**The Psalms:**

**A Theocratic Commentary on the Torah**

**By the Messiah of Israel**

**Introduction Part I**

**By** **Hakham Dr. Yosef ben Haggai**

INTRODUCTION

David M. Howard[[1]](#footnote-1) has published a good overview of major studies in the books of Psalms since the 19th century. Particularly, this article surveys the trends in Psalms studies since 1970, but more particularly in the last 10-15 years. This overview describes how the academic study of the book of Psalms has lead us nowhere, thanks in great measure to the obsessive and dogmatic positions of the school of higher criticism. It seems that those who did not accept this “trend” were labeled not worthy enough to be considered of academic value, and their writings were shunned from major Theological Journals.

Duane L. Christensen[[2]](#footnote-2) makes this point clear when describing some of the ground breaking work being done on the Psalms from a different perspective. He writes:

“Edward G. King examined the Psalter in light of Büchler’s thesis with fascinating results. Unfortunately his insights were not easily reconciled with the conclusions and underlying presuppositions of the method of form criticism as it was developing in the study of the Psalms. The result was that the work of Büchler and King was largely ignored within the mainstream of Biblical scholarship, particularly in Christian circles.”

In fact, several most expensive thick tomes have appeared since the 19th century as academic commentaries on the Psalms, and with little practical application whatsoever, monuments to man’s folly and intellectual endeavors without being thoroughly grounded in the fear of G-d, which King Solomon by divine revelation informs us that it is “the beginning and chief part of wisdom.” On the other hand, a constellation of folksy volumes pretending to be commentaries on the Psalms but totally devoid of any rigorous academic research are being retailed for the benefit of those concerned only with a skin-deep religion that is totally intended not to cause any major transformation in the individual nor to produce such behaviors and perfect religion that a man should have at all times before his Creator. Sadly, such is the present state of research and commentary on this most important book of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The problem for this state of affairs has been one of approach that looks at the book of Psalms devoid of the context in which they were penned or intended to be read. This can be seen from the commonly held assumption as to the basic purpose and understanding of the book of Psalms. Such has been put succinctly as[[3]](#footnote-3):

“Composed by King David, the book of Psalms has been a source of inspiration and a refuge from distress throughout the centuries for both Jew and non-Jew alike. To read from its pages is to enter into a conversation with G-d, whether to express our gratitude or plead for His compassion and confers upon the reader the ability to draw down a G-dly light which can light up the world.”

And whilst this is perfectly true, this and similar definitions do poor justice as to how these Psalms came into being. This widely and most eloquent explanation fails to explain or give an account as to how the Psalms “confer upon the reader the ability to draw down a G-dly light which can light up the world.” The problem then with this definition is one that fails to address its internal evidence, and context.

This commentary on the Psalms tries to build upon the work of Büchler[[4]](#footnote-4) and King[[5]](#footnote-5) but with a totally different point of departure. One which is based in part on the command in the Torah given to Jewish kings to write for themselves a scroll of the Torah so that he should read from it and meditate on it, all the days of his life (cf. Deuteronomy 17:18)[[6]](#footnote-6).

DAVID AS THE MESSIAH

Few have considered that it was to David, the only human being, to whom G-d ever said:

“Truly it is I that has established My king upon Zion, My holy mountain.” I will tell of the decree: Ha-Shem said unto me: “You are My son, this day have I begotten you. Ask of Me, and I will give the Gentiles for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession.” – Psalms 2:6-8

Some have taken these words as referring to the Messiah that it is to come, yet none can refute the obvious, that is, that the plain and literal meaning of these words were spoken of and directed to King David, the Messiah of Israel. This can’t be disputed since in Psalm 89:28-34 we read:

“I also will appoint him My first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth. For ever will I keep for him My mercy, and My covenant shall stand fast with him. His seed also will I make to endure for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven. If his children forsake My law, and walk not in Mine ordinances; if they profane My statutes, and keep not My commandments; then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with strokes. But My mercy will I not break off from him, nor will I be false to My faithfulness.”

This self evident truth is important since then the Psalms must be understood as the writings of the Messiah, the son of G-d, and the begotten of Ha-Shem. This “begotten” (in Psalm 2:7) of course must be understood as Cohen, et al[[7]](#footnote-7) state:

“To be understood in a figurative sense. On the day of his enthronement, the king was *begotten* of G-d, as His servant to guide the destinies of His people.”

This does not do away, though with the metaphorical (Midrashic) interpretation that Psalm 2:7 alludes to the coming Messiah. For in Midrash Tehillim II:9[[8]](#footnote-8) we read:

*“This day have I begotten thee* (ibid.). R. Huna said: Suffering is divided into three portions: one, the Patriarchs and all the generations of men took; one, the generation that lived in the time of [Hadrian’s] persecution took; and one, the generation of the lord Messiah will take. When the time comes, the Holy One, blessed be He, will say: “I must create the Messiah – a new creation.” As Scripture says, *This day have I begotten thee* – that is, on the very day of redemption, God will create the Messiah.”

In other words, the Psalms like most of the Hebrew Scriptures seem to have a prophetic bipolarity or double assignment, in this case, one to King David the Messiah, and the other to the Messiah to come. Perhaps, what we have here is David fully imbued with the spirit of the Messiah, and the Messiah to come, fully imbued with the genetic make-up of David as his physical descendant. And thus what applies to one also applies to the other. The fact of this double polarity and assignment can be better seen in the purpose of this book as stated by its author or compiler.

A similar case of Scripture bi-polarity or “double fulfillment” can also be seen in the case for example of Moses’ words:

“A prophet will the LORD thy God raise up unto thee, from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken” (Deuteronomy 18:15).

The plain and literal meaning of these words have their fulfillment in the successor of Moses, his disciple Yeshoshua (more commonly known as Joshua). Yet, there is also a fulfillment of these words also in the Messiah that is to come.

SEARCHING FOR PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS

King David is not only the author of a number of Psalms but also tradition, both Christian and Jewish, attributes him as the compiler of this book of Psalms. The question then is what did David aim to accomplish when he compiled this book of Psalms? Did he merely intend to express his spirituality and devotion to G-d through music and thereby establish a normative approach to G-d?

In fact if we pay attention to the definitions of purpose advanced by many, that the Psalms’ objective, are merely expressions of meditation and spirituality. However, even if this be so, it seems that this is only part of the story and does not fully explain nor takes into account the centrality of the role of the Torah in the life of G-d’s people, and in the life and ministry of King Messiah, neither does it fully explain the relationship of the Messiah with the Torah (cf. Deuteronomy 17:18 & Joshua 1:7-8).

To accomplish this, we need a better and more profound explanation of the basic purpose of the books of Psalms. We need to rediscover the purpose of the Psalms and bring them to their legitimate position and place within the context of the Torah. We need to explain how obedience to the Torah by the Messiah gave birth to such expressions of spirituality praise and devotion to G-d, most blessed be He!

The picture or impression one often obtains when reading commentaries on the Psalms, both Jewish and Christian is one in which David went about composing some hymns or songs of praise to accompany the worship at the Temple. And this, completely divorced from the Scroll of the Torah which he was to read all the days of his life, and at the same time divorced from the Sabbath and festival and readings of the Torah at the Temple. This seems a bit far fetched given the caliber of his prophecy which is itself derived from the prophetic Torah.

Other authors would leave us with the impression that David was such a spiritual light that he would be equivalent to a modern Kabbalist plumbing the depths of the interaction of G-d with men, and men’s response to G-d’s merciful deeds. Again, neither this explanation or the one before it account for the social milieu in which these songs of praise were composed. The problem with these defective portrayals of the Psalms is the disjunction of the Psalms from the Torah. The Torah seems to be somehow divorced from the reality of the Psalms make-up, there is a complete lack of an intimate and profound meaningful nexus between the two.

What is much needed then is a paradigm shift in the understanding and identification of the main objective of the Psalms, one which accounts fully for the milieu in which they were composed. What is this milieu that we have repeatedly mentioned is lacking in explaining the objective of the Psalms?

THE SABBATH AND THE TORAH IN RELATION TO THE PSALMS

Chiefly among them is the “Lectio Continua” of the Torah. When King David and others wrote these wonderful songs of praise and worship they did so in relation to the portion of the Torah that was read for that week in the Temple or the local gatherings (Ma’amadot) in localities far from the Temple. The Torah is not just only a series of five books to be read whenever one pleases, but it is also a series of five books to be read in “Lectio Continua,” each lesson at a precise point in time during the year!

This idea that the Torah is read in time to create a specific prophetic space, can be seen with regards to the Sabbath. The Sabbath comes whether we acknowledge it or not. Yet if we want to enter to that prophetic space in time of the Sabbath, the lady of the house needs to light candles and inaugurate that “prophetic Sabbath space” in her home at a certain point in time. She needs to separate the holy from the mundane and create a Sabbath reality so to speak, at a certain time in order that this particular prophetic space in time can be enjoyed. Men have to join a minyan (group of ten or more men) and recite Kabbalat Shabbat (reception of the Sabbath) at a certain point in time in order to create that prophetic space in time for the community in order that all may enjoy the Sabbath.

In other words when a certain portion of the Torah is read at a precise time, a definite and special prophetic space in time is created which differs in substance if we would have read a different portion of Torah at the same prophetic point in time. The two realities or prophetic spaces in time would be completely different. For example, the prophetic reality of Shabbat Parah (the Sabbath when we read about the red heifer) differs in substance from the prophetic reality of Shabbat Shekalim (the Sabbath when we read about the annual Temple tax). Thus, certain words of the Torah, certain divisions of the Torah, are meant to be read at specific prophetic points in time so that we may create specific realities, specific prophetic spaces in time. When we then read the exact specific portions of the Torah in their corresponding specific points in time then we are most solemnly creating new prophetic realities in time.

Viewed from this perspective, we can, therefore, say that there could be no greater meaningful prophetic activity than the observance of G-d’s Sabbaths, and the reading and meditation of the correct portions of the Torah prescribed for the appropriate specific points in time.

David, the Messiah, is then very aware of this important prophetic principle and that the Torah is the greatest prophecy ever uttered. His Psalms, are very much aware of this phenomenon, and each share in this special prophetic space that each section of the Torah creates in time. This principle of particular words of prophecy suited for particular times is reflected in the statement of King Solomon who wrote: “A man has joy in the answer of his mouth; and **a word in due season, how good is it!”** (Proverbs 15:23). That is, the words of the prophetic Torah are connected to particular “due seasons,” and were designed to be uttered at specific times to create specific intended realities and prophetic spaces in time. Conversely, when a word is read out of season it is not good – i.e. it does not produce the reality which was intended to be its outcome.

Each week we read special Seder of the Torah that creates a specific space in time, it prophesies uniquely to our needs, desires, and endeavors that take place in the specific week which it addresses. It is our duty then to explore this prophetic space in time which these specific words of Torah have created. We need to appropriate for ourselves these holy words and shape the week of our endeavors, thoughts, emotions and happenings by them. And this is exactly what the Psalmist does. He takes in order a particular Seder or Sedarim of the Torah and gives expression to the realities of G-d’s kingdom before him. The King Messiah, enters into those holy and prophetic spaces in time created by the specific readings of the Torah and takes possession of them and then goes about shaping the world and the future by means of those specific words of Torah.

The Psalmist in fact alludes to this principle on two occasions:

“All of them wait for You, that You may give them their food (i.e. their portion of Torah) in due season.” (Psalm 104:27), and

“The eyes of all wait for You, and You give them their food (i.e. their portion of Torah) in due season. (Psalm 145:15).

Much later the Master of Nazareth equally restates this principle in his abbreviated form of the Amidda prayer when he teaches:

“Give us this day our daily bread (i.e. our daily portion of the Torah).” (Matityahu 6:11)

Therefore, the reading of the Torah on each Sabbath frames the living reality of the coming week inaugurated by it, for it is the specific bread needed for that specific season in time. The Psalmist, that is the Messiah, then goes about taking this “bread given in its due season” and proceeds to digest it and derive from it important principles of Theocratic government. For the Messiah’s chief preoccupation and need is to provide good and just governance based upon the teachings of the Torah for the chosen people of G-d, most blessed be He!

Any particular Psalm, therefore, is not by itself a self-contained unit of prophetic revelation, but it is, as we might put it, a unit of derived prophetic revelation borne in the particular context of a specific Torah Seder read at a precise and specific point in time. Apart from Joshua, Samuel, and Chronicles, the books of Psalms are therefore the most ancient Midrashic commentary on the Torah. Each psalm speaking about and addressing theocratic issues consistent with a very specific reality created in time by a specific Torah Seder.

The great Jewish philosopher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel[[9]](#footnote-9), in endeavoring to explain the Sabbath, coined the famous phrase “the Sabbaths are sanctuaries in time.” He explains that the Sabbaths are our great cathedrals, the Jewish equivalent of sacred architecture. In fact, when explaining the meaning of time from a Scriptural perspective, Heschel argues:

“Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time. Unlike the space-minded man to whom time is unvaried, iterative, homogeneous, to whom all hours are alike, quality-less, empty shells, the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious. …

Technical civilization is man’s conquest of space. It is a triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely, time. In technical civilization, we expend time to gain space ... The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world. …

What is the Sabbath? A reminder of every man’s royalty; an abolition of the distinction of master and slave, rich and poor, success and failure. To celebrate the Sabbath is to experience one’s ultimate independence of civilization and society, of achievement and anxiety. The Sabbath is an embodiment of the belief that all men are equal and that equality of men means the nobility of men. The greatest sin of man is to forget that he is prince.” [[10]](#footnote-10)

Whilst Heschel is correct in his proposition that Sabbaths are “sanctuaries in time,” we must however note that these sanctuaries are not just mere empty cathedrals in time, since what makes each particular Sabbath different and distinct from any other is the specific Torah furnishing that has been particularly designed for that specific Sabbath.

Perhaps, the greatest obstacle to be breached in order to effect this paradigm shift when understanding the goal of each individual Psalm, and the five books of Psalms as a whole, is intrinsically connected to how we view and understand time and the Sabbath in particular. Sabbath-observance is a mighty act of creation. To observe the Sabbath is to participate in God’s intention for the rhythm of creation. To observe the Sabbath entails the framing of the realities of the week to conform to the specific words of the prophetic Torah that were precisely designed for that specific Sabbath. Not observing the Sabbath is a violation of the created order; it gradually returns that created order to a state of chaos. What the creatures do with the Sabbath has numerous and vital cosmic effects.

Western civil religion, on the other hand, calls us to worship in the temple of the free, unrestricted marketplace, offering up our time and receiving the blessings of money. "Time is money," its catechism says. How did this "time is money" idea come about? During World War II, Britain developed the Gross Domestic Product as a measure of national wealth, to track the resources necessary to fight the war. Afterward, the U.N. adopted it as a way to compare the relative wealth of nations. It measures only goods and services bought and sold, and is taken as an indicator or national well-being. Increase is good, decrease is bad. Yet in medical science, unrestricted growth in the body is called a cancer.

Measured by the GDP, cancer is good, Infant mortality is good, and Drive-by shootings are good because they are worth $20K in services bought and sold. If the victim dies and there's a murder trial, then from the GDP perspective it is even better, since the services traded may amount to $100K or more. An oil tanker spill is worth $5-20M, an airline crash or terrorist bombing is worth even more. Yet on this scale of productivity measurement, teaching to read to a child is worthless (unless this activity is seen as producing a better slave to produce more sophisticated products in our modern conveyor-belt industries). Kindness and courtesy are absolutely worthless. Helping a neighbor: totally worthless. Volunteer work with the hungry and thirsty, the sick, the homeless, those in prison - all worthless. And of course observing the Sabbath from this utilitarian perspective is totally worthless and even counterproductive, since that time could be used for enjoyment or provision of pleasures that by themselves produce even more trade.

But if we accept the paradigm shift, and discover the reality that Sabbath observance with its specific and tailor-made prophetic Torah reading, for each individual Sabbath, frames the realities and outcomes for the next six coming days, then we would pay special attention as to what specific Torah Readings must be read, commented upon, and internalized on each specific Sabbath. For we would be aware that a Torah reading for the wrong Sabbath will not produce the required and intended results, and that issues of the coming week are all related to the specific prophetic Torah portion that G-d designed to be read on a specific Sabbath.

If we could but understand that vital issues in our life, and that of the world in general, are framed by the specific, prophetic, Torah portion we read for a specific week, that the system of “Lectio Continua” of the Torah was intended to prophesy to every specific coming week in time, then our Sabbath observance would turn, in fact, to become the most creative time in the whole week! And it is this principle that the Psalmist, in his five books of Psalms, wants to impress upon us.

The message of the Psalmist in each of his Psalms is, therefore, that man does not need to surrender to helplessness, he does not need to surrender to a co-modified price-tag, he does not need to accept the fate created by others for him, for he has been divinely endowed with particular gifts and abilities to shape his future and to create his own fate. But, as in every mechanism, there is a protocol or order in which things happen or are being done, and if man wants to express and enjoy the fullness and wealth of his humanity he needs to observe certain rules and procedures of the cosmic mechanism that G-d mercifully created for him and for his enjoyment.

The connection of each Psalm to specific Torah readings and therefore to particular Sabbaths, was first proposed in earlier times by the Midrash on Psalms[[11]](#footnote-11) and at the beginning of this century by Edward G. King.[[12]](#footnote-12) King, went about to apply the principles laid out by Büchler (ibid) on his work of the Triennial Cycle of Torah readings. And whilst his application broke new ground in the understanding of the composition and goals of each psalm, yet he parted from some defective information which Büchler had advanced. The Torah, in fact, was to be read in two cycles each of 3 and ½ years and attuned to the Shemittah cycles. Nevertheless, the ground-breaking findings of Büchler on the Torah, and King on the Psalms is that the Psalms are not unrelated pieces of revelation or special praises that came spontaneously with reference to nothing. But on the contrary, King proposed that the Psalms are connected harmoniously to the reading of the Torah, and that their arrangement in the Psaltery was effected in relation to the specific Torah readings for each Sabbath in a particular cycle of years.

THE CHIEF PURPOSE OF THE MESSIAH

It is evident from the reading of Joshua 1:7-8 that the concept of the Messiah is thoroughly grounded in the Torah. One of the little explored definitions of the purpose of the Messiah has been precisely described by the prophet Isaiah, who stated:

“The LORD is delighted, for his righteousness’ sake, he will magnify the Torah (Law) and make (it – i.e. the Torah) honorable.” (Isaiah 42:21)

That is, one of the basic purposes of the Messiah is to enlarge (magnify), make great, and honorable all the commandments and prophecies contained in the Torah for each particular Sabbath.

At the beginning of the books of Psalms, King David the Messiah, states that an “ISH” (a prominent regal man who is righteous (i.e. the Messiah and his officers) “will delight in G-d’s Torah and in it will meditate day and night” (Psalm 1:2). This principle is best understood if we quote four passages in toto so that the profound relationship of Messiah with the Torah becomes quite evident.

“And it shall be, when he (i.e. the King Messiah of Israel) sits upon the throne of his kingdom, that he will write for himself a copy of this Torah (law) in a book, out of that which is before the priests the Levites. And it (i.e. the book of the Torah) shall be with him, and he will read therein all the days of his life; that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to keep all the words of this Torah (law) and these statutes, to do them; that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left; to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children, in the midst of Israel.” (Deuteronomy 17:18-20).

“‘Only, be strong and very courageous, to observe to do according to all the Torah (law) which Moses My servant commanded you; you will not turn aside from it right or left, so that you do act wisely in every place wherever you go; this book of the Torah (law) will not depart out of your mouth, and you will meditate in it by day and by night, so that you will observe to do according to all that is written in it, for then you will cause your way to prosper, and then you will act wisely.” (Joshua 1:7-8)

“O the happiness of the (royal) man that has not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seat of the scornful. But his delight (his will) is in the Torah (law) of the LORD; and in His Torah (law) does he meditate day and night.” (Psalms 1:1-2).

“The LORD is delighted, for his righteousness’ sake, he will magnify the Torah (Law) and make (it – i.e. the Torah) honorable.” (Isaiah 42:21)

From this picture we can see that King David the Messiah was under the obligation to read from the Torah “all the days of his life” (Deut. 17:19), and which he interprets as: “But his delight (his will) is in the Torah (law) of the LORD; and in His Torah (law) does he meditate day and night.” (Psalms 1:1-2). Now, the text says “all the days of his life,” and since the throne of David is forever, as we read in Psalm 89:28-29 –

“I also will appoint him My first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth. For ever will I keep for him My mercy, and My covenant shall stand fast with him. His seed also will I make to endure for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven.”

Then it logically follows that G-d through His King Messiah and his agents will cause the reading of the Torah in “Lectio Continua” to be in force even during the coming Messianic age.

The above four Scripture quotations pretty much tie the concept of the Messiah King of Israel with the Torah, as one who rules the people of G-d by means of and by virtue of the prophetic Torah. It is he and his officers who enable the people of G-d to occupy that prophetic space in time of the Sabbaths and fashion each week of the cycles of year according to the prophecies of the Torah. Thus, a Messiah King of Israel, or an officer of him who fails to establish week by week the prophecies of the Torah, and shape the realities of each week by means of that Torah, is relinquishing his sacred duty and is guilty, in fact, of nothing less than treason.

PURPOSE FROM THE NAMES GIVEN TO THE BOOK AS A WHOLE

The English word “psalm” has its origins in the Greek word “psalmoi,” meaning “a song to be played on a stringed instrument.” This is the name given to the book in the Greek version, the Septuagint. This word occurs seven times in the Nazarean Codicil: Lukas I 20:42; 24:44; Lukas II (Acts) 1:20; 13:33; 1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 5:19; and Colossians 3:16. The English word “Psalter” is borrowed from the Greek word “psalteerion,” and meaning “a stringed instrument.”

There is no proper correspondence between either of these titles and the Hebrew title “T’hillim” which is invariably translated as “praises.” It is a verbal noun derived from the word Hal or Hallel, which we have as the first part of the word hallelujah (praise Yah). The root meaning of the verb is first “to jump” or “dance about” as light does, then “to throw light upon anything” so as to illuminate it or glorify it. Thus, the transition is easy, to praise, for praising is the outcome of setting anything in the light.

“T’hillim” then may mean irradiations or illuminations which show forth G-d’s glory and call forth praises. Thus the Psalms are called T’hilleem because they set G-d’s purposes in the light, and illustrate them by causing them to shine forth to His praise. They cover the entire field of revelation in the Hebrew Scriptures (Tanakh). G-d’s purposes are set forth in history and prophecy, as they relate to Man, to Israel, or to the Earth; and light is thrown upon them.

Manuscript and Massoretic authorities, the Talmud (Kiddushin 33a) as well as the ancient versions, such as the Septuagint, divide the Psalms into Five Books.

Book I Psalms 1-40, ending with a blessing and double Amen

Book II Psalms 41-72, ending with a blessing and double Amen

Book III Psalms 73-89, ending with a blessing and double Amen

Book IV Psalms 90-106, ending with a blessing and "amen Hallelujah"

Book V Psalms 107-150, ending with Hallelujah

There are in all seven Amens, and twenty-four Hallelujahs.

Ancient Jewish authorities assert that these five books correspond to the five books of the Law (See the Midrash on Psalm 1:1). Hence we may call:

Book I The B’resheet (At the beginning) - Genesis Book

Book II The Shemot (Names) - Exodus Book

Book III The Vayiqra (And He called) - Leviticus Book

Book IV The B’midbar (In the wilderness) - Numbers Book

Book V The D’barim (Words) - Deuteronomy Book

It is the norm and custom amongst the Jewish people since ancient times to call a book by the first words appearing in the book, and even at times placing the index of contents for the book within the first few passages. Thus the first book of the Torah starts with the Hebrew word “B’resheet” (At the beginning) and so the Hebrew name for that book is literally in Hebrew called the book of “At the beginning” (i.e. “B’resheet”).

One must agree that the book of Psalms is popularly known amongst Israelites as “Sefer T’hillim,” which as stated above should be rather translated as “The Book of Illuminations.” However based on the Hebrew principle that a book should be called by any of its beginning word/words, one would be more predisposed to call it the “Book of Meditations on the Torah” as it is said: “and in His (G-d’s) Torah **he meditates** day and night” (Psalm 1:2). The Hebrew word for “he meditates” is “Yehgeh” (Strong’s # 1897), which comes from the Hebrew root hgh “hagah,” and which in the AV (King James Bible) is translated as “meditate” six times, “mourn” four times, “speak” four times, “imagine” two times, “study” two times, “mutter” two times, “utter” two times, “roaring” once, “sore” once, and “talk” once. The Hebrew word “hagah” means “to murmur,” “to utter sound,” or “to speak with oneself, murmuring in a low voice” (thus “to meditate).

If we then understand that this so called Book of Psalms should rather be called Book of Meditations on the Torah, then perhaps we can better understand the comment on Psalm 1:1 by the Midrash on the Book of Psalms[[13]](#footnote-13) which states:

“As Moses gave five books of laws to Israel, so David gave five books of Psalms to Israel, The Book of Psalms entitled *Blessed is the man* (Ps. 1:1), the Book entitled *For the leader: Maschil* (Psalm 42:1), the Book, *A Psalm of Asaph* (Ps. 73:1), the book, *A prayer of Moses* (Ps. 90:1), and the Book, *Let the redeemed of the LORD say* (Ps. 107:2)

Or, as the Jewish Encyclopedia[[14]](#footnote-14) states, under the heading of Psalms:

“The richest in content and the most precious of the three large Ketubim (Ber. 57a), the Sefer Tehillim is regarded as a second Pentateuch, whose virtual composer was David, often likened to Moses (Midrash Tehillim, ch. i.). "Moses gave [Israel] the five books of the Torah, and to correspond with them, David gave them the Sefer Tehillim, in which also there are five books" (ibid.).”

Thus, according to this Midrash, we could arrange its statements as per the following table:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Books** | **Psalms** | **Commenting** | **Hebrew Name** | **Translation** |
| I | 1-41 | Genesis | Ashre HaIsh | Blessed is the regal man |
| II | 42-72 | Exodus | Mashqil | A contemplation |
| III | 73-89 | Leviticus | Mizmor L’Asaf | A Psalm of Asaph |
| IV | 90-106 | Numbers | T’filah L’Mosheh | A Prayer of Moses |
| V | 107-150 | Deuteronomy | Yom’ru G’ule Adonai | Let the redeemed of Ha-Shem |

In other words, each of the Psalms is a meditation on a certain “reading portion” (Hebrew: Seder) of the Torah. Or, as Rabbi Scheinerman puts it[[15]](#footnote-15):

“There is further evidence that the Sefer Tehillim was divided not only into "books" corresponding to those of the Torah, but into sidrot (portions) as is the Torah, but we know of no institution of public reading.”

What is important here to understand is that the each of the Psalms should not be viewed as independent units of revelation, as is commonly the case in both Judaism and Christianity, but rather as units of illumination/revelation which are in function of a particular seder or sedarim of the Torah. The Psalms are not acts of praise that came from nowhere, but rather they are the product of King Messiah’s meditations on the weekly Torah Seder that was read at the Temple on the weekly and festival Sabbaths. Thus, the Psalms are to be read, explained, and understood in the context of a particular Torah Seder or Sedarim, and not as a self contained unit of revelation disconnected from its vital Torah context.

The relationship of each Psalm to the Torah will be further explained in the second part to our introduction, and in our commentary to each of the Psalms. However, what we want to underline in this introduction is that the Psalms loose all their grandeur and beauty, and to a great extent their profound meaning when they are divorced from their setting and cradle: each of the reading portions (Hebrew: Sedarim) of the Torah. For it is the Psalms that carry that explore the majestic radiance of the Torah and bring it to illumine so to speak the life and preoccupations of man. Moreover, the Psalms raise the prophecy of the Torah to a higher level – one that deals with human governance as decreed by Heaven itself.

The relationship of the Book of Psalms or rather the Book of Mediations on the Torah and the Torah itself is quite interesting. For example, the last five Psalms may be seen as an echo and reminiscence of the whole of the five books. Thus,

Psalm 146 Genesis: compare v. 4 with Genesis 2:7

 compare v. 5 with Genesis 2:8

 compare v. 6 with Genesis 1

Psalm 147 Exodus: compare v. 4 with Exodus 1:1

 compare vv. 2-20 with Exodus 1:7-10

Psalm 148 Leviticus: compare v. 14 with Leviticus 10:3

Psalm 149 Numbers: compare vv. 5-9 with Numbers 14:21; 24:17-24

Psalm 150 Deuteronomy compare v. 2 with Deut. 3:24

The Book of Genesis (Hebrew B’resheet) has been said to contain the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures in a nutshell; it is the foundation book of G-d’s revelation. And so also is the first book of the Book of Psalms (Psalms 1-41) which contains in a nutshell the rest of the Psalms. The book of Exodus (Hebrew: Shemot) is the book which describes the great sufferings of G-d’s people amongst the Gentiles, and how Ha-Shem redeemed them (a rehearsal of the final redemption that is to come). The second book of Psalms (Psalms 42-72) begins with Psalms of suffering, G-d’s people crying unto Ha-Shem for deliverance. G-d hears them, gets rid of their enemies, and becomes their King (cf. Psalms 45-48). This second book concludes with Psalms which describes the reign of the King and the glories of his Kingdom. This is not the last Psalm of David, yet at the close of it is written “The prayers of David the son of Jesse, are ended.” The explanation for these words is most simple and sublime. King David the Messiah meditated on the last Seder (reading portion) of the book of Exodus (Shemot 39:33 – 40:38) that deals with the assembling of the Tabernacle in the wilderness, he beheld in his own mind/understanding the glorious vision of seventy-second Psalm he cried out “the prayers of David are ended!” As the Tabernacle was erected he foresaw the last Messiah who will inaugurate that kingdom of peace and righteousness promised to the last descendant of David.

Leviticus (Hebrew: Vayiqra) is the book in the Torah which has as its most important statement: “holiness unto Ha-Shem.” This theme we also find at the beginning of the third book of the Book of Psalms (Psalms 73-89). This book begins with the Asaph Psalms postulating that G-d is Holy, and that He has separated a people unto Himself. In these Psalms it is recorded the prayers of this Jewish remnant seeking the face of G-d in the midst of apostasy and corruption all around them.

However, the most striking similarity is to be found between the book of Numbers (Hebrew: B’midbar) and the fourth book of the Book of Psalms (Psalms 90-106). This fourth book begins with the prayer of Moses. Human reason would have placed this book at the beginning of the Book of Psalms since it is one of the earliest Psalms of the Jewish people. So, why is this Psalm by the superintendence of G-d, most blessed be He, placed here? It is very possible that Moses wrote this Psalm in the wilderness wanderings contemplating a generation dying off on accounts of its disobedience, unfaithfulness and sins. However, at the same time we see in the book of Numbers G-d pointing to His people rest in their wanderings with the entrance to the Holy land. So in this fourth book of Psalms we find Psalms pointing to that Messianic age of rest. This irrefutable truth has most profound consequences. One of it being that it was Moses our teacher, who was the first to introduce the “Messianic” interpretation of the Torah, and which later King David the Messiah would continue and put in order. This fourth book closes with a recompilation of Israel’s history of failure and what G-d, most blessed be He, has done for them. The fifth and last book of the Book of Psalms begins with Psalm 107, where we find that the futures restoration of Israel predicted in the Book of Deuteronomy (Hebrew D’barim) is once more re-stated.

As can be seen, there is an intimate relationship between the five books in the Book of Psalms or better the Book of Meditation on the Torah and the five books of the Torah. We can see that the Psalms have been providentially arranged in a most wise and orderly way with a profound prophetical outlook that elucidates for us the prophecies contained in the Torah. He who wants to understand the Torah, therefore, must learn at the feet of King Messiah and understanding each his meditations in relation to a particular Torah Seder or Sedarim. The Psalms are the “Key of David” (Apocalypse 3:7) that opens for us both the secret and sacred prophecies contained in the Torah.

In concluding this first part to our explanation and commentary on the Psalms, we come back to our claim that there is a much needed paradigm shift in the understanding of the Book of Psalms, or better the Book of the Meditations on the Torah, as a whole and each individual Psalm contained in it. This new paradigm needs to depend chiefly upon the internal evidence of the book not as a self contained world or unit but as one that is in intimate relationship with the three-and-a-half-year Sedarim in the Torah. This new understanding would provide for a greater appreciation of the Prophetic Torah, as well as the meditations of King David the Messiah and others of the majesty and greatness of the Torah revelation itself as well as the commandments contained therein.

Hakham Dr. Yosef ben Haggai

San Antonio Texas, Iyar 17, 5765 (May 26, 2005)

1. *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), pp. 329-68 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Book Of Psalms Within The Canonical Process In Ancient Israel*, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 39/3 (September 1996) pp. 421–432 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See <http://www.chabad.org/dailystudy/> This definition is being quoted for its conciseness and elegance, as well as summarizing most popular definitions, and not as a criticism of its author or authors. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A. Büchler, *“The Reading of the Law and Prophets in a Triennial Cycle,”* JQR 5 (1893) 420-468; JQR

6 (1894) 1-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. E. G. King, *“The Influence of the Triennial Cycle upon the Psalter,”* JTS 5 (1904) 203-213. See also I. Abrahams, *“E. G. King on ‘The Influence of the Triennial Cycle upon the Psalter,”* JQR 16 (1904) 420-423. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Positive Commandment # 17 in: Charles B. Chavel, *The Commandments*, Soncino Press: London, 1967, Vol. I, p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A. Cohen, D. Oratz, & Shalom Shahar, *The Psalms: Soncino Books of the Bible,* Soncino Press Ltd., New York, 1992, p. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. William G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1959, vol. I, p.41. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Sabbath, by Abraham Joshua Heschel, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. n.8. In I.2 it states: “As Moses gave five books of laws to Israel, so David gave five books of Psalms to Israel …” (p. 5) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. E. G. King, “The Influence of the Triennial Cycle upon the Psalter,” JTS 5 (1904) 203–213. See also I. Abrahams, “E. G. King on ‘The Influence of the Triennial Cycle upon the Psalter,’” JQR 16 (1904) 420–423. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. William G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1959, vol. I, p.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=574&letter=P&search=psalms> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <http://scheinerman.net/judaism/holybooks/psalms.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)