Reclaiming Biblical Wisdom Psalms: a Response To Crenshaw

J. Kenneth Kuntz

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Reclaiming Biblical Wisdom Psalms: A Response to Crenshaw

J. Kenneth Kuntz

The University of Iowa
Ken-Kuntz@uiowa.edu

Abstract

This piece targets Crenshaw's article, 'Wisdom Psalms?' (*CRBS* 2000) that debunks a broad array of scholarly attempts to identify canonical wisdom psalms. Convinced that Crenshaw's minimalist perception often skews his reading of the biblical text and its interpretation, Kuntz counters that the Hebrew Psalter hosts a limited number of psalms that are stylistically and thematically reminiscent of what transpires in the widely recognized trinity of wisdom books in the Hebrew canon (Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth). Despite their overlap with other genres, wisdom psalms of diverse format and length exhibit shared features that warrant our embracing them as a viable psalmic category.

Attentive to my misgivings about James Crenshaw's forthright article 'Wisdom Psalms?' published two years ago in *Currents* (vol. 8), Alan Hauser graciously agreed to my submitting this rejoinder. To appropriate a graphic image from Qoheleth, one who examines Crenshaw's piece is likely to infer that he equates the scholarly pursuit of canonical wisdom psalms with *re'ût rûaḥ*, 'a chasing after wind'. Since Crenshaw devotes more than 40 per cent of his prose to a critique of the first article I published on this psalmic category (1974), I appreciate having this opportunity to respond.

Curiously, Crenshaw subjects my chapter, entitled 'The Canonical Wisdom Psalms of Ancient Israel—Their Rhetorical, Thematic, and Formal Dimensions', to its most rigorous scrutiny a full quarter-century after its appearance. Taking issue with both my own claims and those of like-

minded scholars, Crenshaw concludes, 'My own research in the Psalter leads me to question the very category of wisdom psalms' (p. 15). In his recently published paperback *The Psalms: An Introduction* (2001: 87-95), he appends his critique of the category of 'wisdom psalms' to a chapter classifying the psalms according to types. Beginning with Gunkel (1998), Crenshaw faults numerous scholars for their support of a psalmic classification that he regards as woefully suspect. In this essay, I seek to counter several of Crenshaw's objections, and to reclaim wisdom psalms as a viable category in the Hebrew Psalter.

Weighing the Opposition

Crenshaw's many instructive publications define him as a leading scholar of biblical wisdom literature. While fully invested in that portion of the Hebrew canon, he is no stranger to the Psalter's thought world and modes of discourse. Early in his career, Crenshaw began to lead the charge against an approach that he found too facile in its claims that wisdom influence can be teased out of many a segment of 'nonhagiographic literature' (1969: 129). The assertion in his *Currents* essay that 'all social groups use language in pretty much the same way' (2000: 12), and, in fact, Crenshaw's entire essay, demonstrates that he remains vigilant on this issue. In his recently revised *Old Testament Wisdom* (1998), he retains the heading 'wisdom psalms', reading Pss. 37, 39, 49 and 73 as specimens of a genre he names 'discussion literature' (p. 171). Even so, as he reflects on psalmic wisdom, he consistently displays a caution that he likewise demands from his colleagues.

Crenshaw is justified in his objections that Gunkel's use of the term *Weisheitsdichtung* ('wisdom poetry') is all too opaque (2000: 9) and that Whybray loses control of wisdom psalms by perceiving their didacticism as 'the decisive criterion' for identifying them (1995: 15). But at one crucial juncture, his criticism of Murphy (1963) seems labored. He insists that most of Murphy's criteria for characterizing the content of psalmic wisdom also apply to the prophet Amos (Crenshaw 2000: 11). That may be; however, as Murphy rightly notes (1963: 160), such themes as the two ways and the problem of retribution prevail in biblical wisdom literature. To claim, as Crenshaw does, that some of these ideas belong to 'a common ideology in the ancient world' can be taken to imply that both psalmic and prophetic units of text were susceptible to wisdom influence: a single environment encompasses the priest, prophet and sage, and no doubt there was considerable cross-fertilization.

Response to Crenshaw's Critique

At a half-dozen junctures, Crenshaw's critique of my own discussion of wisdom psalms invites challenge:

1. Crenshaw mentions my failure to speculate on how many rhetorical elements might 'turn an ordinary psalm into a sapiential one' (p. 11). I am reluctant to travel that route, since quantification holds limited promise for understanding poetry. And if a few canonical psalms are lengthy, most of them tend to be short, though in varying degree. To demand that a psalm yield a specific number of rhetorical elements in order to qualify as a wisdom poem is ill-advised: it is necessary to look at the overall tone and nature of the psalm.

2. Crenshaw is inconsistent in his response to my assertion that wisdom psalms prominently feature the *'ašrê* ('happy is…') formula as a rhetorical element. Here Zimmerli's comment that this declaration 'formulates the great concern of wisdom—who is fortunate' (1933: 185) is cogent. Crenshaw argues that my claim that the *'ašrê* formula 'is an "undeniably crucial wisdom psalms element" gives the impression of desperation' (2000: 11). Yet, he concedes that its presence in six psalms (1, 32, 34, 112, 127 and 128), all of which I accept as wisdom psalms, seems to bolster my hypothesis (p. 12). That observation scarcely connotes desperation.

3. Crenshaw erroneously declares that the admonitory address to 'sons' that I highlight in Ps. 34.12 finds no counterpart in biblical wisdom, which always attests the singular 'my son' (p. 11). The book of Proverbs alone speaks to the contrary. While it yields 22 uses of *b^{e}nî* ('my son') as a preferred way of activating sagacious admonition, in four verses *bānîm* ('sons'), as a plural vocative, fulfills the same function. Proverbs 4.1 opens, 'Listen, O sons, to a father's instruction', and 5.7, 7.24 and 8.32 all offer an identical mandate: 'And now, O sons, listen to me'. Not only is it not a problem that *bānîm* in Ps. 34.12 is a plural vocative, but it is seated in a compelling word of invitation: 'Come, O sons, listen to me, / the fear of Yahweh I will teach you'. Succinct admonitions soon follow in vv. 14-15. With the psalmist presenting himself as a respected wisdom teacher, who seeks to induce a reverential fear of Yahweh in the young who visit him for instruction, the affinity of this psalmic couplet with the book of Proverbs is impressive. It matters little that the uses of *bēn* ('son') fail to agree in number.

4. Crenshaw's comments about my copious inspection of wisdom-related words give the impression that mine is a 'dubious' pursuit (Crenshaw

2000: 12). Actually, as I embark on this endeavor, I endorse Murphy's dictum that 'wisdom language does not constitute wisdom' (1967: 410) and draw attention to Crenshaw's insight that, since 'wisdom is rooted in experience, it should be no surprise to discover a common vocabulary among sage, prophet, and priest' (1969: 133). My inspection of the Psalter's use of characteristic wisdom vocabulary did fall short of uncovering neglected psalms that might be responsibly recruited into the wisdom psalms category. Yet, it was an honest effort to test a thesis advanced by Scott in *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (1971), namely, that an inspection of words having a reasonably high frequency in widely recognized wisdom books in the canon might prove 'useful in assessing wisdom influence in other parts of the Old Testament such as the prophetic writings and the Psalms' (p. 121). Among the 77 wisdom-related words he lists, 64 appear in the Hebrew Psalter. That I was not overreaching in my claims is evident in my denial that tabulations of word frequency are a decisive factor in answering the question 'Which *are* wisdom psalms?' (Kuntz 1974: 208). Nevertheless, I held then, as I do now, that a focus on the usage of wisdom-related terms will surely enhance our understanding of Pss. 1, 32, 37 and 49 as wisdom pieces.

5. My quest to posit three subcategories of wisdom psalms (1974: 217-21), naming them as *sentence* (Pss. 127, 128 and 133), *acrostic* (Pss. 34, 37 and 112) and *integrative* wisdom poems (Pss. 1, 32 and 49), troubles Crenshaw (2000: 14). He doubts that a minimal number of sentence-proverbs in Pss. 127, 128 and 133 constitutes a defining element when these poems are viewed in their entirety. Exhibiting the brevity characteristic in the Songs of Ascent (Pss. 120–34), the longest of these three psalms spans six verses and the shortest three. The sentence-proverbs they embody play a formative role in structuring what is asserted, and to require that they be numerous verges on the absurd. Nor is it problematic that I pass over Pss. 9–10, 25, 111, 119 and 145 as alphabetic acrostics, while placing Pss. 34, 37 and 112 into this subcategory. Not every alphabetic acrostic in the Psalter is a wisdom psalm, but it would be short-sighted to ignore that artifice when it structures a psalm that for additional reasons presents itself as a sapiential poem. Crenshaw also objects that the subcategory of integrative wisdom psalms 'gives the appearance of gathering up loose ends' (p. 14). Although the term integrative may not be the most felicitous modifier for this subcategory, Crenshaw has taken too lightly my assertion that Pss. 1, 32 and 49 appear as orderly and carefully crafted units that readily lend themselves to strophic delineation.

6. Crenshaw's claim that diverse counsels about daily conduct are abundant in legal and prophetic texts (2000: 13) does not invalidate my claim (1974: 215) that they are likewise abundant in the canonical wisdom psalms as well as in the classical sapiential books of the Hebrew Bible. Contrary to Crenshaw, Ceresko, in his far-reaching essay on 'The Sage in the Psalms' (1990), cites my prose at length, capitalizing on my 'concrete description of everyday actions and attitudes of wise persons as portrayed in the psalms'. Ceresko considers Ps. 37 'particularly important in this regard' (p. 219).

Additional Problems

Two further considerations require mention: one pertaining to what Crenshaw does and the other to what he fails to do. First, a certain minimalism surges throughout Crenshaw's essay. From his perspective, only when a rhetorical device, word or motif is the exclusive property of wisdom psalms and the classical wisdom books of the Hebrew canon (Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes) does it deserve notice. His passion for precision can be inhibiting. As we study any alleged wisdom psalm we must engage specifics. But we must nonetheless ascertain how those specifics, some sapiential and some not, gather themselves into an achieved literary whole. Like all poems, any wisdom psalm is a discrete text that will in part blaze its own trail.

Perhaps this analogy will prove useful. In my memory bank are thoughts about Saint John the Divine, a religious edifice in New York City that is overpowering. Also, I have thoughts about a humble Quaker meeting house on the Herbert Hoover grounds in West Branch, Iowa, which I often tour with house guests. Whereas these two buildings differ noticeably, they hold some things in common—a floor, a roof, a place for worshipers to sit and a place for them to stand. These structures are identifiable in terms of unique *and* of shared characteristics. Is that not also the case with various types of biblical poetry? Hymns and thanksgiving psalms host shared features, as do individual thanksgivings and laments. Can one even envision a literary category in the Hebrew Bible whose full display of characteristics makes it completely alien to all other categories?

Second, Crenshaw never acknowledges Perdue's contributions to our topic. His published dissertation, *Wisdom and Cult* (1977), offers a copious chapter covering 'Didactic Poems and Wisdom Psalms', in which he calls my 1974 essay an 'incisive investigation' (p. 264). Perdue scrutinizes 11 texts that he embraces as 'long didactic poems' (p. 265), attesting to the

talents of both pre-exilic and post-exilic Israelite sages. Based on his assumption that one simple wisdom form plays a central role in each of the poems under inspection, he organizes them according to three subcategories: 'proverb poems' (Pss. 1, 19B, 34, 37, 73, 112 and 127; pp. 269-98), '*'ašrê* poems' (Pss. 32 and 119; pp. 299-312) and 'riddle poems' (Pss. 19A and 49; pp. 313-23). Whereas Perdue seems somewhat arbitrary as he isolates the central proverb that yields the thesis of those poems taken up in his first subcategory, there is much that is astute in his analysis. Although his agenda and my own are not identical, we are nonetheless engaged in a common cause. Not to overrate the Murphy–Kuntz–Perdue trio, it nevertheless bears mention that in the *NIB* (1996), when McCann refers readers to publications on wisdom psalms, he names this threesome (IV: 650). Also, in his essay on 'Psalm 73 and Wisdom', Luyten writes that 'the studies by Murphy, Kuntz, and Perdue are without doubt the best, most inclusive attempts to delimit a genre of "wisdom psalm"' (1979: 63). Luyten concedes this, despite some misgivings about our results. Since Perdue mounts a carefully nuanced investigation into psalmic wisdom, it is curious that Crenshaw bypasses this endeavor, with which, I assume, he would take issue.

Defending the Category

In a review essay on 'Hebrew Wisdom' (1981), Murphy holds that he, Mowinckel and I 'have established the validity of the classification of "wisdom psalms"' (p. 28). Some will read this as an overreaching assertion. Admittedly, it is much easier to claim that the Hebrew Psalter presents its share of wisdom content and yields traces of final wisdom editing than it is to claim that it embodies a recognizable literary form that can be named 'wisdom psalm'. On matters of content, Murphy (1963) avers that, as the psalmists drew upon their own experience, they 'found wisdom themes useful' (p. 167). In like vein, Crenshaw states that 'some psalms resemble wisdom literature in stressing the importance of learning, struggling to ascertain life's meaning, and employing proverbial lore' (2000: 15).

On matters of editing, both explicit and tacit indications of editorial activity within the Psalter have long engaged Wilson. If in his initial work (1985) he barely ponders wisdom's role in its final canonical shaping, in a later essay (1993) he discovers a 'wisdom frame' for Book V of the Psalter that is activated by sapiential material in Pss. 107.42-43 and 145.19-20. Then, with Ps. 90, at the head of Book IV, projecting 'its own explicit

wisdom teaching' in vv. 11-12, Wilson extends the wisdom frame to encompass Book IV (pp. 79-80). Based on my own study of the presence and strategic location of Pss. 1, 32, 34 and 37, as well as wisdom snippets in Ps. 39.5-7, 40.5 and 41.2, I conclude that 'the scholar-sages of postexilic Israel exerted a significant impact on the shaping of the Hebrew Psalter's first book' (2000: 156).

Wisdom has indeed left its mark on the book of Psalms. But does this collection yield discrete poems that beg to be named 'wisdom psalms'? Answering in the affirmative, my 1974 essay identified Pss. 1, 32, 34, 37, 49, 112, 127, 128 and 133 as authentic wisdom psalms. More recent reflection leads me to add Ps. 73 to this list. While factors determining whether a psalm should be classified as an individual lament evoke far more scholarly consensus than those determining the candidacy of an alleged wisdom psalm, several discernible properties of psalmic poetry identify *bona fide* wisdom poems. These include a cluster of stylistic features, typical vocabulary, and motifs that regularly inhabit Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes.

Since the Psalter contains poems of varying length, the notion that a poem must display a specific number of sapiential characteristics in order to qualify as a wisdom psalm obviously lacks merit. Yet, in each case these characteristics should be multiple and reasonably wide ranging. Thus, the attempt of Hurvitz (1988) to isolate a distinctive terminology in the Psalter that is lacking in the Hebrew canon beyond the classical wisdom books is helpful but not definitive. Mentioning the imperative *sûr mērā'* ('turn from evil') in Pss. 34.15 and 37.27 and the noun *hôn* ('wealth') in Pss. 112.3 and 119.14, he links four psalms with sapiential speech. Augmenting other reliable indicators in Pss. 34, 37 and 112, this discovery, in my opinion, buttresses their status as authentic wisdom psalms. Since Ps. 119 is an acrostic *tour de force* and an entity unto itself, however, the sheer presence of *hôn* falls short of establishing its candidacy.

Fully committed to instructing those who encounter them, the canonical wisdom psalms predominantly direct their discourse horizontally toward humankind, not vertically toward the deity. They are the product of teacher poets intent on imparting lessons on the good life to those who thirst for understanding. As is the case with royal psalms, content more than form defines wisdom psalms. Tending to embody sentence proverbs and *'ašrê* formulations, they manifest some generic similarity. Nevertheless, wisdom psalms do not assume one characteristic form. Since biblical wisdom literature is cast in diverse formats, Whybray (1996) sensibly submits that

'the *literary form* of such psalms is not of first importance' (p. 37; emphasis is Whybray's).

In our form-critical pursuits, we do well to acknowledge that the Psalter includes texts that defy facile categorization. Just as many critics are not alarmed that Ps. 18 is viewed as both a royal psalm *and* a thanksgiving psalm, it need not be alarming that Ps. 1 is viewed as a torah *and* a wisdom psalm, and Ps. 73 as a thanksgiving *and* a wisdom psalm. Since the torah is celebrated as the medium through which the divine will is disclosed, and thus the basis for true wisdom and well being, it follows that torah and wisdom psalms stand in close proximity, both mandating the fear of Yahweh (Pss. 34.10; 112.1). Moreover, the teaching that is *implicit* in the 'testimony' voiced in a thanksgiving psalm resembles teaching that is *explicit* in the unfolding of a wisdom psalm. Clearly, wisdom psalms overlap with other genres. Yet, at day's end, whether or not we classify a psalm as a 'wisdom psalm' may not appreciably impact our close reading of it. For example, Murphy (1963) once held that, since wisdom elements (vv. 1-2, 8-11) encircle its thanksgiving testimony (vv. 3-7), Ps. 32 'deserves to be classified as a wisdom psalm' (p. 162). Recently (2000), he identifies this poem as 'a prayer of thanksgiving, with overtones of wisdom teaching' (p. 86). Even so, his fundamental interpretation of this psalm remains constant.

Roughly three decades ago, Scott (1971) observed that the scholarly community lacks consensus on precisely which poems in the Psalter merit the label 'wisdom psalms' and surmised that the four on which there seemed to be fullest agreement are Pss. 1, 37, 49 and 112 (p. 193). That same assessment seems to hold true today. Yet not all is in disarray. McCann is surely on target when he posits that 'one of the wisdom psalms opens the psalter and serves as a kind of preface' (1996: 650). And Murphy's statement on Ps. 37 is unassailable: 'if ever a psalm could be classified as wisdom, it is this one' (2000: 88). Its sequence of terse independent sayings readily calls to mind ubiquitous aphoristic couplets in Proverbs.

Conclusion

Scholars invested in our topic do not sing in unison. That I readily admit. However, I do not see a discussion of the category of 'wisdom psalms' to be merely a 'chasing after the wind', to use Qoheleth's phrase. By focusing on a limited number of complete psalms and psalm elements that are reminiscent of what transpires in the widely recognized trinity of wisdom

books in the Hebrew canon, we enrich our knowledge of biblical wisdom literature. Additionally, we become more sensitive to the Psalter's instructional function. In *The Tree of Life* (1990), Murphy concedes that one scholar's proposed list of authentic wisdom psalms is unlikely to coincide fully with another's. With a welcome note of scholarly civility he adds, 'The reader is invited to form his or her own criteria for wisdom, and challenge the number of psalms that have been classified as "wisdom"' (p. 104). To that suggestion I respond, 'This, too, is wisdom'.

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