

A Book Review of
Gerald Henry Wilson's book
The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter
Chico: Scholars Press, 1985.

by

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Gerald H. Wilson, who is currently teaching at Azusa Pacific University in California, is credited for his pioneering work on the compositional approach to the Psalter. In his book *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, which is a carefully wrought dissertation executed under the supervision of Prof. Robert Wilson at Yale University in 1985, one can see the impact of Brevard Childs's emphasis on canonical approach. Contrary to the popular methodological preference for reading psalms individually in its own *Sitz im Leben* Wilson argues for a paradigm shift in the reading of the Psalter that takes into considerations the editing of the Psalter as one canon (MT150). There are seven chapters in this book, each building the case gradually in support of his thesis. In the following paragraphs I will review the strength of each chapter and then present my reflections.

In the first chapter, Wilson analyzes the two methodological approaches: One that takes "the final form of the text" into consideration and the other "that views the book as a collection of disparate elements"(p.1). He begins with the proponents of the latter approach, Herman Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel (who greatly influenced the research in the Hebrew Psalter in the last century), and discusses their methodological flaws. Gunkel, who proposed *Gattungsforschung* of each psalm in its own historical and cultural context divorced from their immediate and the larger context, sought unity of the psalm in terms of its genre and its relation with the cultural context, but failed to consider the data that reflected the purposeful editorial activities and the canonicity of the MT 150. The process of canonization was assumed to be an accident (p.2). Mowinckel also failed to conceive the Psalter as a unified whole with a connected purpose. He rejected any editorial purpose in the final positioning of

each psalm. But Wilson contends for evidence within MT150 for an editorial movement that binds the whole together. He thinks that the unity achieved in by this editorial movement is not accidental but represents the end results of a purposeful editorial organization (p.4). He puts forward two major concerns: First, to isolate and describe what evidence exists of activity within the Psalter and to determine the extent of its unifying influence. Second, the editorial purpose that governs the organizational process be addressed. In order to avoid imposing any non-existent structure on the psalm, Wilson begins with an analysis of comparative texts, which would set parameters for “the kind of editorial techniques and concerns one might find active in the organization of a group of hymnic texts such as the Psalter.” The comparative texts are the Mesopotamian Hymnic literature (namely, the Sumerian Temple Hymns and the Catalogue of hymnic incipit) and the available Qumran Psalms manuscripts. The questions may arise here—Why does Wilson assume that the seemingly look-alike parameters obtained from the comparative texts would involve similar purpose and framework? Why should the Mesopotamian Hymnic literature be preferred over any other ANE literature?

In the second chapter, Wilson examines forty-two stereotyped Sumerian Hymns dedicated to equal number of temples (p.13). These hymns were compiled in the third millennium B.C. according to apparent political and geographical motivations. The necessity of an adequate Sumerian language skill and the translated Sumerian manuscript may limit the reader to analyze the comprehensiveness of his argument. There are few occasions when the arguments move from one hypothesis to another without explaining the presuppositions underneath them (p.17, 19). Nevertheless, Wilson draws the following fascinating insights from his analysis: (1) The Sumerian texts underwent subsequent additions and editing. (2)

They were adapted into new geographical and political context on the basis of the larger schema and motif. (2) The adaptation was free from its original and specific intent (p.22). (3) The collection of hymns cannot be considered to be haphazard and devoid of organizational intent (p.23).

Wilson suggests that these insights should lead one to subjugate MT150 and inquire the possibility of a shift in the intent of the composition of the Psalter. His proposition for the possibility of correspondences in the underlying principles of the literary works of ANE is helpful but one may wonder if the unique theological and literary nature of the Hebrew Bible (divine revelation, divine intent, and progressive revelation), which distinguishes it from all ANE literature, has been considered as well? The assumption that the editorial activities in ANE context are interrelated and therefore study of one would supplement the other is simplistic. In fact, Wilson himself admits that there is a difference of function between biblical superscripts and Mesopotamian colophons (p.154).

In the third chapter, Wilson investigates “the organizational principles involved in collection and arrangement of a number of originally unrelated hymnic compositions,” which in this case are “Catalogue of Hymnic Incipits” dated from Ur III period (2112-2004 B.C.) to the Neo Babylonian period (625-539 B. C.) (p.25). He thinks that there are three significant principles involved in the collection and arrangement of the hymns: (1) explicit groupings of incipits by genre in the catalogue (p.54). (2) Arrangements are made according to the deity mentioned (p.55). (3) Similar phraseologies are grouped together. The arrangement, according to him, is very tantalizing and strongly suggestive of a purposeful patternism (p.56). Wilson is aware of the limitations that surround his investigations. First, “the Catalogue of Hymnic Incipits” includes twenty-two cuneiform tablets (both whole and

fragmentary), which do not contain complete hymnic composition, but instead catalogue numerous hymns by means of their opening lines (p.7). Second, it is not easy to make a definitive analysis with a fragmented catalogue (p.38). Third, there is inconsistency in the phenomenon (p.58). Fourth, other exact duplicates of catalogues are not known (p.59).

In the fourth chapter, Wilson examines the nature of the earliest known exemplars of canonical psalms. Are there other Psalter traditions, which functioned authoritatively? If they are only liturgical collections that incorporated authoritative psalms, then how are their organization and the arrangement significant to the understanding of transmission history? What is the relation between the QPssMss and MT150 in term of priority and dependence? He then analyzes the conflicting views of James A. Sanders (who purports both canonicity and open-endedness of the Qumran text) and the late Patrick W. Skehan (who denies canonicity and supports dependence of QPssMss on MT 150). He recommends for clarity and consensus in three separate issues: Canonicity, authority, and priority (p.88). Finally, he draws three probable relations between 11QPs^a and MT 150 (p.91): (A) Direct-Sequential Linkage; (B) Parallel collection; (C) Library editions. These possibilities reflect the fluidity of the Psalter, which might have given the impetus for the stabilization or closing of the Psalter as a canon by the first century A. D. They also suggest the theological/liturgical arrangement of the Hebrew hymnic composition at a very early date (p.92). In the next chapter, Wilson looks for explicit editorial statements and non-explicit organizational techniques within Qumran Psalm manuscripts that might illuminate the underlying practice in MT 150 (p.135). After a rigorous and careful analysis of Qumran texts, Wilson advocates for the possibility of editorial technique intended to preserve the alternate traditions of the composition. They are based on two major types: Ps-types (genre and author

groupings) and functional concerns (*hllwyh* [ḥaləlû-yāh] pss, *šyr hm lwt* [šîr ḥammaḳ'älôṭ] pss, and *hwdw* [hôḏû] pss) (p.136).

In chapter six, Wilson executes a thorough analysis of the Hebrew Psalter. His concern is to examine the editorial intent behind the two available editorial statements (descriptive/explicit and organizational/tacit, e.g. superscript and the statement that indicates editorial method and concerns such as Ps 72:20). How is the explicit statement of the individual psalm connected to the group or to the juxtaposed psalms? Is there any tacit statement in the composition of the Psalter that might expose the message behind the editorial arrangements? With careful exegesis of data, Wilson demonstrates: (1) that the “book” divisions of the Psalter are editorially induced, not accidental; (2) the author and genre classifications has “separating” and “binding” function; (3) the absence of the superscript indicates the tradition of combination; (4) the use of *hllwyh* [ḥaləlû-yāh] psalms implies conclusion of a segment; (5) the *hwhw* [hôḏû] psalms are used to introduce a segment; (6) and the thematic correspondences mark the beginning and the ending psalms (p.199).

Finally in chapter seven, Wilson attempts to translate all the disparate data into a coherent picture that might uncover the editorial plan and purpose for the final shape of the Psalter. He turns to the three evidences in the Psalter: (1) the “introductory” Ps.1; (2) the five-book division; and (3) the final Hallel (Ps 146-150). With the help of lexical and thematic connections, he shows the organizational patterns and the implied changing editorial intent. According to him, the final product reflects the message intended by the final editor (s). He writes, “In a strange transformation, Israel’s words of response to her God have now become the Word of God to Israel”(p.206). The emphasis is now on individual rather than

communal. It is about mediation rather than cultic performance. But one may wonder why such intent cannot be expected from the individual psalm prior to its collection or in any collections other than MT 150. Does Wilson see the evidences for such editorial intent sufficiently strong? Wilson is optimistic and seems to overstate his evidences. Even though there are some tendencies that indicate some kind of editorial arrangement, it is very difficult to discern the master plan for Psalter's over arching message. In absence of certainty can we assert the idea of editorial internationality in the Psalter? According to M. A. Vincent, one could take any modern hymnbook or poetry collection and likewise construct an editorial plan (M. A. Vincent, "The Shape of the Psalter: An Eschatological Dimension?" *New Heaven and New Earth Prophecy and the Millennium Essay in Honor of Anthony Gelston*. Leiden: Brill, 1999: 61-82). Vincent also accuses Wilson for generalization and for ignoring the uncomfortable number of exceptions in his constructions. Wilson seems to be unwilling to see any randomness in the Psalter. Is it because of his strong canonical agenda or, because he implicitly wants to assert the divine intent? He is not explicit about his presuppositions but he admits his urge: "I feel it is possible to show that the final form of MT 150 is the result of a purposeful, editorial activity which sought to impart a meaningful arrangement which encompassed the whole" (p.199). Nevertheless, his work is a new milestone in the study of the Psalter that has not only brought the literary analysis of the biblical text to eminence but also the wholistic reading of the Psalter.