2. I posit that among the earliest discernable collections of psalms in the history of psalmody is a late preexilic psalter I call David I (Pss 3–41*³⁹). This early collection of psalms is later expanded and supplemented in the Persian period into a Messianic Psalter (Pss 2–89*). If the placement of Ps 2 at the primary position of a psalter postdates an earlier placement of Ps 3 as the initial psalm in the collection, then the analysis of Ps 2 must engage its relationship to Ps 3. Specifically, I aim to uncover what literary functions Ps 2 performs that Ps 3 does not. A similar set of circumstances obtains in the case of Ps 1: if the placement of Ps 1 at the primary position of a growing psalter postdates an earlier placement of Ps 2 in the primary position, then the relationship between Pss 1 and 2 necessitates examination.

There are two main parts of this project. The three chapters of the first part (“Context and Interpretation”) offer reflections on the theory and method that inform the project, a clear definition of terms in dialogue with literary-theoretical discourse, and a preliminary account of the historical development of the MT Psalter. The engagement with literary-theoretical discourse is foundational for the synchronic approach offered here. Decades ago, James Barr predicted that in biblical studies “Derrida and Foucault will become more familiar than the Septuagint or Brown, Driver and Briggs.”⁴⁰ Barr’s prediction

content. Sigmund Mowinckel notes that, of the royal psalms, “the pertinent psalms include almost all the literary genres of psalmody” (*Psalms Studies*, trans. Mark E. Biddle, 2 vols., HBS 2 [Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014], 2:572).

³⁸ I discuss each of these features at length in chapters 5 and 6.

³⁹ I borrow the designation “David I” from the work of Hossfeld and Zenger. See most succinctly their partial reconstruction of the development of the MT Psalter in Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 1–7; and more fully in Erich Zenger and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, “Das Buch der Psalmen,” in *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, ed. Erich Zenger, updated by Christian Frevel, 9th ed., Kohlhammer Studienbücher Theologie 1 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2016), 431–55. The asterisk indicates that not all psalms within the span are necessarily included in these early iterations of the psalter.

⁴⁰ James Barr, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament: Biblical Studies at the End of a Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 28.

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