

Psalms 1-2 as an Introduction to Reading the Psalms Missionally



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When read together, Pss 1—2 serve as a hermeneutical introduction to the Psalter. This is an emerging consensus among Psalter scholars. In this essay, I will explore the implications of this insight for a missional reading of the Psalter. A missional reading of Scripture is one that recognizes and privileges *God's mission (missio Dei)* as the interpretive key to understanding the Bible. [1] The Psalter serves as the prayer book for God's people who exist as a community called to reflect and embody God's character for the sake of the nations.

Reading Psalms One and Two

The literary shape of these psalms invites us to read Psalms 1—2 together as a literary unit. Psalm 1 begins and Psalm 2 ends with a blessed/happy statement: *Happy is the man...* (1:1) and *Happy are all who find refuge in him* (2:12). These statements form an *inclusio* or bracket around the unit. Moreover, unlike virtually all psalms in Books I—III, both Psalms 1 and 2 are untitled. Lastly, there is a movement from the particular to the universal in these psalms. Psalm 1 focuses on the "Happy man" or "Happy person" [2] whereas Psalm 2 closes with a universal affirmation, "Happy are *all* who find refuge in him." These features serve to bind the opening two psalms to one another.

Psalms 1 and 2 introduce two themes that are paramount for understanding the Psalter as a whole: Scripture and Kingship. Psalm 1 opens the Psalter by pointing to the Scriptures as the only sure guide to life. The "Law of the Lord" serves as a constant companion that shapes the "happy one" into a person who will prosper. The prosperity envisioned in Psalm 1 is the successful fulfillment of God's work in the world. The tree imagery and the summative statement "all that he does will prosper" in verse three are rooted in allusions to Jer 17:5—8, Ezek 47:12 and Gen 39:3, 23. [3] Verse three is not promising a prosperity in which hardship and suffering are absent. Rather it understands success in terms of the fulfillment of God's will and mission. McCann aptly writes, "The point of the simile is *not* that the righteous will not suffer, but rather that the righteous will always have in God a reliable resource to face and endure life's worst." [4] Scripture nourishes and shapes its readers for a life lived for God. Verse six affirms that the Lord "knows" such persons in the sense of "maintains relationship" or "watches over."

Psalm two follows up by proclaiming the reign of God over the nations through the king whom he installs in Zion. If Psalm 1 secures the individual through God's gift of the Scriptures, then Psalm two secures the community of God's people in the midst of the nations. The nations may not support the mission of God in the world and indeed may move to oppose it actively (2:1—3). Psalm two recognizes the violence and rebellion present in the world. The rulers of the earth often stand against the purposes of God. But from the beginning, the Psalter declares to God's people that the nations stand under the authority of God and of God's anointed one (2:4—9). Moreover despite the presence of active opposition, God invites all nations and kings to find their true calling in the service of God's mission (2:10—12).

Missional Reflection on Pss 1—2

What is the effect on the reader of the Psalter of such an introduction? This is the key question in a missional hermeneutic. The goal of interpretation is the *conversion* of the reader/hearer to the perspective of the text. This includes both Christ—followers and those who are still pre—Christian. A missional reading invites us to ask questions such as these: What sort of person does this text assume that I am? What would my life look like if I embodied the words of this psalm? To what mission is this passage calling me to give my life? In short, a missional reading helps us to hear Scripture’s call to (re)align ourselves with the ethos and purposes of God’s kingdom. [5] This perspective is critical for learning to proclaim the Gospel in our pre (or post)—Christian context. If we read only from the perspective of the Church, we are forgetting about those on the outside; if we read only from the perspective of non—Christians, we miss the call to realign that the Scriptures continually pronounce to believers. Instead, what is needed is a reading of Scripture that speaks *human*. Such a reading calls insiders to the Gospel to realign themselves with God’s missional work in the world and invites outsiders to align their lives with God’s mission in the world.

When read together, the initial two psalms prepare the reader of the Psalter for a journey through the Psalter and through life. These psalms...

1) Shape a person with Scripture

Psalm 1 is audacious in its emphasis on a steady and consistent diet of Scripture. It affirms such a lifestyle to be the key to a life of faithful obedience in engaging the world with the Gospel. Don’t miss a key implication of Psalm 1’s extolling a devotion to Torah: *We are invited to read and pray the Psalms as God’s authoritative Scripture*. Individual psalms are not merely praises and prayers from God’s people to the Lord. They are the word of God for us and to us. The Psalter is our missional prayer book whose goal is to mold us into persons who truly reflect God’s good news for the world. This emphasis is restated in Ps 19 and most emphatically in Ps 119. Living as God’s missional community for the sake of the world requires a map to serve as a sure guide. The Psalter opens with a poignant reminder of God’s gift of the Scriptures. As you read through the Psalter, allow each text to shape you by asking: *How do I need to change in order to pray this psalm and mean it?*

2) Point to the security of the future through God’s Kingdom

A missional reading recognizes that Psalm two is a word of encouragement, security and hope to God’s people. It assures God’s people of the LORD’s sovereignty over the geo—political realm. Nations and rulers may rage openly against God and attempt to thwart God’s aims, but such schemes and intrigues will not prove to be the final verdict over Creation. God’s people are invited to live with the *end* in mind. The present may be bleak. The raging of the nations may be intimidating and frightening, but rebellion and darkness will not be the final verdict of history. Thus, God’s people can give themselves to daring and bold lives of advancing God’s kingdom through following the lead of God’s anointed one. The New Testament clearly sees Jesus as the fulfillment of Psalm 2’s vision for God’s Son and ruler. [6] Thus, Psalm two calls its hearers to (re)align their lives around the prerogatives of Jesus who clearly called his followers to follow him into the world on mission (Matt 4:18—22; 16:24; 28:18—20). Live confidently in the world and be fully engaged in God’s mission because the future is firmly in the hands of the LORD. Ask: *How does this text call our community of faith to live differently in light of God’s future?*

3) Prepare the hearer/reader/prayer for the challenges of living as God’s people in the world

The orienting effect of Pss 1—2 is critical for the formation of a missional people. The life of faith is risky and full of challenges. The Psalter affirms this beginning with Psalm 3 and

consistently thereafter through the first 89 psalms in which the reader is confronted by lament after lament in which God's people find themselves surrounded by enemies, afflicted with illness, isolated from one another, and even feeling abandoned by God. [7] Brueggemann in his work on the Psalms argues for a two—fold movement in the Psalter: 1) a move from settled orientation to an unsettled disorientation and 2) a movement from this disoriented state into a new orientation. [8] Brueggemann's work is helpful because it takes seriously the overarching shape of the Psalter. [9] If one reads or prays through the Book of Psalms, he or she embarks on a journey through the vicissitudes of life. Yet the Psalter is not arranged haphazardly. It is designed to mold God's people into people who can serve as a missional people regardless of the external circumstances (good or ill) in which they find themselves. By orienting the reader of the Psalter around the themes of Scripture and God's Kingship, Psalms 1—2 prepare the reader for the disorientation that God's people face in the midst of lament and for the reorientation found in Psalms 90—150 in which the Psalter moves toward the symphony of praise of Psalms 146—150. If themes of lament dominate the initial 90 psalms, the last 60 psalms emphasize God's reign, thanksgiving for God's salvation, and the unadulterated praise of God. [10] Reflect: *How do these texts prepare us for living out God's witness in the world?*

4) Serve as an invitation to the nations

A missional approach to the Bible is not complete until it has assessed how a text can be communicated as good news to the world. This point was emphasized last year in my Psalms exegesis course at Asbury Theological Seminary (Orlando, FL). While studying Psalm two, a student asked, "Wow, what would it be like to hear this text if we were one of the nations rather than as part of God's people?" I stopped class immediately and replied, "You've just asked one of the most important questions that a student has ever raised."

In our 21st century context, it is crucial for Christ—followers to always read the Bible on behalf of the world. Within the Church, we have a tendency to read the Scriptures only from the perspective of *insiders*. Many preachers and teachers routinely rage and rail against those outside of the walls of the Church. Yet how does such talk serve to advance the Gospel in our day? How does an insider versus outsider mentality help outsiders to become insiders? How would such an approach help to illumine the missional message of Psalm 2?

This text bears witness that the current reality in which the nations are at times in open hostility to the mission of God is not the final word. Yes, this text describes God's response as scoffing (v. 4). This posturing is part of the encouragement for God's people to persevere. But verses 9—12 serve an important missional function. They are an invitation to the rulers of the nations to recognize and submit to the sovereignty of God. This may sound triumphalistic and militaristic, but the concluding beatitude subverts any such misreading: *Blessed/Happy/Fortunate are all who take refuge in him* (v. 12c). This text ends with a profound hope for the world. Even the nations who may openly rage against God may enter into the privileged state of blessing. Thus, Psalm 2 is not anti—outsider nor simply an imperialistic declaration of the LORD's sovereignty. It does not imagine a conquest of the nations by *human* hands. Rather it is an invitation to the world to enter into a new status as members of God's people. It is significant that the Psalter ends with a similar hope. Psalm 148:11—13 is an invitation to the rulers and people of the nations to join in the praise of God. Psalm 150:6 offers the broadest of all calls to worship: *Let everything that has breath praise the Lord*. Reflect: *What is the Gospel message in this text? What invitation does it extend to an outsider to the Gospel?*

Conclusion:

Psalms 1—2 thus prepare us for our journey through the Psalter. There will be hymns of praise and laments of utter desperation that follow. There will be songs of thanksgiving and psalms of trust and instruction. But Psalms 1—2 ground us as God's missional people by focusing on the need for our continual realignment with Scripture as we engage the world as God's missional people in the assurance that God's ultimate victory is assured and that the final word will be a symphony of praise of the Living Lord in which all creation is invited to participate (Pss 146—150, esp. 150:6).

Notes

[1] Christopher J. H. Wright, *Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 29—69. See also Brian D. Russell, "What is a Missional Hermeneutic?" *Catalyst: Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives for United Methodist Seminarians* 36.4 (2010): 1.

[2] Heb 'ish is male—gender specific. In the context of the psalter as a whole (as well as the Bible as a whole), there is no reason to restrict the implications of Psalm one to only males.

[3] Brian D. Russell, "Psalm One as an Interpreter of Scripture" *Irish Biblical Studies* 26 (2005): 170—93.

[4] J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "'The Way of the Righteous' in the Psalms" in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. William P. Brown; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 137.

[5] This call is summarized in the initial preaching of Jesus (Matt 4:17 cf. Mark 1:14—15).

[6] Matt 3:17, 17:5; Mark 1:11, 9:7; Luke 3:22, 9:35; John 1:49; Php 2:11; Heb 1:2; Rev 2:26—27, 12:5, and 19:15.

[7] The vast majority of psalms in Books I—III (Pss 1—89) are laments. Laments are psalms in which the psalmist cries to God for help. Although they are less frequent in Books IV—V (Pss 90—150), laments are the most common type of psalm in the Psalter as a whole.

[8] Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 19—23 and 38—39.

[9] Those interested in this dimension of Psalter study may want to explore the following resources: James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) and J. Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

[10] There are of course a number of laments sprinkled into Pss 90—150, but the percentage is notably lower. 17 of the 60 psalms of Pss 90—150 are laments. This contrasts with Pss 1—89 where 54 of 89 are laments.

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