The Christology of Israel’s Psalter

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Is the Old Testament a Christian book? Although the catholic tradition of the church typically answers this question in the affirmative, a study of church history reveals the presence of occasional dissenters, some of whom were quite vociferous in their rejection of the Christian character of the Old Testament (e.g., Marcion). In our own day, negative responses to this question are typically understated, often assuming the form of neglect rather than outright hostility. This is especially evident in the worship life of the contemporary church, where New Testament readings from the lectionary, whether gospel or epistle, typically form the basis for Sunday morning homilies or sermons. It is not too much to say that Old Testament preaching has fallen upon hard times, and this is due in no small part to the church’s uncertainty when it comes to affirming the Old Testament’s relationship to Jesus Christ. Can one say that the Old Testament not only points to Christ as its fulfillment or telos, but that it also mediates Christ, both to us and to the Israel of its own day? For many in our day, Christianity begins with the incarnation; ergo, reading the Old Testament as Christian scripture is little more than a hopelessly anachronistic exercise, grounded in a form of uncontrolled allegory or ‘spiritualizing’. After all, there were not multiple incarnations, but one (John 1:14).

But to acknowledge, along with John, that the Word is not yet made flesh in the Old Testament economy is not the same as saying that the Word is not yet made visible, for Christ the eternal Word revealed himself to Israel ‘at many times and in diverse ways’, through the figural form and Christ-shaped witness of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms, prior to his revelation as the incarnate Son (Luke 24:44; cf. Hebrews 1:1). Not only the individual psalms of the Psalter, but also its larger shape and message, may therefore be rightly construed as ‘christomorphic’ in character. Just what does it mean to say that the Psalter is christomorphic in character? The answer is not overly complicated. The Greek term morphē is often glossed in English as form, and a form is something visible.¹ To say that the Psalter is christomorphic is to say that there is a morphological fit between the literary shape and theological message of the Psalter, on the one hand, and the earthly life and ministry of the incarnate and risen Christ, on the other. By virtue of this ‘accordance’ or morphological fit between Christ and the witness of Israel’s Psalter,² Jesus the Christ is made visible to Israel in a time of promise.

¹ In Philippians 2:6, Paul speaks of the pre-incarnate Christ as One who exists as morphē theou, or the ‘form’ of God. The early fathers understood this to be a statement about Christ’s eternal identity as the ‘visibility’ or true ‘image’ of God, that is, the One who reveals or makes ‘visible’ the invisible God (cf. Colossians 1:15), first in the OT economy of creation and Israel’s redemption, and then in the NT economy of his bodily incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

² In 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Paul argues that the Christian message of Christ’s death and resurrection is “in accordance with” the entirety of Israel’s scriptures (cf. also Romans 1:1-2; 2 Timothy 3:14-15).
In light of these preliminary reflections, one may perhaps comprehend more fully the interpretive guidelines offered by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Colossians. There Paul exhorts the church at Colossae to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16). While it is clear from his other letters that “the word of Christ” includes more than the book of Psalms, and in fact encompasses the entirety of Israel’s scriptures, in this verse Paul clearly links “the word of Christ” with the book of Psalms. The Greek terms Paul uses to speak of “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” are all used as titles for psalms in the Septuagint Greek translation of the Psalter. In addition, many of the Psalms make use of words and phrases drawn from Old Testament wisdom traditions. When we keep in mind that Israel’s scriptures formed the authorizing matrix for his teaching on the gospel of Christ, it becomes clear that for Paul, the ‘wisdom’ embodied in the teaching or instruction (torah) of the Psalms is nothing less than “the word of Christ” he speaks of in Colossians 3:16.

But just what does this say about Paul’s understanding of the Psalter? In what sense may the Psalms be said to be “the word of Christ”? Some have interpreted this phrase in terms of what grammarians refer to as a subjective genitive, which is a rather technical way of expressing the simple observation that Christ is the speaker of the Psalms. Others take the phrase as an objective genitive, suggesting that Paul wishes to teach the church that Christ is the One to whom the Psalter bears witness, that is, the One the Psalter is speaking about. Both nuances are probably in view, which is to say that as the Word or speaking voice of God in the Old Testament, Christ is the One who speaks the Psalms, as well as the One to whom the Psalter bears witness. With these introductory hermeneutical reflections offered by way of preface, we may now focus more closely upon the question how Christ the eternal Word is imaged or made visible in the Psalms, in an economy or time prior to his incarnation. Although there are many angles of figural vision from which one might pursue this question, it is helpful to begin by reflecting upon the structural relationship between Israel’s Torah and the larger shape of the Psalter, then focus upon the theological significance of that relationship the interpretation of Psalms 1-2, especially the combined perspective they offer on wisdom.

Israel’s Torah, the Psalms, and Wisdom

The Psalter has sometimes been called ‘the second Torah’ because its fivefold structure mirrors the number of books in the Pentateuch. Book I: 1-41; Book II: 42-72; Book III: 73-89; Book IV: 90-106; Book V: 107-150. This fivefold structure mirrors the fivefold structure of Israel’s Torah. Although Psalm 1:2 speaks of the ‘law of the LORD’ rather than Moses, that the Law or Torah of Moses is in view is evident from the way in which this phrase is used in post-exilic literature, that is, the period when the larger structure and matrices in which the

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3 See for example Psalm 3:1 (ψαλμός), Psalm 6:1 (ὕμνος), and Psalm 4:1 (ὁδή).

4 Standard ‘themes’ from Israel’s wisdom traditions include contrasts between the way of the wicked and the righteous, the wise and the foolish, as well as exhortations to practice the fear of the Lord. These themes, as well as others associated with Israel’s wisdom traditions, manifest themselves from the outset of Psaltery and continue from throughout its larger structure (see Psalms 1, 19, 32, 34, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 128).
individual psalms are now contained were probably constructed. This may be seen from the fact that 2 Chronicles 17:9; 34:14, Ezra 7:6, and Nehemiah 8:1 suggest that at the time of the writing of Chronicles and Ezra, the ‘law of the LORD’ and the ‘law of Moses’ were identical in meaning, and that both phrases were used interchangeably to refer to Israel’s Torah.

The final book of Law of Moses, which functions as a hermeneutical guide for interpreting the teachings of Israel’s Torah, identifies the teachings of Torah with wisdom (Deuteronomy 4:5–8). The structure of the Psalter is modeled upon the fivefold division of the Pentateuch in order to underscore the fact that, like the Mosaic Torah, the teachings inherent in the Psalter also embody the LORD’s wisdom. Like the five books of Moses, the Psalter is also ‘instruction’ or torah worthy of our meditation if we would be made wise, since Israel’s Torah and Israel’s Psalter both function as witnesses to the embodiment of LORD’s wisdom in the midst of Israel. Because the structure and wisdom of the Torah is replicated and expanded in the structure and wisdom of the Psalter, the call to engage in the practice of meditation upon the Torah also extends to the practice of meditation upon the Psalter. Thus when interpreted in terms of the larger structure of the Psalter, the call to meditate upon the Torah in Psalm 1:2 also functions as an invitation to later readers to meditate upon the teachings of the Psalter.

Psalms 1-2

The parallel structures of Torah and Psalter serve to teach us, then, that just as the instruction of the Mosaic Torah embodies the LORD’s wisdom in the midst of Israel, so also the Psalter embodies that wisdom. But just what does wisdom look like? How is it imaged in the witness to the LORD’s wisdom rendered by the Psalter? While time and space do not allow for a comprehensive study of the Psalter in this regard, the hermeneutical guidelines for interpreting the Psalter provided by Psalms 1-2 offer the reader a christological lens for making sense of its larger message and theological wisdom. Indeed, as many Christian readers of the Psalter have recognized, the christological vista provided by the book of Psalms opens with Psalms 1-2, for these two psalms serve as an introduction, not only to Book I of the Psalter, but also to the entire Psalter. Their introductory function is seen in the fact that, unlike all other psalms in Book I, they lack titles. Both psalms are also closely connected to one another on a literary level, with the Hebrew term “Blessed” (ברוך) forming an inclusio or bracket that links the beginning of Psalm 1 (1:1) with the end of Psalm 2 (2:12). The interpretive effect of this bracketing is to link the source of Israel’s blessing, both to instruction in and meditation upon the Torah (Psalm 1), as well as to the LORD’s gift of kingship to Israel (Psalm 2). The blessing of this gift is especially manifest in the protection the LORD offers to all who take refuge in that kingship (2:12). The teaching of Psalm 2 is that the LORD’s Messianic Son mediates the LORD’s blessing by providing refuge for all those who submit to his rule.

5 See Deuteronomy 17:14-20; cf. 1 Samuel 16:1. In this essay I will follow the convention used by the NASB and gloss the tetragrammaton as LORD in small caps. Whatever else its problems, adopting LORD as an English gloss for the tetragrammaton may be said to have a certain precedent in the Hebrew practice of vocalizing the tetragrammaton as Adonai, as well as the LXX practice of translating the tetragrammaton as kyrios.
The inclusio structure also has implications for our reading of verses 1:6 and 2:12, both of which speak of perishing (ματαιώ) in the way (δρόμος). In the case of 1:6, we learn that the ‘way’ of the wicked will ‘perish’. The same two terms reoccur in 2:12, but what it means to ‘perish’ in the ‘way’ is now further specified in terms of failing to ‘Kiss the Son’, which in the context of Psalm 2 means failing to offer the proper homage to the LORD’s Anointed (Μαρτύριος) or Christ (Χριστός), who is also identified as the King the LORD has appointed in Zion (2:6) and the LORD’s Son (2:7).

Finally, the relation between wisdom and the combined teaching of Psalms 1-2 is specified in terms of fearing the LORD and offering proper homage to the Son he has anointed as King (2:10-12). The kings of the nations are invited to a life of wisdom (2:10), which includes living in the fear of the LORD (2:11) and in submission to David and his descendants (2:12).

David and Christ

The question now arises: who is the LORD’s Anointed? On one level the answer would seem to be straight forward. David the King of Israel is the LORD’s anointed. Though in keeping with its introductory function in the Psalter, Psalm 2 has no title, it seems clear that it originally referred to David (Acts 4:25-28), who was installed as king on Mt. Zion in the face of opposition (2 Samuel 5) and promised the nations as his inheritance (2 Samuel 7). However, Psalm 2:8 never found any more than a partial fulfillment in David’s kingship, for there never was a time David ruled all the known nations of the earth in his day. The text itself therefore encourages us to read David as the earthly figure of a greater King who blesses all those who take refuge in him, while also bringing judgment upon those who resist his rule and the offer of refuge in him. Here David’s kingship offers us an Old Testament image or figure of Jesus Christ’s kingship. David was a son of God by grace; Jesus Christ is the Son of God by nature. However, while David was a figure of Christ, and not the incarnate Son, he was nevertheless functioned as an instrument by which the LORD mediated the blessings of Christ’s eternal kingship to the Israel in a time of promise, for the teaching of Psalm 2 is that it was the LORD’s intention that the office of Israel’s kingship serve as the messianic mediator of the blessing of refuge and protection. David’s reign as the LORD’s anointed is therefore a down payment on the shape the future will take, a christomorphic shape already intruding itself within Israel’s present through David. The nations will be brought into submission (2:9), and for this reason they are warned about the futility of their present rebellion (2:10), which will be met with anger and judgment, rather than blessing (2:11-12). In sum, if we grant that Psalms 1-2 establish a christological frame of reference for reading the book, then the shape that ‘wisdom’ takes in the Psalter is that of embracing the LORD’s Anointed, or Messiah, for only in so doing does one escape the LORD’s judgment. The military protection from Israel’s enemies offered by David is thus an Old Testament image or ‘making visible’ of the refuge that Jesus Christ provides from sin and death, the true enemies of God’s people.

The message of Psalm 2 is thus not primarily about the reign of the Davidic monarchy, but about the reign of the LORD in the midst of the Davidic monarchy. The LORD reigns through his Anointed, of which David was a figure. David’s installation as king was therefore an image or a ‘making visible’ of Christ’s installation to an eternal session and rule at his resurrection, ascension, and exaltation. What David realized through his kingship in a limited, temporal way, Christ
consummated in an eternal way, for Christ’s resurrection was his coronation day, the day when he gave the promises of David an eternal fulfillment (Acts 13:26-34; cf. Acts 2:29-36). At Christ’s resurrection and coronation the inheritance of the nations begins (Mt. 28:18-20), and the promise of Psalm 2:8 finds its ultimate fulfillment.

The Christomorphic Shape of the Fivefold Psalter

Though the Psalms open with wonderful promises of blessing to Israel through Torah mediation and obedience (Psalm 1), as well as the exercise of messianic kingship over the nations (Psalm 2), the psalms immediately following this introduction make us wonder whether these promises will be fulfilled. Where is the Davidic king who is supposed to be taking possession of the nations as his inheritance? In fact, as many students of the macrostructure of the Psalter have observed, the movement of the first three books of the Psalms traces the breakdown of the Davidic monarchy as it moves from David at the end of Book I (41), to Solomon at the end of Book II (72), climaxing in Rehoboam’s division of the kingdom and the Babylonian exile eventually fostered by that division at the end of Book III (89), resulting in the loss of Davidic kingship. In sum, Book I inaugurates the Davidic kingship. By the end of Book II it is clear that this kingship has been transferred to Solomon. While the first ‘blessed man’ and ‘king’ described in the introduction to the Psalter was David, by the end of Book II the ‘blessed man’ and ‘king’ is Solomon. The end of Book III sees the breakdown of this kingship, probably referring to both the advent of the divided kingdom and the Babylonian exile. The promises to David of blessedness and a continuing kingship rendered by Psalm 1-2 seem to have failed. Through their disobedience, Israel and her kings have now gone down to the death of exile. The writer of Psalm 89 therefore asks “LORD, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?” (89:49). The answer to this question is found in Book IV. In their despair over the temporal destruction of the Davidic kingship in Israel, the people stand in need of another perspective, already made visible at the outset of the Psalter. The hope and focus of Psalm 2 was not based upon the figure of David per se, but upon the LORD who ‘begets’ Israel’s royal sonship by virtue of his eternal life and resurrection power over death, even in the midst of Israel’s disobedience. Israel’s hope for a future beyond exile and death is identified with this LORD, who by his eternal life and reign over all is able to ‘beget’ her again from the dead. The opening psalm of Book IV therefore grounds this hope in the eternal life and kingship of Israel’s LORD (90:1-4), a theme that is then carried forward with emphasis in Book IV. This focus on LORD’s eternal name and life also forms the culminating note of Book V in Psalm 145:1-3, 13. We may summarize this movement as follows:

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<th>Book</th>
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<tr>
<td>Book I</td>
<td>Davidic kingship inaugurated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book II</td>
<td>Transferred to Solomon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book III</td>
<td>Davidic kingship in doubt</td>
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<td>Book IV</td>
<td>Israel’s resurrection hope in the LORD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book V</td>
<td>Living under this hope without an earthly king</td>
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Though the post-exilic community that returned from Babylon had no visible Davidic king, and did not rule the nations, but was ruled by Persia, Books IV and V of the Psalter remind them that the LORD still rules by his eternal kingship, and that because of this, the promises given in Psalms 1-2 cannot fail. Thus while it appears that Israel’s history has ended in the death of exile at the close of Book III, the opening psalm of Book IV establishes a theological frame of reference that clarifies the true source of Israel’s hope in the midst of judgment. Israel’s judgment history will not end in the death of exile, because her history is linked to the eternal life of the LORD who reigns over death, and who is fully capable of raising Israel from the death of exile.

Books IV and V clarify the character of Israel’s hope in the face of death, providing readers of the Psalter with a theological basis for the fulfillment of the promises given at the outset of the Psalter in Psalms 1-2. Israel’s kingship and her people will be ‘begotten’ again. Psalm 2:8 will be fulfilled, for by the power of his indestructible life and kingship, the LORD of Israel who reigns over all remains faithful to his promises, even when a visible Davidic king is absent. The overall structure of the Psalms teaches Israel to trust in the LORD’s ability to deliver her from self-imposed exile and death, and to place her hope for the future in the resurrection power of the LORD’s eternal life, even though there be no visible Davidic kingship. It also teaches them to live under the LORD’s reign in anticipation of the coming Messianic King who will finally fulfill the promise that the LORD’s Anointed will inherit the nations. In this way, the larger shape and structure of the Psalter also proclaims the christomorphic shape and hope of the gospel in a time of promise, thereby linking up with the christological lens for reading wisdom provided by Psalms 1-2. Truly, the destiny of those who take refuge in LORD’s Christ is blessing. This is the message of the Psalter, ‘the word of Christ’ (Colossians 3:16).