

‘I WILL INCLINE MY EAR TO A PROVERB;
I WILL SOLVE MY RIDDLE TO THE MUSIC
OF THE HARP’ (PSALM 49.4):
THE WISDOM TRADITION AND THE PSALMS

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1. *Introduction*

Stuart Weeks concludes his paper on ‘Wisdom Psalms’ in an earlier Oxford Seminar proceedings volume by observing that, in a vibrant and complicated literary culture, to speak of ‘wisdom’ and ‘psalms’ is to ‘mark the point at which the interests of the two types of writing coincide’.¹ Although this raises questions about the extent to which ‘wisdom’ and ‘psalms’ both equally represent a ‘literary culture’, in that each seems to have a lengthy oral tradition of teaching and singing before and alongside anything literary, it summarizes succinctly that the ‘coincidence’ of wisdom and the psalms lies in their mutual interests. Most scholars have posed the question about this relationship as follows: ‘What does the wisdom tradition tell us about the psalms?’ However, in the present study, I wish to formulate the question the other way round: ‘What do *the psalms* tell us about the *wisdom tradition*?’

I shall start by summarizing the various answers scholars have given to the former question and will note that there are three basic responses to it: first, that there are no wisdom psalms; secondly, that the entire Psalter has, in its final stages, been shaped as a wisdom book; and, thirdly, the view which argues that there are *some* wisdom psalms (or, at least, a ‘wisdom tradition’ expressed in some psalms). Having set the debate in context, I shall then focus on my own question, asking what the different psalms show us about the wisdom tradition. I shall present this under three different headings: *wisdom as a particular mode of writing* (here I consider what we might learn from the psalms about wisdom as a

1. Weeks 2005: 305.

type of literature); *wisdom as a particular mode of thinking* (whether the psalms tell us anything about wisdom as a distinctive intellectual tradition); and *wisdom as a particular mode of living* (here I ask if there is any evidence in the psalms to suggest that wisdom has been preserved and transmitted in particular specialist circles). This threefold assessment will bring to light two contentious ‘wisdom issues’—the more obvious being that of wisdom expressed as cultic practice, and related to this, that of the relationship between what might be termed anthropocentric and theocentric wisdom.

2. *What Does the Wisdom Tradition Tell Us about the Psalms?* *An Overview of Scholarship*

It has become somewhat of a cliché to state that behind most of the modern debates about the wisdom influences on psalmody we can still observe the different legacies of Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel. Yet this is still undoubtedly the case. Gunkel, for example, understood that most of the more personal laments and thanksgivings were late non-cultic copies of non-extant early, cultic psalms, and that these exhibit a personal a-cultic piety.² Thus he had no problem assuming that wisdom, less related to cultic action and concerned more with the individual than the community, could be found in quite large measure within these psalms. Even though his classification was, somewhat unusually, made more on the basis of *content* rather than on his more rigorous form-critical enquiry, Gunkel had no difficulty in proposing eight wisdom psalms (1; 37; 49; 73; 112; 128; and, to a lesser degree, 127 and 133) and wisdom influence in over twice as many others.³

Initially Mowinckel had a much more cautious view about the number of wisdom psalms.⁴ He viewed most of the psalms not as later copies of lost psalmody, but, rather, as actual pre-exilic cultic psalms, concerned with the community and its myth and rituals expressed in worship. Hence the wisdom tradition did not fit into this category, and so originally Mowinckel proposed that there were only two such psalms and that

2. See Gunkel (1967: 26-29) on the way that personal piety developed out of cultic religion in the restoration period, creating ‘geistliche Gedichte’.

3. For Gunkel’s account of wisdom poetry, see Gunkel and Begrich (1998: 293-305; cf. the German original of 1933: 385-97).

4. See Mowinckel (1982: II, 86), arguing against Gunkel that cult-free piety and ‘conventicles of prayer’ are a modern and artificial construction. See also Mowinckel (1955: 203): ‘The problem in psalm exegesis is not the cultic psalms, but the non-cultic ones’.

these were late post-exilic wisdom compositions.⁵ Later he developed the theory that, whereas the creation of the smaller collections was the work of the Temple singers, the final editing process of the Psalter was carried out by wisdom scribes—what he called ‘private psalmographers’, who, Mowinckel maintained, had a close relationship with the Temple singers.⁶ They created ‘a book of instruction’ which was based upon the inspired songs of the past (apparently 140 out of the 150 psalms were cultic psalms expressly composed for that purpose) and they also brought into this ancient collection the non-cultic wisdom psalms (1; 34; 37; 49; 78; 105; 106; 111; 112; and 127).⁷

Psalms commentators have been influenced by these two views in different ways. For example, scholars who, like Mowinckel, understood that first and second Temple liturgy was of fundamental importance in the formation of psalmody, found ‘wisdom psalms’ to be a problem. One example is Aage Bentzen, who argued there were only three such psalms (1; 112 and 127).⁸ And Ivan Engnell—not surprisingly, given his views of the importance of cultic psalmody—proposed that there were none at all.⁹

By contrast, scholars who adopt Mowinckel’s view about the editing of the Psalter have frequently concluded that the editors of the psalms produced the Psalter as a private book for reflective prayer, for which Psalm 1, apparently a Torah/Wisdom Psalm par excellence, provided an ideal prologue.¹⁰ Usually this theory is expanded to include many other

5. These were originally Psalms 1 and 112. See, e.g., Mowinckel (1924: 128-92): ‘Sonst wusste ich ausser Ps 1 und vielleicht Ps 112 keinen Psalm, der nicht für kultische Zwecke, d.h. zum Vortragen im Tempel, gedicht worden ware, wenigstens sein könnte’.

6. See Mowinckel 1955: 211. The identification of these with the singers (a point I shall return to at the end of this study) is found on p. 218: ‘...several of these learned men may have been levites, belonging to the families of singers’ last stage of redaction—on the Temple staff’.

7. See Mowinckel 1955: 207, 209. See also Mowinckel 1982: II, 87, 94, 110-14, 204-205, for the suggestion that in the first instance the singers (not non-cultic scribes) incorporated the wisdom psalms into the Psalter. For example: ‘...the learned traditionalists wanted to collect and keep whatever they could find of sacred inspired poetry from the time of the fathers... Being ancient, sacred poetry ought to have its place in the temple service and serve as a pattern for the prayers of the pious...’ (204).

8. See Bentzen 1958: I, 161.

9. See Engnell 1969: 99.

10. One of the earliest examples of this is Claus Westermann (1965: 253 [German original, 1962: 280-81]), who sees that the first edition of the Psalter began with Ps. 1 and ended with Ps. 119; thus at this stage it no longer had a cultic function, but rather a new focus devoted to the law and wisdom teaching.

‘wisdom psalms’ and advocates that wisdom—or at least, some instructional tradition—is one of the more prominent influences in the editorial process of the entire Psalter. A key question is whether this occurred within a Temple context, as Mowinckel argues, or outside it.

Joseph Reindl, for example, clearly sees the Jerusalem Temple as the context for editorial activity.¹¹ He argues, *inter alia*, that ‘Temple scribes’ rearranged smaller collections to give them a more prominent wisdom orientation and cites Psalms 90–92 and 146–150 as illustrations of this. Furthermore, these scribes added wisdom themes to other psalms; because these read very differently from the wisdom poetry of Ben Sira, they suggest for Reindl an earlier Temple context.¹²

Gerard Wilson’s seminal work on the editing of the Hebrew Psalter focussed mainly on the eschatological concerns of the editors, but his paper of 1993, partly influenced by Qumran scholars who had begun to discern a good deal of wisdom material in the Dead Sea Scrolls, argued for more wisdom influences in the editing process.¹³ This is especially the case, Wilson proposed, in Book V, which he considered to be used as a ‘manual of instruction’. For example, Wilson considered Pss. 107.42–43 and 145.19–20 as editorial additions to mark out wisdom concerns at the beginning and ending of Book V. He also noted that Book IV, starting with Psalm 90, another wisdom psalm, suggested some sapiential editing.¹⁴

Erich Zenger was another prolific psalms commentator who believed that the Temple setting played an important initial part in an editorial process, only later to be supplemented by different didactic concerns outside a Temple setting. Writing frequently about how the collections of the psalms in Book I (3–14; 25–34; 35–41) were designed to encourage

11. See Reindl (1981: 331), discussing the ‘Weisheitliche Bearbeitung von Psalmen’: ‘Der Traditionsort sowohl der Psalmen, wie auch ihrer Sammlungen und damit auch der Ort, an dem der Psalter seine endgültige Gestalt gefunden hat, ist im Jerusalemer Temple zu suchen’.

12. See Reindl (1981: 340): ‘Ein solcher Umgang mit den Psalmen, wie er sich hier abzeichnet, lässt nicht vermuten, dass der Redaktor des Psalters im Kreis der Tempelsänger beheimatet ist’. Reindl cites Mowinckel’s article on wisdom on the psalms in this respect, also noting a close relationship between Temple scribes and Temple singers—a point I shall return to at the end of this study.

13. See, e.g., Harrington (1996: 23–32) on the Psalms Scroll from Cave 11. See also the more cautious paper by Collins (1997).

14. See Wilson 1993: 73–74 and 79–81 (‘wisdom has had the last w  [81]). Wilson therefore did not see the Psalter as a hymn book for the **Second Temple** (72) but in its final stage of compilation a book of private meditation and instruction (81–82).

the piety of the poor ('the little people', disenfranchised physically and spiritually dependent on God alone), Zenger concluded that the entire Psalter had been brought together for the purpose of teaching 'the poor'.¹⁵ Noting that a theology of the Temple and God's protection of Zion was prominent in many of the smaller collections, Zenger argued that the later editors spiritualized these earlier literal references so that 'Zion' implied not the place but the people, thus making this theology relevant to diaspora communities who lived far from Jerusalem. Eventually the Psalter as a whole became a book of instruction to encourage the piety of the poor.¹⁶

Beat Weber has developed Zenger's theory in relation to just the first three psalms, which he sees as a didactic prologue full of 'Weisheits-theologie' announcing the various themes (they are signposts, or 'Wegmarkierungen') throughout the entire Psalter. Like Mowinckel and Reindl, Weber attributes this instructional process to the Levitical singers who had been influenced by the 'wisdom school' (and not only in these three psalms, but throughout the Psalter, especially in Ps. 73 at the heart of it and Pss. 146–150 at the end of it).¹⁷ Each psalm, Weber proposes, serves a didactic purpose and wisdom is in fact the bridge which brings the different themes together.

Norman Whybray also understood the wisdom tradition to be prominent in the editing process of the Psalter. This, he argues, is evident in three ways: in editorial additions made to particular psalms, in the inclusion of psalms which echo the intellectual tradition associated with so-called wisdom books, and in the provision of new psalms with a specific didactic emphasis.¹⁸ As Crenshaw notes, his list of actual

15. See Zenger (1994: 44): 'That the psalter was not intended as a hymnal either of the second temple or of the synagogues... was already recognised by H. Gunkel... in saying "this collection has been assembled with the intention of creating a devotional and house book [*sic*] for pious lay people" [*Einleitung*, p. 452]. For certain groups: the so-called "little people" and the "pious", the *anawim* and the *hasidim*, the book of psalms was biblical reading par excellence.'

16. This is particularly clear in Zenger's account of Pss. 25–34: see Zenger (1994: 45–54) on the way the editors 'democratized' this collection of psalms. See also Hossfeld and Zenger (1992), which is a similar account of the way that the 'Armenfrömmigkeit' of the editors reinterpreted what once applied to the nation to the Hellenistic community of faith (49–50).

17. See Weber (2012: 290): 'Die Besonderheit der für die Gestalt des Psalters massgebenden und möglicherweise durch Sänger-Levitiden mitgetragenen Weisheitsschule liegt in der grossen Integrationsleistung'.

18. See Whybray 1996: 83–87 and 118–20.

wisdom psalms covers at least one sixth of the Psalter (8; 14/53; 25; 34; 39; 49; 73; 90; 112; 127; 131, with additions in Pss. 18; 27; 32; 86; 92; 94; 105; 107; 111; 144; 146 and Pss. 1 and 119).¹⁹

Kenneth Kuntz has written several papers on this issue. Following Zenger's observations about Book I, he notes four clear wisdom psalms here (1; 32; 34; 37) and finds wisdom motifs in five others (25; 31; 39; 40 and 41).²⁰ On account of the *אשרי* formula in Ps. 1.1 and, despite the textual difficulties, in 41.2, Kuntz concludes that Book I has intentionally been brought together to open up the Psalter as a wisdom book. Similarly in Book V, Kuntz argues along with Wilson that five other wisdom psalms have been placed in strategic places (112; 119; 127; 128; 133) and so concludes this is another wisdom collection.²¹ This is less evident in Book II, Kuntz admits, with only Psalm 49 as a clear wisdom psalm, and similarly less so in Book III, although the wisdom psalm 73 opens the collection; Book IV has more sapiential overtones, with Psalms 90, 92 and 94 all having some wisdom elements.²² Kuntz supposes, following Zenger, that this thorough 'wisdom editing' reveals that the Psalter is no longer a 'Hymn Book of the Second Temple', but, rather, a 'Prayer Book of the Synagogue'.²³

Other scholars are more judicious about naming wisdom and wisdom-oriented psalms, preferring to use terms like 'instruction' and 'teaching' in identifying the final purpose of the Psalter. For example, J. Clinton McCann has written on several occasions that the Psalter was edited as a 'book of instruction' rather than as a liturgical collection.²⁴ Other writers who are less preoccupied with wisdom yet argue that the Psalter is a book of teaching include Patrick Miller and, more recently, Gordon Wenham.²⁵

19. See Crenshaw (2000a: 14): 'Astonishingly, Whybray manages to come up with almost twice as many wisdom psalms as any other scholar...'

20. See Kuntz 2000: 150-56.

21. See Kuntz 2000: 158-60.

22. See Kuntz 2000: 156-58.

23. See Kuntz 2000: 144.

24. See McCann 1992: 128: '...While the Psalms should be prayed and sung, they should also be studied and taught and preached'.

25. See Miller (1994: 141), which notes that Deuteronomy's theology of kingship pervades the Psalter and concludes that the instructional purpose of the Psalter may well reflect a Deuteronomistic influence. See also Wenham (2012), which is both a canonical and reception-historical account of the way in which the Psalter might shape our moral insights.

This then, illustrates that two extreme views are possible: either there are few or no wisdom psalms because most individual psalms have been composed for first and second Temple liturgy, or that the Psalter has been edited as a book of instruction with thoroughgoing wisdom concerns: whether this was within or outside the Temple cult is not always clear. There are, of course, a number of scholars who hold a *via media*.

Roland Murphy, for example, writing in 1963, proposes there are seven wisdom psalms (1; 32; 34; 37; 49; 112 and 128) discernible on account of their common content, and a further seven which have been edited to reflect some wisdom concerns (25; 31; 39; 40; 62; 92 and 94).²⁶ Little is made of their part in the shaping of the Psalter as a whole, although Murphy does see the Psalter as becoming increasingly didactic in its concerns.

Leo Perdue, writing in 1977, is also less preoccupied with the shaping of the Psalter overall, but discerns some eleven wisdom psalms consisting of seven Proverb Psalms (1; 19B; 34; 37; 73; 112 and 127), two אִשְׁרֵי Psalms (32 and 119) and two Riddle Psalms (19A and 49). The title of his book, *Wisdom and Cult*, indicates the importance of understanding these so-called wisdom psalms in relation to the cult: some, he argues, were written for cultic use (Pss. 19A, 19B and 129); others were not intended for such use but nevertheless were connected with cultic practices (32; 34; 73); while a number might be termed non-cultic psalms (1; 37; 49; 112; 127).²⁷

Samuel Terrien, writing in 1993, offers brief comments on how the editors put a wisdom stamp on the final text of the Psalter, but is more concerned about the wisdom influence in individual psalms. Because of his interests in Job, Terrien uses this book as a model for measuring whether a psalm can be classified as ‘wisdom’ or not. So Psalms 49, 73 and 139 are wisdom psalms because they all deal with similar issues to those found in Job; and Psalm 104, with its sketch of God’s creative acts in the ordering of the cosmos, is also important here.²⁸ In addition, some of the so-called Torah Psalms offer sapiential themes.²⁹

Also focussing on the contents of the psalms, Stuart Weeks, writing in the 2005 publication of the proceedings from this Old Testament Seminar, suggests that wisdom psalms might comprise two basic categories: psalms affirming rewards for righteous behaviour (such as 1;

26. See Murphy 1963: 161-64 and 165-67.

27. See Perdue (1977: 286-91); see also Dell (2003: 448-51), which offers a useful critique of Perdue’s views on wisdom psalms and the cult.

28. See Terrien 1993: 64-71.

29. Terrien 1993: 57-63.

19B; 25; 32; 34; 37; 52; 112; 125 and 128) and those addressing problems with such behaviour (10; 14; 49; 73; 90 and 94).³⁰ This therefore includes other psalms not discussed by scholars such as Murphy, Perdue and Terrien.

Frustrated by the way that scholars have used such diverse criteria to propose such different assessments, James Crenshaw asks whether the term ‘wisdom psalm’ should be used at all.³¹ In his view the sages normally associated with the so-called wisdom books have no part to play in the psalms; the more general term ‘didactic psalm’ (which would actually cover a far greater number of psalms) would be better than the misleading expression ‘wisdom psalm’. Similarly Gerard Sheppard, criticizing the tendency to ‘sapientialize’ the entire Old Testament, observes that the Psalter is concerned not with one theme but many—liturgy, prophecy, and law, as well as wisdom—and one should use the term ‘wisdom’ with some caution.³² So too Mark Sneed, writing in 2011, argues that the term ‘wisdom psalm’ is a modern invention. The idea that wisdom is about a different ‘world view’ (its lack of concern, for example, with salvation history) is, according to Sneed, too negative and does not allow for sufficient fluidity between the prophets, priests and scribes. Taking Jer. 18.18 as a key text (‘for instruction shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet...’), Sneed interprets this not as evidence for the independence of each social group—the priests, the wise, the prophets—but for their overlap in literary, theological and social ways.³³ Using Karel van der Toorn’s work on scribal culture and the making of the Hebrew Bible, Sneed affirms that all the biblical books, to different degrees, have emerged as the work of the sages and scribes, and the Psalter is not

30. See Weeks 2005: 304. For an example of a less disciplined all-inclusive assessment of wisdom psalms, see Oeming 2008. For an example of a more useful recent assessment of which psalms might be termed ‘wisdom’, see Cheung (2012), who, by using three criteria of wisdom-related *content*, intellectual *tone*, and didactic *intention*, includes Pss. 37; 49; 73; 128 and also 32; 39 and 19 in his survey of ‘graded membership’ (2012: 52-53).

31. See Crenshaw (2001: 87-95), arguing that only Pss. 37, 49 and 73 have affinities with issues in Job, and only Ps. 39 on the theme of the brevity of life in Ecclesiastes, concluding ‘My own research in the Psalter leads me to question the very category of wisdom psalm’ (2001: 94). See also Crenshaw (2003: 157): ‘What I have objected to is the claim that some psalms deserve the title “wisdom psalms”’.

32. See Sheppard (1980: 104): ‘Wisdom interpretation is only one of several means that open the Scripture up to its use by later generations and creates a place for the Psalter among larger canonical collections’.

33. See Sneed 2011: 57-59.

exceptional in this respect.³⁴ Hence the difference between wisdom in the Psalter and wisdom in Proverbs is one of degree rather than kind, and this might explain the difficulty we have in either underestimating or overestimating wisdom psalms and wisdom traditions in the Psalms.

Clearly not all these views can be right, and the sheer divergence probably tells us as much about the nature of wisdom as about the nature of psalmody. In order to explore this further, we do however need to have some working consensus on which psalms might offer evidence of this nebulous but pervasive tradition which is called wisdom. In her 2004 paper on the wisdom psalms and the cult, Katharine Dell offers two lists: one is of a small number of psalms which most scholars agree suggest wisdom traditions, and the other is a broader selection.³⁵ The smaller number consists of Psalms 1; 34; 37; 39; 49 and 73, and the broader selection consists of Psalms 1; 14; 19; 25; 32; 33; 34; 36; 37; 39; 49; 51; 53; 62; 73; 78; 90; 92; 94; 104; 105; 106; 111; 112; 119; 127 and 128. These lists provide us with an important working model, and, with some variations, I shall use the broader selection to consider just what we might learn about wisdom from a study of the psalms.³⁶

3. *What Do the Psalms Tell Us about the Wisdom Tradition?*

a. *Wisdom as a Particular Mode of Writing*

Three different criteria have generally been used to identify wisdom influence from a literary point of view: these are vocabulary, style and form.

(1) *Vocabulary.* Starting with vocabulary, Avi Hurvitz's assessment provides a minimalist position. Using Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes as his points of comparison, Hurvitz argues that the expression סור מרע ('turn from evil') and the word הון ('wealth') are wisdom terms confined to these books and found in just four psalms (סור מרע is found in 34.15 and 37.27; הון is in 112.3 and 119.14).³⁷ Hurvitz's careful linguistic study

34. See Sneed 2011: 64, citing van der Toorn 2007: 75-108 and 143-72.

35. See Dell 2004: 452. For a detailed appendix of some sixty scholarly views of the number of wisdom psalms—almost all entirely different—see Cheung 2012: 200-201.

36. My own list would omit Pss. 33, 36 and 51, insofar as they were not referred to in my own survey of scholars above; additional psalms might include 8; 10; 27; 31; 125; 131; 133; 144 and 146 although these were usually so identified by only one scholar each. This simply shows the difficulty of making any confident assessment: in the main I shall stay with Katharine Dell's list.

37. See Hurvitz 1988: 46-47 and 48-49.

is commendable, although few scholars have been as cautious as this. Overall the maximalist view seems to prevail. This view is best represented by Robert Scott, who proposes 77 words which constitute wisdom vocabulary in the psalms, a list which Kuntz takes down to 64.³⁸ Kuntz concludes that 24 psalms fail to employ any of these words, while 21 others use just one word; however, there are as many as 13 in Psalm 32, 15 in Psalm 94, and 20 in Psalm 119. The problem here is that some psalms infrequently associated with wisdom (e.g. Pss. 10 and 107) have ten examples, and five more frequently rated wisdom psalms either have none or only one or two (Pss. 34 and 112; 127; 128; 133). Even Kuntz admits that ‘word tabulation’ can be a ‘fruitless effort’.³⁹

So, following Hurvitz, a better way might be to isolate particular expressions from this list. So let us take, first, the macarism **אשרי** (an intensive plural construct of **אשר** meaning literally, ‘the great happinesses of...’). In various formats this occurs 25 times in the Psalms—sometimes in the more frequently acknowledged wisdom psalms (1.1; 34.9; 112.1; 127.5 and 128.1) and twice in Ps. 32.1-2. It occurs in three other psalms with some wisdom influence (Pss. 94.12 and 119.1-2). However, **אשרי** does not feature at all in other so-called wisdom psalms such as Psalms 37, 49 and 133; and conversely, it is found in several other psalms which have few if any obvious wisdom associations, such as 2.12; 17.5; 40.3-5; 41.2; 65.5; 84.5-6 and 13; 89.16, and in four other psalms whose relationship with wisdom is debatable (33.12; 106.3; 144.15 and 146.5). So is **אשרי** really a wisdom term? It does not appear as much as one might expect in Proverbs (only in 3.13; 8.34; 20.7 and 28.14) and comes only once in Job (5.17). Conversely, outside these wisdom books it occurs several times, for example in 1 Kgs 10.8 and the corresponding passage 2 Chron. 9.7, and also in Isa. 30.18 and 56.2 as well as in Dan. 12.12. So **אשרי** is hardly a clear and distinctive wisdom formula: it is used both inside and outside a wisdom context, and is found in some of the so-called wisdom psalms but also in psalms without this nomenclature. It hardly serves as a criterion for a wisdom psalm and suggests that Sneed’s observations on the more integrated nature of wisdom with other traditions is probably right.

It may be that the ‘better... than...’ formula (**טוב... מן...**) might serve as a more useful criterion. Although its use in Job is minimal (it is only really obvious in Job 35.3), it occurs 22 times in Proverbs and 18 times in Ecclesiastes; hence it is a more common wisdom formula than **אשרי**.⁴⁰

38. See Scott 1971: 121, adapted by Kuntz 1974: 200-202.

39. See Kuntz 1974: 203.

40. See Kuntz 1974: 191-92.

However, it only occurs six times in the Psalms, so here our evidence is limited. Only two of these examples (Pss. 37 and 119) are in obvious commonly-termed wisdom psalms. Psalm 37.16 reads ‘Better (טוב) is a little that the righteous person has than the abundance (מהמון) of many wicked’: as an aphorism, this is thus an obvious wisdom saying. Psalm 119.72 however is quite different because it is addressed to God rather than to an attendant congregation, reading ‘The law of your mouth is better (טוב) to me than thousands (מאלפי) of gold and silver pieces’. The other four examples (63.3 [MT v. 4]; 84.10 [MT v. 11]; and 118.8-9 [twice]) are not usually classified as wisdom psalms, although the two instances in Psalm 118 actually do suggest proverbial sayings. Furthermore, the phrase occurs in several forms outside the normative wisdom literature, of which some pertinent examples are found in 1 Sam. 15.22; 2 Sam. 17.14; Song 1.2; 4.10; Amos 6.2 and Jon. 4.3, 8. It is again difficult to use a ‘better... than’ saying as a criterion for advocating wisdom influence in a psalm because its incidence both within and outside the Psalter shows that although it occurs in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes more than anywhere else, it is not distinctive wisdom vocabulary.

Another example might be the admonitory address to ‘my son’ or ‘sons’. The singular form occurs some 23 times in Proverbs as ‘my son’ (בני), and is found there in several different collections;⁴¹ so again, initially one might propose this as a useful specific criterion for identifying wisdom in the psalms. However, although it is found ten times in the singular in psalmody, not one is in the vocative form of address found in Proverbs. There is an example of some vocative use in Ps. 34.11 (MT v. 12), at the head of a number of sapiential admonitions, but here it is found, unusually, in the plural. The NRSV reads: ‘Come, O children (לכו-בנים), listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD’.⁴² The fact that this only occurs in an admonitory form in Proverbs hardly makes this a universal wisdom formula; rather, it forms part of the distinctive father/son and teacher/pupil admonitions mainly used in just that book. So whereas the other two examples offer too many instances outside Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, this criterion suffers from having too few and is not really apparent in the psalms at all.

Another possible wisdom expression might be the numerical saying. Here the evidence might seem to be more secure because it is found not

41. Prov. 1.8, 10, 15; 2.1; 3.1, 11, 21; 4.10, 20; 5.1, 20; 6.1, 3, 20; 7.1; 19.27; 23.15, 19, 26; 24.13, 21; 27.11; and possibly 31.2.

42. See Kuntz (1974: 194-96), who notes the vocative calls to the people in Pss. 49.1 (MT v. 2) (‘Hear this, all you peoples’) and 78.1 (‘Give ear, my people, to my teaching...’).

only in Proverbs but in Job and Ecclesiastes as well. For example, the ‘three...four’ formula is found in Prov. 30.15, 18, 21, and 29; the ‘once...twice’ saying is in Job 33.14 and 40.5 (also Job 33.29, ‘twice, thrice’); other variations include the ‘six...seven’ sayings in Prov. 6.16 and Job 5.19, and the ‘seven...eight’ saying in Eccl. 11.2. However, the term also occurs outside the wisdom literature, most notably in Amos 1.3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2.1, 4, 6 and it may well be argued that this is not only a wisdom motif but also part of a formula used in curses on other nations.⁴³ The only obvious occurrence in the psalms is in Ps. 62.11 (MT v. 12): ‘Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God’; but this psalm is not usually termed as a wisdom psalm. It might be argued that another numerical saying is used in Ps. 27.4 (‘One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after...’), but this focuses only on one item, and again, the psalm is not a commonly attributed wisdom psalm. So yet again we see how difficult it is to delineate a particular wisdom term and then apply it to psalmody.⁴⁴

Finally, what of the word חכמה which is found five times in the psalms (and twice in the adjectival form of חכם)? The most obvious example is Ps. 49.3 (MT v. 4) (‘My mouth shall speak wisdom’: חכמות, i.e. in the plural form), and the use of other wisdom vocabulary in the following verse (משל for ‘proverb’, חידתי for ‘riddle’) confirms the more particular wisdom interests here. חכמה also occurs in Pss. 37.30 and 111.10, again two frequently cited wisdom psalms. But the word also occurs in Pss. 51.6 (MT v. 8) and 107.27 (the latter in a construct form with a third person masculine suffix) and these are not commonly accepted wisdom psalms. The adjective is found only in Pss. 107.43 and 49.10 (MT v. 11) (the latter again in the plural form as ‘wise ones’), and in each case the noun has been used earlier in the psalm. Thus the evidence for this term in psalmody is hardly overwhelming; and yet the noun, adjective and verb occur frequently elsewhere, not only in Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, but also in Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel. So although this term might confirm what we already know about the wisdom interests in some psalms, outside these psalms the term has just too broad a remit to suggest a specifically technical wisdom term which was used in this way by different psalmists.

43. See, e.g., *KTU* 1.17.11. 26-46, discussed in Soggin 1995: 121; Crenshaw 1967: 49; also Roth 1965. The use of the ‘once/twice’ and ‘twice/thrice’ saying occurs several times in Deuteronomy, 2 Kings and Jeremiah; it is also found in Isa. 17.6 and Hos. 6.2 where neither context suggests wisdom influence.

44. See Kuntz 1974: 192-93.

Hence the diffuse and complex nature of wisdom vocabulary outside the psalms reveals the difficulty of using this as a way of establishing it inside the psalms.

(2) *Style*. What, then, of wisdom style? In many ways this is even more difficult to isolate than wisdom vocabulary.

One example is *rhetorical questions*, which occur frequently in, for example, Proverbs and Job as a device appealing to the audience's empirical experience.⁴⁵ However, again this is not only found in wisdom literature, as it is a device frequently employed by the prophets, for example in Amos (3.3-8; 5.25; 6.2, 12 and 9.7), in Jeremiah (2.14), in second Isaiah (49.15; 50.1-2) and even in Haggai (1.4) and Zechariah (1.5). Kuntz points out that the ה...א interrogative form, used by Amos, is found in Ps. 94.9b.⁴⁶ Psalm 94.9b reads 'He who formed the eye, does he not see?' (אם יצר עין הלא יביט) and fits with other wisdom traditions used in Ps. 94.9-11. A different type of rhetorical question is in Ps. 25.12 ('Who are they that fear the LORD?', מי־זה האיש ירא יהוה) and again this is part of a sapiential section (vv. 8-14). Other examples in two other often-cited wisdom psalms are Ps. 34.12 (MT v. 13) ('Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good?') and Ps. 49.5 (MT v. 6) ('Why should I fear in times of trouble?'). Here, however, למה is a question addressed to God rather than to the congregation, and suggests this has more to do with the lament form than anything to do with wisdom *per se*.⁴⁷ So it is clear that the use of rhetorical questions is not uniform; nor are they an exclusive wisdom device, whether in the psalms or outside them.

A second example of wisdom style in the psalms is the use of *similes*, especially taken from the natural order and animal kingdom.⁴⁸ This pedagogical technique, often with the use of כִּי, is common not only in the wisdom books but is an instructional device often used by the prophets as in, for example, Isa. 1.8 ('So the daughter of Zion is left as a booth in a vineyard, as a hut in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged

45. For example, in Job 6.5, 11, 22; 7.12; 9.12; 12.9; 15.7-9 (used by Job); 4.7; 15.2, 7-9, 11-14 (Eliphaz); 8.3, 11; 18.4 (Bildad); and 11.2, 17, 10 (Zophar); and 34.13, 17, 31-33; 34.19.22 (Elihu). They also occur in the speeches by God (e.g. 38.4, 5 and 24). Examples in Ecclesiastes include 2.2; 3.9; 4.11; 5.5; 6.8; 7.13 and 10.14. Proverbs has fewer examples, though see 20.9.

46. Kuntz 1974: 197-98.

47. למה is frequently found in laments such as Pss. 10.1; 22.1 (MT v. 2); 44.23 (MT v. 24); 52.1 (MT v. 3); 74.1, 11; 79.10 and 88.14 (MT v. 15) where the question posed hardly expects a self-evident answer as expected in a rhetorical question.

48. See Kuntz 1974: 198-200; also Forti 2008.

city') and Jer. 23.29 ('Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?') as well as in the poetic and narrative material in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic literature.⁴⁹ And because of their poetic medium and frequent didactic intentions, the psalmists exploited this device as well. The simile of the fruitful tree in Ps. 1.3 thus need not necessarily suggest wisdom influence, for it is also found in Jer. 17.8; and the simile of the grass in Ps. 37.2 ('for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb') similarly need not be derived from wisdom, for the simile is also found in prophetic texts such as Isa. 40.6 ('All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field'). And in Ps. 128.3 the simile of the fruitful vine and olive shoots ('Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table') is a simile used in the prophets, for example in Hos. 14.6-7 (MT vv. 7-8) ('his beauty shall be like the olive tree...they shall blossom like the vine...'). These three examples are from so-called wisdom psalms; but many other similes occur in psalms not usually associated with wisdom, such as in 17.12; 18.33 (MT v. 34); 21.9 (MT v. 10); 42.1 (MT v. 2); and 147.16.⁵⁰ This is just another example of the rich stock of pedagogical imagery used throughout the biblical literature, including but also beyond wisdom: the psalms offer just one example of the use of such imagery.

What, thirdly, of the use of *an aphorism*? Clearly the wisdom literature abounds with this mode of teaching, not least in Proverbs. Not surprisingly we find some evidence of this in the psalms, where the poetic parallelism of Hebrew also lends itself to such a binary expression. An obvious example is Ps. 127.1 ('Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labour in vain. Unless the LORD guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain...'), but one might also cite 127.2, 3-5 and 128.1-2, 3-4, texts also rich in the use of similes (Pss. 127.4 and 128.3). There are several other examples of the use of aphorisms in the Psalms of Ascents, both in so-called wisdom psalms (such as Ps. 133.1) and in others not usually associated with wisdom at all (such as Pss. 121.3-4 and 126.1). Outside this collection, Psalm 34 (another possible 'wisdom psalm') offers several examples, of which vv. 10 (MT v. 11) and 21 (MT v. 22) are the most striking; but then other non-wisdom psalms

49. Poetic examples include Deut. 32.2; 2 Sam. 22.34 and 43 (noting the parallels with Ps. 18); and 2 Sam. 23.4, 6. Narrative examples include 1 Sam. 13.5; 17.7 (also in 21.19); 26.20; 2 Sam. 17.8, 10, 11; 1 Kgs 20.27; 22.17, and 2 Kgs 19.26.

50. See Kuntz 1974: 199.

also utilize them, such as Ps. 86.5. So this is not a style reserved only for psalms purportedly related to the wisdom tradition; this is not surprising, as proverbial sayings occur frequently outside the wisdom literature, most commonly in the prophets: sometimes these are by way of citations (e.g. Jer. 31.29 and Ezek. 18.2), but other examples include Ezek. 16.44 and Isa. 65.8.

Fourthly, *admonitions* are a common feature of ‘wisdom style’, but then they are also common in Deuteronomic, prophetic and priestly literature as well. And because many psalms are intended to instruct the congregation rather than pray to God—including the psalms of thanksgiving, psalms about the history of the people, psalms about meditating on the Torah—the use of admonitions cannot be regarded as exclusively the result of wisdom influence. Kuntz argues that a special trait in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes is the way that observations are uttered in the indicative then lead on to admonitions in the imperative, thus drawing out implications for morality rather than imposing commands on the hearers.⁵¹ Often this is expanded by a motive clause introduced by כִּי—a style which occurs in wisdom, but it also is found in the prophetic and Deuteronomic literature as well. However, it is indeed evident in some of the so-called wisdom psalms (e.g. in Pss. 34.9 [MT v. 10]; 37.1-2, 8-9, 27-28, 37 and 49.16-17 [MT vv. 17-18], all using an imperative form and the כִּי participle). It is not evident in most of the other so-called wisdom psalms such as 1, 112, 127, 128 and 133 (although Pss. 127.5 and 128.1-2 do have a similar format, albeit in the context of an אֲשֶׁר־י saying). But the use of admonition is obviously very common, and occurs in many other psalms which have no associations with wisdom.⁵² So yet again we must conclude that it is impossible to establish a specific number of ‘wisdom psalms’ from the use of this specific stylistic device.

A fifth example of a literary style which might indicate some wisdom influence is the use of *acrostics*. This is again a complicated issue, not least because the only noteworthy acrostic form in wisdom literature outside the Psalter is in Prov. 31.10-31, the other examples being in Lamentations 1 and to some degree in Lamentations 2–5 and also in Nahum 1, so this is not an exclusive wisdom device. Indeed, several of the most frequently termed wisdom psalms have no acrostic form (32; 39; 73; 49; 127 and 128 are obvious examples). Conversely, some

51. Kuntz 1974: 193. Prov. 9.9; 20.18; 22.24-25 and 25.21-22 are good examples; Eccl. 5.1 is another.

52. For example, Pss. 33.3-4, 8-9; 62.10 (MT v. 11); 69.32-33 (MT vv. 33-34); 81.3-4 (MT vv. 4-5); 95.6-7; 96.4-5; 107.8-9; 116.7.

non-wisdom psalms do have evidence of some acrostics, including Psalms 9–10, which has an incomplete acrostic form,⁵³ and Psalm 145, which uses 21 of the 22 Hebrew letters. The remaining so-called wisdom psalms do use the acrostic form but not in identical ways: for example, some would argue that Psalm 1 is an implicit acrostic because the first letter of the first word starts with an *ʾaleph* and the first letter of the last word starts with a *taw*.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Psalm 119 is *sui generis* because of its eightfold use of just one letter, interlaced with many wisdom words and devices, for each of the 22 stanzas.⁵⁵ Psalm 111 uses the full acrostic form in half verses, comprising eleven verses in all. Psalm 112 is rather like it, perhaps even a copy of it, also using the 22 letters in eleven verses. Psalm 25, which suggests some wisdom element in vv. 8-10 and 12-14, also is an incomplete acrostic, lacking a *waw* and *qoph*, duplicating the *resh* and adding another *pe* at the end. Psalm 37 is missing an *ʿayin*, but exhibits an almost complete acrostic form over alternate verses. Psalm 34 also lacks a *waw* and has supernumerary *pe* at the end but has a clear strophic form and structure within the acrostic structure, covering seven different maxims, so that throughout the psalm the content and form closely correspond with one another.⁵⁶ In conclusion, therefore, the acrostic form actually does not indicate particular wisdom usage, given that only Proverbs 31 has evidence of it, and the variation of this format suggests that there is no one consistent model, wisdom or otherwise, to which the psalmists felt compelled to conform.

(3) *Form*. An appeal to a particular form or genre as a mark of wisdom influence is equally contentious, because the relevant psalms have various forms, including thanksgivings, laments, hymns, and other hybrid genres. My own view is that, other than for the use of hymns and laments, the ancient composers and compilers were not concerned with the categories and sub-categories we so frequently use as the result of Hermann Gunkel's form-critical classification. The term 'wisdom psalm' is our construct, not the psalmists', and this explains why these so-called wisdom psalms do not conform to any particular convention, and why we cannot know anything about their particular setting.

53. There is no *daleth*, *ṣade* or *sin* and the *mem* and *nun* are reversed, as also the *ʿayin* and *pe*. See Holm-Nielson 1960: 50-53.

54. See the detailed analysis in Cole 2013: 46-49.

55. See Holm-Nielson 1960: 23-25.

56. Kuntz 1974: 219-20.

For example, Psalm 1 is seen by some as a wisdom psalm, but it is really a 'Torah Psalm'. It never actually uses the term 'wisdom' and, although its dualistic thinking about the righteous and wicked might suggest some wisdom concerns, these could also suggest prophetic and/or Deuteronomic influence as well. The linking of Torah with wisdom is a later phenomenon, found most clearly in Ben Sira, so this creates problems for those who would date Psalm 1 much earlier than this. By contrast, Psalm 19A is a hymn: the main reason for designating it as having wisdom influence is its interest in the ordering of the cosmos, although this creation theme occurs in other psalms (e.g. Pss. 8; 29 and 33 in Book I) which are not usually classified as wisdom psalms. Psalm 25 is a lament, as is 49: they are probably both later psalms, and in each case the suppliants have chosen to include so-called wisdom language and style to suit their particular concerns about justice and the rewards for righteous living. Psalm 32 is a thanksgiving psalm with clear didactic concerns, and the use of wisdom language and sapiential themes is a means of instructing an attendant congregation. Psalm 73 is another, very different, thanksgiving psalm whose didactic concerns also suggest the borrowing of some of the language of wisdom. Psalm 78 is a psalm reciting the history of the people: it hardly conforms to the usual themes of wisdom, and the only way it could possibly be seen as having any wisdom influence is its didactic nature, but this could be as much due to Deuteronomistic influence as to wisdom. Other psalms, such as 90 and 92, 111 and 112, 127 and 128, 133 and 139 could fit a number of classifications, and yet these have been termed 'wisdom psalms'. Throughout the Psalter the classification 'wisdom psalm' has undoubtedly been made according to content rather than form, and it is this which has caused so many different and often contradictory views among scholars.⁵⁷

The confusion about any specific 'wisdom genre' is compounded when we look at the use of hymns, laments and thanksgivings outside the Psalms. In Job, for instance, hymns and laments are now used for instructional purposes, with Job frequently adopting the lament form as a radical expression of despair and the friends often uttering hymns in words they often do not understand. Will Kynes' work on Job's use of the psalms is most pertinent here.⁵⁸ Without engaging explicitly with the

57. Murphy (1963) tries to bring clarity into this form-critical debate by proposing that the Thanksgiving Psalm is the form of psalm most open to being appropriated by wisdom within a liturgical context: 'The psalmists could incorporate wisdom elements freely, and it was the testimony in the Thanksgiving Psalms that offered the opportunity for teaching' (167).

58. See Kynes 2012.

debate about whether a psalm used can be classified as ‘wisdom’ or not, Kynes shows in a most engaging way how psalms of praise, such as 8 and 107, and psalms of supplication, such as 39 and 139, and psalms of instruction, such as 1 and 73, have been used, often in parody, sometimes for more positive reflection, in the book of Job.⁵⁹ According to Kynes the *forms* (and one might add, the possible settings) of the psalms are less important than the *ideas*.⁶⁰ Kynes makes a good case: and because the wisdom writers freely use the content of the psalms for instructional purposes, it suggests that they, like the psalmists, were less interested in aligning form with setting. Hence attempts to produce a specific category called ‘wisdom psalms’ may well contradict the intentions of the ancient authors.

To conclude, it seems that attempts to define any ‘wisdom psalm’ on the basis of a particular mode of writing—whether in terms of vocabulary, or style, or form—are plagued with the problem of categorization. Some psalms may well register more literary affinities with ‘wisdom’ than others; but wisdom cannot be confined to any one category of psalms, partly because it cannot be confined to any one category of literature.

b. *Wisdom as a Particular Mode of Thinking*

So everything, it seems, depends on the content of a psalm—what Weeks called the ‘coincidence of interests’—rather than its form. However, even when we focus on the content we run into difficulties, in that each of the various key themes of wisdom is potentially so broad that this tells us less about wisdom and more about the teaching and theology of the Hebrew Bible as a whole.

Take, for example, the overarching theme which scholars such as Murphy have identified as ‘essential wisdom’: its *instructional nature*, found especially in the thanksgivings.⁶¹ Of course wisdom is advice literature—the books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes exemplify it in very different ways—and of course this is found in the psalms, both in those psalms which address God with the congregation apparently looking on, and those psalms which directly address the congregation. A large number of psalms, of all types of genre, actually speak mainly

59. See Kynes 2012: 63-79 (Ps. 8), 80-97 (Ps. 107), 101-21 (Ps. 139), and 121-41 (Ps. 39), 145-60 (Ps. 1) and 161-79 (Ps. 73).

60. See Kynes (2012: 36): ‘The author of Job himself seems to relish flouting genre expectations, which should further encourage the categories to be held lightly, but it does not mean rejecting them altogether.’

61. This relates to the use of admonitory style which I discussed earlier (note page number). 

about God to the congregation: many of these are the so-called wisdom psalms, including Psalms 19; 34; 37; 49; 73; 111; 112; 127; 128; 133. But many others are not, and include Psalms 1 and 2, as a Prologue to the Psalter, as well as Psalms 11; 14/53; 20; 24; 46; 58; 78; 87; 101; 103; 105; 107; 110; 121; 124; 129; 131; 134; 135; 136, and indeed all the Hallel (146–150) at the end of the Psalter.⁶² Within this list, if we were to use form-critical categories, we would find royal psalms, Zion hymns, liturgies, historical psalms, laments, thanksgivings, and hymns of praise, so the admonition is spread across all types of psalms and all types of possible cultic settings. Whether this didactic concern has come directly from wisdom is questionable. Prophets were equally concerned about teaching the people, and the psalms are full of prophetic influence, as I argued in a publication from this Seminar some five years ago.⁶³ Furthermore, the Levitical priests and Temple singers were also committed to teaching the people, as the books of Deuteronomy and Chronicles make clear, another issue which I have argued elsewhere.⁶⁴ As Collins has shown us from the wisdom material in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the instructional element is vast and complex and comprises many different types of worldview, in and beyond the sapiential literature.⁶⁵ This is partly why McCann, while acknowledging that those who compiled the Psalter were interested in it being a book of instruction, avoids specific references to wisdom in his work, because many of the psalms which exemplify most didactic concerns exemplify least the traits of wisdom style.⁶⁶

A second possibility is that we can find the influence of wisdom content in the psalms by the references to *everyday living*. As Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes make clear, there is an obvious interest in wisdom about the theory and practice of living an ordered life.⁶⁷ However, one only has to read the first six chapters of Amos or the first five chapters of

62. See Gillingham 2014: 201-202. In addition, the beginnings or endings of other psalms also address the congregation, not God: these are found mainly in the thanksgiving parts of laments, and include 22.28-31 (MT vv. 29-32); 27.1-6; 28.5-9; 31.21-24 (MT vv. 22-25); 41.1-3 (MT vv. 2-4); 52.1-8 (MT vv. 3-10); 69.30-36 (MT vv. 31-36).

63. See Gillingham 2010.

64. See Gillingham 2014.

65. See Collins 1997: 278-80.

66. See McCann (1992), who is able to include Torah Psalms, Kingship Psalms and Royal Psalms all under the category of 'instruction'.

67. See Kuntz 1974: 215; also Sneed (2011: 68), using an unattributed observation by John Goldingay, that wisdom 'concentrates more on everyday life than history, more on the regular than the unique, more on the individual (though not outside of his social relationships) than the nation, more on personal experience than sacred tradition'.

Isaiah to see that an interest in everyday living, in justice and righteousness, is hardly the exclusive prerogative of wisdom but part of the prophetic voice as well, from the time of Amos to Malachi. The psalmists, too, are concerned with the community's and individual's relationships with God in their everyday life. But this concern is not the prerogative of the so-called wisdom psalms alone; it pervades the Psalter. It is not only expressed, for example, in Psalm 1, but also in Psalm 3; not only in Psalm 32, but also in Psalms 31 and 30; not only in Psalm 37, but also in Psalm 38; and so on. This is another criterion which is too broad to make any real difference to whether we demarcate a psalm as having wisdom concerns or not.

Thirdly, perhaps a key theme which might indicate wisdom thinking is the concern for *retributive justice*—whether it is effective, as is usually upheld in Proverbs, or questionable, as is debated in Job and Ecclesiastes. However, the same theme (in relation to the experience of the exile) is also found in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, for example; and if we look beyond to the apocalyptic writings, the same theme is the concern of Isaiah 24–27 or Daniel 7–12. Retributive justice is also vital to the teaching of Deuteronomy, which often appears to echo the teaching of Proverbs in this respect, albeit with a more explicitly theological agenda. Kuntz has argued that retributive justice is a key theme in the purported wisdom psalms: the two-way theology of Psalms 1 and 112, the optimistic ending to Psalm 34, and the wrestling with the issue in Psalm 49, all, he claims, point to its significance.⁶⁸ But the problem again is that this is not only found in the so-called wisdom psalms. It is paramount in so-called royal psalms, such as 2 and 72, which affirm it, and in 89, which questions it. It is central, too, in so-called prophetic exhortations, not only in Psalm 50, which may have some wisdom elements, but also in Psalm 81, which does not. It is evident in the observations about the fool in Psalms 14 and 53, and is expressed on a broad canvas in the so-called Kingship Psalms, 93 and 95–99. So yet again this criterion is just too broad to single out the 'wisdom psalms' alone: as Crenshaw has commented on Kuntz's view of retribution, 'The wise were not the only ones who subscribed to this belief, nor were they alone in suffering when the dogma collapsed'.⁶⁹

A fourth related theme is the *contrast between the righteous and the wicked*: perhaps this might mark wisdom thinking. The problem is that this dualism is also a vital theme in Deuteronomy, with its teaching on the two ways, and we find it in the eighth- and seventh-century prophets,

68. Kuntz 1974: 214-15.

69. Crenshaw 2003:13.

as well. Of course it is a shared theme in Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, but it is hardly exclusive to these books. Indeed, an assessment of the term ‘justice and righteousness’, for example, covers a wide spectrum of material, not only in the Psalms but in the Prophets and wisdom literature as well.⁷⁰ Kuntz argues that this theme is found, for example, in Psalms 34 and 37, and he is right;⁷¹ but he fails to show how prevalent it is in psalms which have little connection with wisdom. Again, as Crenshaw states: ‘That inclination to identify behaviour worthy of imitating and to disassociate oneself from harmful conduct would probably have been felt across the board, for it represents a drive toward self-protection. Not unexpectedly, the dichotomization of society into opposing groups shows up in literature from quite different social institutions.’⁷²

Perhaps a fifth theme common to the ‘wisdom psalms’, implicit and explicit, is the concern with *the natural world and cosmic order*, a dependence on what might be termed a more universal ‘creation theology’. Ceresko calls this ‘world-building’, a striving for moral order which is dependent upon a belief in cosmic order which those who are concerned with instruction seek to emulate.⁷³ Psalms 19A and 19B are an ideal example of this, in that a hymn praising the order in creation is set alongside a reflective poem on the order experienced through keeping the Torah. The problem is that, outside the Psalms, this view of creation, even in wisdom literature, takes on many forms—one only has to compare the idea of personified wisdom in Proverbs 8 with the cosmogony found in the divine speeches in Job 38–41, or with the rather minimal references to God as Creator in Ecclesiastes, implicitly in chs. 1 and 12 and explicitly in 12.1-2. And outside these wisdom books, one only has to compare the interest in cosmic order in Genesis 1 with the link made between creation and redemption in Second Isaiah, for example in Isa. 40.12-31; 45.11-18 and 55.8-13, to conclude that ‘creation theology’,

70. The term occurs some thirteen times in the psalms—in royal psalms (72.1-2 and 89.14 [MT v. 15]), in an enthronement psalm (97.2) and also in several psalms associated with wisdom (36.5-6 [MT vv. 6-7]; 94.15; 106.3; 112.5-6 and 119.7, 75, 121 and 160). It is also found in the earlier prophets such as Amos (5.7, 24 and 6.12) and Isaiah (1.21; 5.16; 33.5) where it is focussed much more on the behaviour of the people. This pragmatic emphasis is also found in Proverbs (1.1-3; 2.8-9; 8.20 and 21.3), while in Job (8.3; 29.14; 37.23) and Ecclesiastes (3.16 and 5.8 [MT v. 7]) it takes on a more conceptual and less affirmative interpretation. As an indication of the conversation about the rewards for the just and righteous, the term has a wide range of meaning; see Houston 2006.

71. Kuntz 1974: 213-14.

72. Crenshaw 2003: 13.

73. Ceresko 1990: 218-19.

even outside the Psalms, hardly speaks with one voice. Attitudes to creation are also multivalent in the Psalms. However, some creation psalms (Ps. 29, and probably Ps. 33, too) have little to do with wisdom; similarly, psalms which refer to ancient creation myths as a means of expressing the breakdown in cosmic order in present experience—I am thinking here of Psalms 74; 79 and 89—have little, if any, relationship with wisdom concerns. Other psalms, such as 8 and 104, have tangential wisdom interests in their appeal to some cosmic order, but each also suggests the influence of Genesis 1. Conversely, a large number of psalms—some perhaps associated with wisdom—do not refer to the theme of creation at all, being more concerned about the practical and parochial realities of living out a faith which often contradicts experience. So a direct interest in God as Creator is evident, but by no means dominant, in the so-called wisdom psalms.

There is one final theme which may be specific enough to relate to particular wisdom concerns and broad enough to engage with the complexities of the wisdom tradition. This is also proposed by Kuntz, and actually concerns two themes in one: *the fear of Yahweh and the veneration of the Torah*.⁷⁴ Three times in the Psalter these two themes are connected (Pss. 19.11 [MT v. 10]; 34.11 [MT v. 12]; 111.10) and each of these is a possible wisdom psalm. However, several so-called wisdom psalms also speak of the fear of Yahweh within the context of obedient faith, but without reference to the Torah: these are Pss. 34.7, 9 (MT vv. 8, 10); 112.1; 128.1, 4 (the latter two with the *אשרי* formula). There are also other psalms which speak more of the veneration of the Torah where the actual expression ‘fear of Yahweh’ is not found at all, such as in Psalms 1 and 119. Kuntz is quite right to note that this is undoubtedly a wisdom concern: it occurs some fifteen times in Proverbs,⁷⁵ it is an obvious concern in the book of Job⁷⁶ and occurs with a different emphasis in Ecclesiastes.⁷⁷ The problem is that the expression is by no means the preserve of wisdom: interesting examples, very different from the use in the wisdom books, include the proto-Messianic passages in Isa. 11.2, 3 and 33.6, and, using a curious formula, in 2 Chron. 14.14 (MT v. 13); 17.10 and 19.7, 9. So even with such a precise theological theme the

74. Kuntz 1974: 211.

75. Prov. 1.7, 29; 2.5; 8.13; 9.10; 10.27; 14.26, 27; 15.16, 33; 16.6; 19.23; 22.4; 23.17; 24.21.

76. Job is tested apparently to discover if he ‘fears God for nothing’ (Job 1.9) and the addition of Job 28 (and the conclusion in v. 28) anticipates Job’s response to God in 42.1-6.

77. Eccl. 3.11-15; 8.12; and especially in the additional ending 12.13.

same problem emerges: ‘the fear of the LORD’ is a term with several different referents, and its use beyond the wisdom literature as well as within the psalms (connected sometimes but not always with the veneration of the Torah) suggest that this, too, is not a sufficiently distinctive wisdom motif.

And so our attempts to postulate wisdom as a particular mode of thinking by way of reference to the psalms, particularly those with purported wisdom concerns, show just how difficult this is because of the complex nature of wisdom as an intellectual and empirical pursuit both outside the psalms and also within them. James Crenshaw astutely observes, ‘Perhaps we should limit ourselves to what can definitely be affirmed: some psalms resemble wisdom literature in stressing the importance of learning, struggling to ascertain life’s meaning, and employing proverbial lore... I do not see any profit in attributing these psalms to the sages when we know so little about the authors and their social contexts.’⁷⁸ Conversely, the wisdom books reflect the confluence of these particular themes—some to a greater degree than others—but, as Sneed has also observed, the thought-world of wisdom is shared by many other writers in the Hebrew Bible, and the psalmists are just one example of this multi-cultural process.

c. *Wisdom as a Particular Mode of Living*

Thus far we have seen how the psalms reveal that anything we might term ‘wisdom’ is a diffuse and open-ended phenomenon. Thus in the context of trying to establish a particular social and religious group called ‘the wise’, Sneed’s observation that Jer. 18.18 tells us more about the interdependence between priests, prophets and the wise than about their being separate social groups seems to be close to the mark.⁷⁹

There are four interrelated theories, not all mutually exclusive, about the possible identities of those who were part of the circles of the wise. One is that in pre-exilic times ‘sages’ are to be found as *counsellors and advisors in the court of the king*. A second is that it was the *family and clan elders* who preserved the more popular pragmatic traditions of wisdom for daily life. A third theory is that, probably in the restoration

78. Crenshaw 2003: 15. 

79. Even the ‘prophets’ and ‘priests’ are complex social groups: for example, are we dealing with independent or professional prophets, or a combination? And as for the priests, how do we consider Aaronide and Zadokite priests, and to what extent do these different bodies sacrifice, or teach and sing psalmody? Given these uncertainties, we cannot expect anything less with the third social class we term ‘the wise’.

period, ‘sages’ were *scribes and teachers*, preserving and editing proverbial sayings and stories from the past. A fourth theory is that they had some cultic status, perhaps as *priests or Levitical singers* within the second Temple.⁸⁰ Many would argue that not all these theories can be correct—or if they are, it points, yet again, to the diffuse nature of wisdom. And because all four of these proposed settings for ‘the wise’ might be illustrated from various psalms, it shows again the difficulty of defining wisdom by way of reference to psalmody.

As for the first possibility, outside the psalms we read frequently about *royal counsellors at the court*—officials such as Seriah and Sheva in 2 Sam. 8.17 and 20.25, Shebnah under Hezekiah in 2 Kgs 18.18-19; Isa. 36.4, and Shaphan under Josiah in 2 Kgs 22.8-10, and it could be that some of the royal psalms might exhibit similar influences. Could the psalmist in 45.1 (MT v. 2) be a ‘royal sage’? In this wedding song for the king we read, ‘I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe’. And what of the lengthy prayer for the wellbeing of the king in Ps. 72.1-17: might this be the work of a so-called royal counsellor? We might also add the reference to the ‘decree’ or ‘statute’ (קח) in Ps. 2.7 which affirms the rights of the Davidic kings in the context of the threat of other nations.⁸⁰ If this is the case, then we must note that neither Psalm 45 nor 72 nor 2 has been proposed as a ‘wisdom psalm’, so this again illustrates the diffuse nature of the wisdom tradition in psalmody, occurring again in unlikely places.⁸¹

The case is slightly different when we look at the second theory, for there are several psalms which may well be more clearly connected with *familial and popular wisdom*. The best examples are Psalms 127 and 128, with their aphorisms about family life: these have been seen to represent the memory of earlier familial teaching transmitted into the restoration period. The actual setting for these psalms is of course unknown, but those in the restoration times who collected the Songs of Ascents (Pss. 120–134) undoubtedly had some interest in personal faith

80. This latter reference obviously concerns some prophetic mediation because of its correspondences with Nathan in 2 Sam. 7; but it also contains a good deal of Deuteronomic language (see Miller 1994) and the role of court scribes in preserving this tradition is not impossible. As we see in Isaiah, it may well be that the line between a prophetic role and a royal counsellor was not demarcated in quite the way we might think.

81. We might also argue that this influence is found in the 72 Davidic superscriptions which honour David as a paradigm of piety, with later sages perpetuating the ancient royal interests in post-exilic times. If so, again we are dealing with a large number of psalms which have no obvious wisdom affiliation.

and trust and placed two psalms about familial piety in the heart of the collection. And if scholars such as Zenger are correct in seeing Psalms 35–41 as another collection about personal trust, brought together to defend the rights of the ‘little people’, or the poor of the land, then the influence of those sages concerned with more familial piety might be found in the didactic psalms in this collection, especially Psalms 37 and 39.⁸² Thus the case for such a circle of ‘the wise’ actually corresponds with some of the proposed ‘wisdom psalms’.

What of the evidence of a third type of sage, as part of a *more intellectual scribal tradition*? Here Perdue might well be correct in his view that Psalms 49; 73 and 139, each in different ways concerned with the same issues debated in the book of Job, might be later compositions by such groups of the wise, albeit here perhaps more associated with the cult.⁸³ Certainly this would make sense of Ps. 49.3-4 (MT vv. 4-5) (‘My mouth shall speak wisdom; the meditation of my heart shall be understanding. I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will solve my riddle to the music of the harp’). Psalms 49 and 73 both question wisdom and affirm its premises, so neither psalm is as radical as some of the speeches of Job; and the liturgical headings over both psalms reflect the extent to which they have been accommodated to a more liturgical *status quo*.⁸⁴ Again, then, the possibility of such a group of scribes corresponds with a small number of the so-called wisdom psalms.

So we might identify a small number of different psalms, some not listed as wisdom psalms and others more frequently affirmed as such, which pertain to at least three different social groupings of ‘sages’: royal counsellors, family and teachers of popular wisdom, and wisdom scribes. The problem is that their various influences relate only to a handful of psalms. What, then, of the final editors? To which social class might these ‘psalmists’ have belonged? Is the fourth theory of ‘Temple scribes’ a plausible one? If Mowinckel is right, that the ‘learned psalmographers’ who collected and edited the psalms were also part of the Temple cult, then is it possible that, despite all I have said about the complexities of defining and finding wisdom in the psalms, the final editors were also associated with the later wisdom tradition?

82. See Hossfeld and Zenger 1992: 23-26; also Gerstenberger 2014.

83. See Perdue 1977: 286-91.

84. ‘To the leader (choirmaster?). Of the Korahites. A Psalm’ is above Ps. 49, while ‘A Psalm of Asaph’ is above Ps. 73; and ‘To the leader (choirmaster?). Of David. A Psalm’ is the superscription above Ps. 139.

Here we also have to account for the fact that by the time of the Greek translations, perhaps in the second or first centuries BCE, the Psalter was probably also a book of instruction for use in synagogues throughout the diaspora: Zenger and Gerstenberger are possibly right in this respect, but to my mind this applies more to the Greek translations than to the Hebrew versions of the Psalter preserved at the Temple in Jerusalem. We have to account for the vast number of references to Jerusalem, Zion, the Temple and its worship throughout each collection of each of the five books which eventually comprised the Psalter: I take many of these as literal, and, in my view, this suggests that the Psalter also existed as ‘the hymn book of the second Temple’. So again we return to Mowinckel, who argued for the close proximity between the cultic personnel and those who collected and edited the Psalter as a whole.⁸⁵ For Mowinckel, the Psalter as a whole witnesses not only to the importance of teaching but of ‘singing the teaching’ in the psalms.⁸⁶ I too have developed this observation in two recent studies, suggesting the final editors were Levitical singers.⁸⁷ In my view, this would explain not only why many different aspects of the concerns of the ‘sages’ are represented in the psalms—royal, familial, intellectual—but also why, alongside these, we find psalms which evince other very different concerns, such as those represented by the prophets, the priests, and even the Deuteronomists. The Psalter is not an exclusively wisdom book, but it does contain a few ‘wisdom psalms’, and other psalms which reflect wisdom concerns. The Temple singers—perhaps we could also call them Temple ‘scribes’, thus appropriating Sneed’s terminology—were also interested in teaching and instruction. However, they were equally concerned about matters of little interest to the ‘sages’, such as the history of the people, the future of the people, and the kingship of God. So, in my view, this fourth theory is also most plausible: the group who preserved and ordered and taught and sung the psalms—recognizing the wisdom tradition but by no means being bound to it—belonged to the Temple, and this group I would term ‘Levitical Temple singers’.

85. See, e.g., Mowinckel 1982: II, 204: ‘The psalm collection as a whole came into existence through a combination of the earlier cultic collections and other cultic psalms together with some private psalms composed in the learned circles and with obvious traces of the thoughts and style forms of “wisdom”’.

86. See Terrien (1993: 52-52) and Smith (1992: 409-11) who each make the same point.

87. See Gillingham 2014: 201-13 and forthcoming.

4. Conclusion and Implications

What, then, might we learn from the Psalms about the literary, intellectual and social aspects of wisdom? One obvious conclusion is that although it is difficult to propose any one criterion which clarifies a tradition as broad and nebulous as ‘wisdom’, it is possible to suggest some wisdom influence when a confluence of characteristics occurs in a particular psalm. The discussions here have returned principally to Psalms 37, 49, and 111/112 and 127/128—one psalm each in Books I and II of the Psalter, none in Books III and IV, and two pairs of psalms in Book V. Three other psalms have also been frequently discussed, and they too might be included here: these are Psalms 34, 73 and 90.⁸⁸ Accordingly, given that only nine psalms exhibit the closest family likeness with what has been established as ‘a wisdom tradition’ outside the Psalter, it is difficult to speak of ‘wisdom psalms’ as a separate category and it is even more difficult to speak of the Psalter as a **Wisdom Book** 

The final part of this study argued that there is one key difference between wisdom in the psalms and wisdom in literature outside the psalms: that is, the psalms belong to a liturgical singing tradition as well as to a didactic one. Indeed, only Psalms 111 and 112 in the above list are without liturgical and/or musical headings, and even they commence by declaring God’s praises to an attendant congregation. The Psalter is not, like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Wisdom, another ‘Book of Solomon’: it is a ‘Book of David’, and its ‘remit’ is very different from those other books which claim their authority from Israel’s so-called wise king. By tracing its ancestry back to David, the Psalter as a whole shows it is more interested in the singing and worship of the whole people of God bound together in their shared history of two Temples, rather than—as is the case with, for example, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes—the fate of the individual. In this way, the Psalter is perhaps **more clear**  in its concerns to the books of Chronicles, with its own glorified depiction of David, than it is to Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes.

There is a curious paradox here, in that the interest in the Temple and its worship might have encouraged a greater awareness of Solomon as founder of the Temple, but, somewhat akin to the Chronicler, it seems that here the *founder* of ‘Temple song’ is not Solomon, but David. A good illustration of this is the double heading to Psalm 30, where ‘A Psalm of David’ is also ‘A Song at the Dedication of the Temple’.

88. In my view the Torah Psalms, 1 and 19B and 119 are not to be included in this list: some of their concerns overlap with wisdom, but they suggest a different genre, just as the teaching about the keeping the law in Deuteronomy is different from seeking wisdom in Proverbs.

In fact, the heading ‘A Psalm of Solomon’ is found in only two psalm headings. In Psalm 72, the Solomonic superscription is over a psalm with royal concerns, and it may well have come about because of the contents, which speak about the king’s international reputation (vv. 8-11). However, the key theme of Psalm 72 is the king’s role as defending the poor and needy—a requirement which Solomon, according to 1 Kings 3–11, ultimately failed to fulfil, thus contributing to the division of the kingdoms. Hence the reference to Solomon, closing Book II of the Psalter, is perhaps intentionally ironic and corresponds with the equally pessimistic view of kingship in Psalm 89 at the end of Book III. The effects of the abuse of the poor by the rich are developed in Psalm 73, a psalm with a number of wisdom concerns in it, and one which, in the view of Psalm 72, hardly places Solomon in a good light.

A similar implicit criticism of Solomon might be seen in Psalm 127 (‘A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon’) which begins, ‘Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labour in vain’. This might be read positively, but the repeated use of שוא (‘in vain’) in vv. 1 and 2, concerning both the Temple and the city, make this questionable. The admonitory tone of these two verses is very different from that in Psalm 132, also a Song of Ascents, which celebrates David’s bringing the Ark into Jerusalem and thus founding Zion as God’s ‘resting place’ for ever (Ps. 132.13-14). Like Psalm 72, Psalm 127 may have been given a Solomonic heading on account of its contents (not only in the reference to the Temple but also to the many sons in the last three verses), and even though this particular psalm, along with 128, does suggest a greater confluence of wisdom concerns, it lacks an obvious positive appeal to Solomon in this respect. Thus Solomon, the paradigm of wisdom in, for example, Prov. 1.1; 10.1; 25.1 and Eccl. 1.1, 12, hardly appears in this mode in the Psalms; psalmody celebrates David as a paradigm of piety and has little interest in Solomon.

This interest in David as the purveyor of wisdom is given an interesting interpretation in much later Christian tradition. Several illuminated Psalters, dating from the tenth century onwards, depict King David standing between two female personifications of Wisdom and Prophecy.⁸⁹ The Spirit, in the form of a dove, hovers above the king, who, in Byzantine

89.  taken from a thirteenth-century Byzantine Psalter now held at the National Library of Russia, St Petersburg (Ms.gr. 269). A very similar depiction is found in the tenth-century Paris Psalter, held at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Ms.gr. 139) and also in a thirteenth-century Psalter, possibly from Mount Athos, held in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City (Ms.Vat.Palat.gr 381[B]). See Carr 2004: 265 and 273-74. 

imperial dress, is reading from the first verse of Psalm 72, handing on its teaching to future Emperors of Byzantium: ‘Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son’. In both earlier and later Jewish and Christian tradition it is David, not Solomon, who is the patron of psalmody; hence David, not Solomon, is imbued both with the spirit of wisdom (a symbol of living an ordered life in the present) and with the spirit of prophecy (a symbol of future hope). So of course the Psalter evinces some influence from the wisdom tradition: however, whether reflecting on the period of its inception or on its later reception, an understanding of psalmody includes far more than this.

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