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MAY OUR SONS IN THEIR YOUTH BE LIKE PLANTS FULL-GROWN

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Introduction

‘May our sons in their youth be like plants full-grown.’

Thus prays the psalmist in Ps 144:12a. The request begins a series of prayers for fruitfulness of the land as well as the family of the psalmist. Ps 144 is generally considered a royal psalm,¹ both by virtue of its references to David (in the superscript and in v. 10) and its description of God as the one who gives victory to kings. The psalmist himself speaks as one who is a king, when he says that God ‘subdues peoples under me’ (Ps 144:1). So then, this is a prayer of the king for his land and his nation. The whole people are encompassed in the final cry of blessing that ends the psalm. We should be careful, then not to see too narrow a compass for the people described in the prayer for sons who are like plants. The context of the psalm indicates that this is probably a prayer for all Israel.

Within the context of Ps 144, the significance of this image seems relatively straightforward. The psalmist is asking for his sons, that is Israel, to reach maturity. Indeed, the metaphor in the second half of the verse, concerning the daughters, is much more obscure in its point of comparison. And yet the image of plants full-grown is perhaps deceptively simple. It is easy to pass over the figurative use of language at all, so fleeting is the reference.

But the psalmist has chosen to express this prayer using an image. A simple request for healthy, long-lived sons could have been made without any figurative language at all, just as the requests for full granaries and productive livestock in the following verses seem to be intended, at least in the first instance, literally. There is no way of knowing, of course, precisely what mix of motives prompted the psalmist to speak in such a way. He might have felt the need used to balance the imagery for the daughters in the second half of the verse with a similar image for his

1. Philip S. Johnston, “Appendix 1: Index of Form-Critical Categorizations,” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (ed. David Firth and Johnston, Philip S.; Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2005), 300.

sons. Perhaps he felt that metaphorical language was appropriate to the genre of his psalm and he chose it primarily for aesthetic reasons. It could even have been the case that the image of growing to maturity like plants was a stock metaphor, or a dead metaphor, used without conscious recognition of its figurative nature.

In this paper we propose to make use of the recent developments in psalms scholarship to consider one further factor in understanding the use of this specific image in Ps 144:12a. We will not be concerned to ask the speculative questions regarding authorial motivation, nor even editorial activity. Rather we simply recognise that 150 psalms which make up the psalter are found in a particular arrangement which may have an impact for the reader on their interpretation of any one of those psalms.

Jamie Grant summarizes the recent history of psalms scholarship in the introduction to his work and we shall not rehearse it in any detail here.² Gerald Wilson's groundbreaking work is generally, though not universally, held to have demonstrated the existence of "purposeful editorial arrangement... producing a unified whole"³ within the psalter. For Wilson and those following him, this editorial activity is deemed to be of interpretive significance. The assured results of the work on the shaping of the psalter and the influence of Brevard Childs' canonical approach, have led scholars to an increasing awareness of the final shape of the psalter as the locus of theological interest.

The title of Nancy deClaisse-Walford's contribution to this debate, *Reading from the Beginning*,⁴ precisely captures the methodology behind the shape of the psalter approach, though in fact, her book is concerned more with the shaping of the psalter. If the Book of Psalms is in

2. See Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms* (SBL Academia Biblica; Atlanta: SBL, 2004), 7–8.

3. Gerald H. Wilson, "The Structure of the Psalter," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (ed. David Firth and Philip S. Johnston ; Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2005), 229.

4. Nancy L. deClaisse Walford, *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997).

any sense a literary unity, it must be approached like all other books, starting from the beginning and working systematically through, allowing themes and images and structures to emerge along the way.

Wilson proposed that the psalter actually followed a redemptive-historical scheme, in which the first two books reflected Israel's covenant life under the kingship of David and, later, Solomon, the third book dealt with God's failure to keep that covenant, and the final two books offer the hope of YHWH's reign rather than a renewed human, Davidic kingship.⁵

This scheme has been subjected to a certain amount of criticism and revision. Two notable alternatives have been proposed: a Torah redaction, emphasising the prominence of Pss 1, 19 and 119;⁶ and an eschatological redaction which from the start focusses on the hope of an eschatological king.⁷ In Jamie Grant's model, Pss 1 and 2 form an introductory unit which juxtaposes the themes of Torah and kingship, themes which are juxtaposed at various key stages of the psalter to create the image of the hoped-for king who will be the torah-keeping exemplar for the people. David Mitchell agrees that the psalter was subject to an eschatological redaction, observing that "the very inclusion of the royal psalms in the psalter suggests that the redactor understood them to refer to a future *mashiah*-king. For otherwise their presence in a collection for use in second temple times, when the house of David was in eclipse, would have made little sense."⁸

5. Gerald H. Wilson, "The Use of Royal Psalms at the 'Seams' of the Hebrew Psalter," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35 (1986): 85–94.

6. See, for example, J. Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

7. As in David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms* (JSOTSup; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) and Grant, *King as Exemplar*.

8. Mitchell, *Message of the Psalter*, 86.

Ps 144 is one such royal psalm. How should the prayers for the sons of the king be understood in a time when there was no king of the line of David? If indeed the psalter bears an eschatological thrust, this will affect the interpretation of our verse and the significance of the imagery within it. But the presence of the image in this psalm suggests another fruitful line of inquiry. Might not the imagery of the psalter and other literary devices, just as much as its themes, its vocabulary, its superscriptions and authorial ascriptions, and other elements be part of the literary structure of the final arrangement? Here we are cautious not to speak of editorial activity or intent, for there is scant evidence on which to base such judgments. Rather, we will consider the final shape of the psalter as it now exists and ask whether, reading from the beginning, the imagery of the psalms helps to bind the book into a coherent whole and lends further depth to the interpretation of each psalm. For imagery is a powerful tool in shaping a reader's thought patterns, and the psalter is laden with imagery.

So then we shall attempt two investigations. First we ask whether the use of this image in the psalter might be related to the structure of the whole book, as it is currently understood. Second, we will consider what the effect of the image's use throughout the psalter might be on our interpretation of Ps 144:12a.

The image and the shape of the psalter

The image in Ps 144:12a compares sons with plants full-grown. The kind of plant is unspecified and the imagery appears quite vague. Nowhere else in the psalter is the noun **נְטִיָּה** used, though the cognate verb, **נָטַע** does occur in both metaphorical and literal senses.⁹ However, in this study we are not concerned so much to trace a verbal link through the psalter as a metaphorical one. The vagueness of the reference in Ps 144:12a suggests that we are justified in taking this as part of a broader metaphorical field, namely PEOPLE are PLANTS.

9. In Pss 44:3, 80:9, 16 it is used metaphorically, with respect to Israel. In Pss 94:9, 104:16 and 107:37 it is used literally.

Strictly speaking, our image is a simile, introduced by the comparative ? . Linguistic analysts are divided as to the precise significance of the distinction between the simile and the metaphor. Some hold that these two figures operate at quite different levels of interaction for the reader. The simile may be thought of as holding the tenor and vehicle apart, reminding the reader that they are only ‘alike’, whereas the metaphor juxtaposes the two as if they are the same.¹⁰

However, the rhetorical function of the metaphor also depends on the disjunction between tenor and vehicle for its effect. For the purposes of this paper, therefore, I shall follow Janet Soskice, in making no great distinction between the two:

Simile may be the means of making comparisons of two kinds, the comparison of similars and dissimilars, and in the latter case, simile shares much of the imaginative life and cognitive function of its metaphorical counterparts. For this reason, we can say that metaphor and simile share the same function and differ primarily in their grammatical form.¹¹

Both metaphor and simile allow for the interaction of tenor and vehicle. The reader is provoked to form comparisons that encompass both similarities and dissimilarities.

We will look, then, for all the references to people as plants in the psalter, both metaphors and similes, whether explicit or implicit. A certain degree of interpretation is already implicit in the compilation of the list. Metaphors with only a distant link to the PEOPLE are PLANTS metaphor have been excluded. The most important of these is the CHILDREN are FRUIT metaphor. In several places in the psalms, children are described as the fruit of the womb. That they are fruit of the *womb* is significant for our purposes, since it means that there is no implied plant here. The fruitfulness is the extent of the metaphorical image and so these references have not been listed.

10. So Paul Avis, for example, claims that, “Metaphor and simile belong to two different psychological worlds. They arise out of different experiences or perceptions; they generate different experiences and perceptions.” Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 97.

11. Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 59.

Implicit metaphors are, inevitably, harder to discern with certainty. Where verbs that would normally be used with reference to plants are applied to people, these have been taken as implicit instances of the metaphor. Five verbs are identified as such: **פָּרָה**, **שָׁתַל**, **נָטַע**, **צִוּץ** and **שָׁרַשׁ**. However, verbs which may be applied to plants or people have been excluded unless another signifier of the metaphor is also present. These include verbs such as **יָבֵשׁ** and **נָבַל**.

In the main, the list is further restricted to images involving living plant material. Wood, or picked fruit, for example, has not been considered. A single exception to this has been made for Ps 1:4, where the wicked are compared to chaff, that is to say, the dead and dry useless parts of grain. This seems to correlate with the later images of the wicked as grass that will die and wither. For the purposes of the distribution of the metaphor, this matters little, since the metaphor in Ps 1:3 is clear.

A full list of the references that have been included in this analysis has been provided in Appendix 1. This list gives some indication of the distribution of the metaphor and its development in the psalter. The following chart illustrates more clearly how the metaphor is used within the five books of the psalter.

Book I:	1.....	41
	1	37
Book II:	42.....	72
	44	52
Book III:	73.....	89
		80
Book IV:	90.....	106
	90 92	102 103
Book V:	107.....	150
		128 129
		144

Book I and Book IV both begin with psalms that use the image, and Book II also has such a psalm near its beginning. Book II ends with a reference to the image, and Books I, IV and V also contain the imagery in psalms towards the end. Book III neither begins nor ends with

psalms containing this image, but the most extended form of the metaphor anywhere in the psalter is found at its center, in Ps 80. Only Pss 52, 128 and 129 use the imagery in places that seem to have relatively little structural significance according to this scheme.

The structural use of the image may be seen even more strongly if certain other units within the psalter are assumed. Books I and II have long been recognised to exist as a unity, indicated by the redactional comment at the end of Ps 72 which refers to both books as the psalms of David. Books IV and V seem to share certain literary and thematic elements which bind them together and distinguish them from the rest of the psalter.¹² Pss 1 and 2 can also be shown to function as a single introductory unit.¹³ Pss 146-150 are recognizable as an extended doxology, forming the conclusion to the whole psalter.¹⁴ In addition to these commonly recognised groupings, I propose that Pss 144-145 may be read as a single concluding unit, matching the introductory unit of Pss 1-2.¹⁵ If this structure is correct, then the beginning and end of the Books I-II and Books IV-V units are all marked by psalms including some variation of the PEOPLE are PLANTS metaphor.

12. See Wilson, "The Structure of the Psalter," 231 for the division of the five books into these three sections, and also Nancy L. deClaisse Walford, "Anzu Revisited: The Scribal Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter," *Word & World* 15 (1995): 360-64 for a clear analysis of the distinctions between Books I-III and Books IV-V.

13. Wilson, "The Structure of the Psalter," 237. See also M. A. Vincent, "The Shape of the Psalter: An Eschatological Dimension?" in *New Heaven and New Earth: Prophecy and the Millenium: Essays in Honour of Anthony Gelston*, vol. 77 (ed. P. J. Harland and C. T. R. Hayward ; VTSup; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 68 for a defence of the suggestion that Psalm 145 functions as the end of Book V 'proper.'

14. Wilson, "The Structure of the Psalter," 232.

15. See below.

1-2.....	41	42.....	72
1	37	 	44 52 72
73.....		89
80			
90.....	106	107.....	144-145 146-150
90 92	102/3	 	128/9 144

The presence of the image in these four seam psalms, as well as in Ps 80 at the heart of Book III and the center of the whole psalter, indicates that there is indeed some structural significance to the literary device.

Excursus: The Unity of Pss 144-145

There are number of verbal and thematic features which suggest that these two psalms may be read together:

- (i) Ps 144:1 and Ps 145:21 form an inclusio marked by the repetition of the word **יְיָ**, used in each case with respect to the Lord;
- (ii) The cry for a rescue found in Ps 144:7 is answered by the promise of Ps 145:19 that the Lord hears the cry of those who fear him and rescues them;
- (iii) The promise to sing a new song to the God who rescues (Ps 144:9) is fulfilled in Ps 145, which is introduced as a hymn of praise to the Lord. It is a hymn which makes known God's greatness in all respects, including his saving power;
- (iv) Both psalms look forward to a future generation (Ps 144:12, Ps 145: 4, 12), and a time of blessing, expressed primarily in the Lord's provision of food (Ps 144:13-15, Ps 145: 15-16).

In addition, there are reasons to think that Psalms 144-145 form an inclusio to the main body of the psalter with Psalms 1-2, leaving Psalms 146-150 as a doxology appended to the whole.

- (i) Just as Psalms 1 and 2 are linked by the use of a *leitwort* in Ps 1:1 and Ps 2:12, so too are the opening and closing verses of Pss 144 and 145 linked. In the latter, the keyword is בָּרַךְ whereas in Pss 1 and 2 it is אֲשֶׁרִי. These are different terms but certainly related concepts. The reason for the difference is seen in the persons to whom they are applied. In Pss 1 and 2, the focus is on the blessed man, whereas in Ps 144 and 145 it is YHWH himself who is blessed. Where the blessed people are spoken of, in Ps 144:15, they are described as אֲשֶׁרִי here also.
- (ii) The final line of Ps 2: מְגַנֵּי וּבֹי אֲשֶׁרִי כָּל-חֹסֵי בּוֹ is reflected in Ps 144:2: חֲסִיתִי. The speaker of Ps 144 who takes refuge in the Lord is one of those whom Ps 2 designates as blessed.
- (iii) The kingship theme of Ps 2 is taken up again in Pss 144 and 145. Ps 144 looks forward to the reign of a Davidic king, while Ps 145 reiterates the motif of the Lord's own kingly rule. These two taken together strongly suggest the notion of an eschatological Messiah as the fulfilment of the blessed Torah-obedient king of Pss 1 and 2.

The structure suggested by the metaphor

If we are correct to have identified these five psalms containing the metaphor as having structural significance in the psalter, we must next consider the nature of that structure as seen in the relationships between these psalms.

Ps 1 - the blessed man

In Ps 1 the image of the blessed man is central. He is identified as one who does not associate with sinners but rather delights in and meditates on Torah. The blessed man is contrasted with the wicked man who will perish under the judgment of God. The psalm speaks in generic terms using language and imagery reminiscent of the wisdom literature.

Ps 72 - the hoped-for king

Ps 72 is a psalm לְשִׁלְמֹה. This may be intended to indicate Solomonic authorship, but it seems more likely that here it suggests the subject of the psalm. Ps 72 is presented as David's prayer for his son's reign (as suggested by v. 1a, with its prayer for righteousness for the son of the king). It is certainly a royal psalm, a prayer for and of the king. He is to be a king who will act justly for his people and cause them to prosper greatly. The terms in which his righteousness and the people's prosperity are expressed suggest that this is more than could be expected of any human Davidic king: his dominion will extend to the ends of the earth (v. 8); he will be served by all nations (v. 11); he will be the deliverer and the redeemer of his people (vv. 12-14); his name will endure for ever (v. 17). The link with the doxology in v. 18, by virtue of the repeated use of בָּרַךְ is also suggestive of a kingship that is more than human, though interestingly it is the people who will be 'blessed' (וְיִתְבָּרְכוּ) while the king himself is said to be אֲשִׁירִי.

The end of Book II thus alludes to the beginning of Book I. The 'happy man' of Psalm 1 is now given a more particular reference: the blessed, coming, Davidic king of his blessed people. This is not to say that the conclusions of Ps 72 should be read back into Ps 1, rather that the psalter develops the idea in its own way, so that what at first was applied very generally is now considered with respect to a specific situation.

Ps 80 - the failure of Israel

Ps 80 may be seen as representative of the whole of Book III in its portrayal of the failure of the once-secure relationship of the covenant between God and Israel. God is addressed in laments and complaints, he is accused of forgetting his people and abandoning them to their enemies. Ps 80 describes how Israel, who had thought of herself as secure in her blessings and prosperity, has now been exposed to the taunts and ravages of her enemies. The great hopes for the nation expressed in Ps 72 are nowhere fulfilled. There is only the repeated call for God to return and restore his people to his favor.

The question is inevitably raised concerning the blessed man of Ps 1? Is there such a person to be found? If even Israel has failed to fulfil this role, though she was planted and tended

to by God himself, what hope can there be? Ps 80 thus illustrates the narrative conflict at the heart of the psalter.

Ps 90 - the weakness of humanity

The answer that is given in Ps 90 and is echoed throughout Books IV and V of the psalter is simple: YHWH. There is no hope for Israel in herself, and no hope in a mortal king. Humans are weak and mortal but God who formed the world is from everlasting to everlasting. Compared to him, all people are like grass that flourishes and withers within a day. Ps 90 is a solemn reminder of the real status of humanity with respect to God.

Ps 144 - the blessed king of renewed Israel gives new hope to men

Like Ps 72, Ps 144 is a royal psalm. Unlike Ps 72, however, it carries within it the understanding of Ps 90 that human life is fleeting and that men are nothing when compared with the all-surpassing greatness of God (Ps 144:4). Ps 144 also stands in the shadow of Ps 80 and Israel's subjection to her enemies. It is, in places, a cry of lament, a call for God's rescue out of the hand of foreigners (vv. 5-7, 11). But it is also a psalm of hope, ending with the confident expression of the happiness (אַשְׁרֵי) of God's people. The promises of Ps 1 have not been lost but they have gained a new significance. The happy man of Ps 1 who meditates on the Torah and bears the fruit of obedience is presented in Ps 144 as the eschatological Torah-obedient king, with his blessed, fruitful nation. This is the Israel who was planted and ravaged, but which has now been restored and rebuilt. Ps 144 is a promise that the cry of Ps 80 will be answered. YHWH will return and restore to his people the blessings of Ps 72, including the great blessing of the messiah-king.

So it seems that these five psalms can be shown to form a coherent structure within the psalter. The use of the metaphor in these psalms supports the possibility of this kind of reading but should not be understood as a final claim for a comprehensive scheme. Rather, it may be best to view the structure we have outlined as merely one layer of the much more complex and multi-faceted structure of the psalter.

Reading from the beginning

If we are right to recognise that there is a structure to the psalter and that it exists even at the literary level, incorporating literary devices such as the metaphor we have been considering, then we must consider how it may influence our reading of the psalms. Here we follow deClaisse-Walford's strategy of reading through the psalter from the beginning. Each instance of the image will be considered in the light of what has gone before, showing how it is developed through the course of the book. Inevitably in a paper of this length, this will be a brief and incomplete sketch but it should be possible to at least draw in the main lines of the overall picture and assess the effect of interpreting the image in this way.

Books I-II

The first psalm has at its heart the image of the blessed man as a tree, well-watered, fruitful and long-lasting. The tree is said to have been planted (שָׁתַל), possibly implying the action of some external gardener-figure. The meditation on Torah described in v. 2 is represented in the image by the irrigation canals of water which feed the tree and make it fruitful. The fruitfulness of the tree is linked with Torah-obedience though it is unclear whether the fruit should be understood as representing the obedience itself, or the results of such obedience. This image is contrasted with that of the wicked as chaff. They are like dead, useless parts of the plant which are easily swept by the wind, characterised by transience and worthlessness.

The next reference to the image extends its negative aspect. In Psalm 37, there are two pictures of the wicked as plants. The psalm opens with a word of encouragement to the righteous, and a warning not to envy the wicked. The images of the wicked as grass and as herbs (יֵרֶק דֶרֶשׁ and חֲצִיר) are explicitly used to illustrate their shortlived existence. They will fade and wither (נָבַל and מָלַל).

A similar point is made by the use of the plant image in v. 35. Here, the wicked man is described as אֶזְרָה רַעֲנָן. This is a difficult expression to translate. אֶזְרָה usually refers to a

native person, by contrast with the foreigner in Israel.¹⁶ However, the modifying adjective is used only of trees or similar botanical objects, expressing flourishing verdure. I suggest that perhaps this might be rendered ‘native greenery’, without seeking too much specificity with respect to the plant in question. The purpose of the metaphor seems reasonably clear, nonetheless. The wicked man grows and appears successful but then is gone, leaving no mark of his existence.

This psalm, like Ps 1, draws on language and imagery commonly associated with the wisdom literature. In the light of the apparent disharmony of the world, the psalmist urges his hearers to trust to YHWH to set things right. Though the wicked appear to succeed, their lives will be short and they will have nothing of value that lasts. The whole psalm contrasts the righteous as those who have a future (v. 37) with the wicked as those whose future is cut off (v. 38).

In Ps 44 there is just a fleeting reference to the metaphor, implied by the use of the verb **נָטַע**. The people of Israel are said to have been planted by God in the land, after he had driven out the nations before them. The emphasis seems to be upon God’s sovereign activity in establishing the Israelites in the land. The plant is, of course, helpless. It is the gardener who must prepare the ground and set the plant in it, watering and tending to its needs. The terminology is different from Ps 1 and the people in view are differently configured as well. Where the tree of Ps 1 referred to an individual, here an entire nation is in view.

The reference in Ps 44 is matched by that in Ps 52. Here again, the metaphor is merely hinted at by means of a verb from the plant world being applied to a group of people. The wicked are uprooted (**שָׁרַשׁ מִן**) from the land of the living. The psalmist who observes this thinks of himself as a green olive tree (**זֵיתַן רֵעֵנָה**) in the house of the Lord. He is confident in the steadfast love of God while he watches and mocks the mighty, wicked man who will be destroyed and uprooted by God.

16. See for example, Exod 12:49, Lev 16:29 and *passim*.

Thus far, with the exception of the reference in Ps 44, the image has been developed consistently as a way of contrasting the righteous and the wicked. Two kinds of plants are in view: trees and grass. The tree is associated with the righteous person and indicates his fruitfulness and longevity. Grass is associated with the wicked and indicates their worthlessness and transience.

When we come to Ps 72 and the end of Book II, we once again find that the PEOPLE are PLANTS metaphor is used. In this royal psalm, prayers are offered on behalf of the king and his people. In v. 16, a request concerning the fruitfulness of the land is followed by this prayer: **וַיִּצְיֹן מְעִיר כְּעֶשֶׂב הָעֶרְוֹן**. The verb **צִיָּן** is rare in the Hebrew bible, and most likely refers to flowers blossoming. The related noun, **צִיָּן** is slightly more common and is used for flowers and for temple plates that may have been shaped like flowers. It certainly has a positive connotation, unlike the verbs applied to grass elsewhere, which indicate withering, fading and death.

There is another, more subtle, allusion to the metaphor in Psalm 72:6. The psalmist prays for the king to be like rain, causing the righteous to flourish (**פָּרַח**). The king here is not the plant, but he causes his people to grow like plants. He is their source of water - not the irrigation canals of Ps 1, but rain from above. His fruitfulness is seen in the productivity of the land and the multiplication of the people, such that the cities blossom like the grass of the field. Theirs is a secondary blessing, achieved because they are the people of the blessed king.

Book III

Book III signals a distinct shift in emphasis. The David psalms are ended and the psalms of lament which have been scattered through the previous two books now become dominant. At the centre of this book Ps 80 offers one such lament, using an extended metaphor of Israel as the vine as the basis of its complaint.

Immediately the allusion to Ps 44 is clear. The brief reference there to God ‘planting’ his people in the land is now given full scope. There is perhaps also a hint of what is to come in Ps 80 by means of a verbal link to Ps 52. There, the wicked people were uprooted by God (נִשְׁרַשׁ (מִן)). Here, Israel is said to take root (וַתִּשְׁרַשׁ (בְּאֶרֶץ)). Clearly the construction is different and the meaning quite opposite, but the common verbal root and the shared imagery may be sufficient to make a slight allusion. What has taken root may yet, as we know from Ps 52, be uprooted.

This vine was a great tree, overshadowing mountains and dominating even the mighty cedars. Surely this was to be the tree of Ps 1, magnified beyond imagining. It is not planted by the mere irrigation canals of Ps 1:3, but reaches out to the sea and the river (Ps 80:10[11]). However, the fate of this tree is not the assured prosperity of Ps 1. Its protection was removed, leaving it open to the ravages of passers by, of wild animals and swarming insects. God, who planted the vine and made it grow tall and strong, has apparently abandoned it to its enemies. The link to the beginning of the psalter is made even clearer by the identification of the vine as God’s son (see Ps 2: 7, 12). The son who was once enthroned, who claimed the nations as his heritage, who commanded allegiance from the rulers of the earth, is humiliated and scorned. His fruits are plucked by all who pass by. The nations mock him and destroy him.

The lament of Ps 80 is a call to God to act. Four times God is asked to return or restore the people.¹⁷ The image of the vine here, as in Ps 44, emphasises the Lord’s sovereignty over Israel’s future. Just as the Lord planted her in the land, tended her and made her strong, so he abandoned her and permitted her enemies to overrun her. Israel is helpless to act on her own behalf. All she can do is cry to her Lord, her gardener, to restore her.¹⁸

17. The refrain appears in vv. [4]3, 8[7], 15[14], 20[19]. In vv. 4, 8 and 20 it takes only a slight variation, each time appearing with a longer appellation for God. In v. 15 a more significant variation appears, with a change of subject for the turning action. Nonetheless, the form is close enough to suggest that this should be read as a modified version of the standard refrain.

18. See e.g. Vincent, “Shape of the Psalter,” 75 for an interpretation of Psalm 80 as God’s

In the wider context of the PEOPLE as PLANTS metaphor, however, it can be seen that Israel is not portrayed as entirely blameless in her present situation, nor entirely without means of escaping it. For we know how a tree can grow strong and healthy and fruitful: Ps 1 has told us that it is by meditation on and obedience to the Torah. And we know what causes a plant to be uprooted, to become withered and worthless: Pss 1, 37, and 52 have all shown us that it is wickedness in various forms. The implication for Israel in Ps 80 is thus clear: failure to obey Torah is the cause of Israel's downfall. Only the wicked are uprooted in this way; the righteous grow strong and fruitful and multiply greatly.

Indeed Ps 80 contains its own indicator that Israel was not wholly blameless. In the final plea to the Lord a promise is made, "Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name." (Ps 80:19[18]) There is a subtle implication that in the past Israel has turned back from the Lord and sought her refuge elsewhere.

If Book III of the psalter is a reflection on God's failure to keep the covenant, Ps 80, at least, is not quite so clear-cut in its assignation of blame. There is an underlying implication, hinted at through the use of the metaphor and more directly in v. 18, that Israel has failed to keep her covenant with God.

M. A. Vincent notes the link between the laments of Book III with the introductory psalms (1 and 2):

It is surely significant that the problem being dealt with in the psalms of individual lament in book 3 is the apparent falsity of the assertion of Ps. 1 - that the righteous are blessed and the wicked suffer - in the light of the psalmist's experience of life. The problem being dealt with in the communal laments is the apparent failure of Ps. 2, the other psalm which forms the introduction to the psalter. Where is God's 'Messiah'?¹⁹

If we are correct in our assessment of the development of the PLANTS are PEOPLE metaphor thus far, then we may suggest that though Vincent is correct to notice this link, the division between communal and individual laments does not follow the pattern so precisely. Ps 80

apparent rejection of the Davidic monarchy and the covenant promises.

19. Vincent, "Shape of the Psalter," 75.

is a communal lament, certainly asking the question regarding the Messiah who will come to deliver Israel. However it also alludes to Ps 1, asking how it is that this great tree of blessed Israel can have fallen so far.

Books IV-V

Given the downfall of Israel depicted so vividly in Ps 80, and lamented throughout Book III, it is perhaps unsurprising that the first psalm of Book IV takes an image which has previously been associated only with the wicked, and applies it indiscriminately to all mankind. If even Israel can suffer the ignominy of being uprooted, who then can hope to be the firmly planted tree of Ps 1? The contrast between the secure fruitfulness of the righteous and the transient worthlessness of the wicked is no longer relevant. Rather it is God alone, God who is from everlasting to everlasting, who is to be compared with all mankind. And in this contrast, all mankind are no more than grass which flourishes in the morning only to have withered and faded by evening. There is no hope for Israel in her human condition, and no hope for her will be found in a human king. The Lord reigns and it is to him she must turn and in him she must trust.

And yet, the shift is perhaps not so complete. Ps 92 presents us with, by now, very familiar images. The wicked sprout like grass (בְּפֶרֶחַ רְשָׁעִים כְּמוֹ עֵשֶׂב) and the evildoers flourish (וַיִּצְיָצוּ), but are doomed to swift destruction. By contrast, the righteous grow (שִׁגְרָה and פְּרָה) like the cedars of Lebanon bearing fruit unto old age in terms strongly reminiscent of Ps 1. Here, however, the fruitful, strong tree of the righteous is planted not by the waters of Torah, but in the very house of God. The temple, rather than Torah, is the source of life and strength.

The cycle turns again with Ps 102. Here the psalmist speaks of his own heart, and his own self, as grass, withering and fading. The psalmist makes no claim to personal righteousness or Torah-obedience, but with every word shows himself to be one who calls on the name of the Lord. Here indeed is one who seeks refuge in Yahweh (Ps 2:12).

If the reference in Ps 102:5[4] might be thought to indicate weakness rather than death, v. 12[11] is clearer. The psalmist thinks of his days as a passing shadow - ephemeral and fleeting. He withers like grass - fading to death. This is the reality of life, even for one who seeks God. Here is no blessed life, here is only persecution, weakness and death. Ps 90 was correct. All mankind is like the grass in its mortality and finitude.

Again in Ps 103, though in rather less personal and agonised terms, the psalmist draws the picture of all mankind as grass, appearing to flourish but gone with the wind. Only God is steadfast. Only God is from everlasting to everlasting. Only his righteousness extends to generations.

The focus of the image shifts again in Book V, with Ps 128 depicting the wife and children of the blessed man as a fruitful vine and as olive shoots. Those who fear the Lord can still, it seems, somehow be thought of as more than grass. The blessed man can still enjoy the fruits of his labour. So the prayer in Ps 129 is that the Lord treat only the wicked as grass, withering before it grows up to produce anything worth harvesting.

Finally, then, we reach the image with which we began this paper. In Ps 144:12a the royal psalmist prays for sons to be like plants full-grown. The vocabulary is not particularly significant: it would be hard to make anything of this as a catchword. Nor is the theme a strong one. Only in Ps 128 have children been described as plants. But as an image, this phrase picks up on the PEOPLE as PLANTS metaphor which began the psalter and has been developed throughout the book. Along the way the image has gained weight so that it now carries a number of different connotations and can be used to make allusions to a range of different people and situations.

Plants which grow to full strength are, as in Ps 92, those that are planted in the house of the Lord, flourishing and bearing fruit even in their old age. They are those as in Ps 1, planted near streams of water that keep their leaves green and fruit on their branches, by meditating on Torah. These plants have a blessed king who is like rain watering the earth for them, that they may blossom like the grass of the field as in Ps 72. They will be the vine which remains faithful to

the covenant, spreading its branches over the whole land, casting even the cedars into shadow, and who will not then suffered the consequences of disobedience described in Psalm 80.

Read in the context of the psalter, this becomes much more than a prayer for sons who will reach an age of maturity. It is a prayer for a renewed Israel under the leadership of a divine, torah-obedient, blessed king. It is a prayer for a people who will themselves be obedient to their God and who will worship him in his temple. It is a prayer for a people who will resist wicked ways and walk in wisdom. It is a prayer for the people to be blessed by their gardener-God, to be planted by him and nurtured that they may set down deep roots in the land, and to be protected by him from their enemies. Reading from the beginning allows us to see that this image cannot easily be easily substituted by a literal statement. The simple point of comparison we began with in terms of maturity or longevity barely begins to scratch the surface of the image in terms of its interpretive value.

Two suggestions for future avenues of fruitful study

We have aimed to demonstrate two things in this paper. First, that the structure of the psalter may be seen not merely in terms of the external elements such as book divisions, nor in its theme and content, but also at the literary level. The metaphor we have been considering acts as one element helping to bind together some of the most significant psalms in the structure of the psalter. Second, that interpretation of this image in the context of the psalter generates a much fuller reading and, in the example we have been considering, lends support to the eschatological model of the shape of the psalter.

Two avenues for further fruitful study thus suggest themselves. First, a wider survey of the function of literary features in giving the psalter its shape would be a valuable contribution to the ongoing debates concerning the shape and shaping of the psalter. This could include other imagery, but also literary features such as the acrostic poem, the use of refrains and other forms of repetition, and so on. Each of these features has a poetic value that may be exploited in an

anthology in order to make links and provoke the reader to form comparisons or contrasts. This may have particular value not just at the broader macro-structural level we have been working with, but also for the micro-structure of the psalter, where links between adjacent psalms or groups of psalms are considered.

The second potential avenue for further study extends beyond the psalter, for the metaphor we have been discussing is by no means exclusive to the psalms. Its use in Ps 1, for example, is matched closely by a passage in Jer 17. We have noted a number of references which have links to the wisdom literature. In fact this imagery is pervasive throughout the Old Testament, and even into the New Testament. The effect of this cumulative use of common imagery on interpretation of any one instance would be a valuable thing to consider. But perhaps more interesting still would be a study of the use of metaphor as a unifying or structuring device across books.

One of the perennial problems facing the Old Testament theologian is the relationship of the writings to the rest of the Old Testament books. Redemptive-historical and thematic schemes have shown themselves to have only limited success in including the whole corpus. An approach focussing on the use of literary devices, and in particular the use of metaphor, might shed some further light on the kind of unity that exists within this diverse group of books, just as it has shed light on one layer of the unity that exists within the 150 psalms that form our psalter.

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