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ROBERT E. WALLACE,
THE NARRATIVE EFFECT OF PSALMS 84–89

THE NARRATIVE EFFECT OF PSALMS 84–89

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INTRODUCTION

Recent canonical approaches to the Psalter have suggested that the Psalter was redacted purposely to help the exilic and post-exilic communities answer the apparent failure of the Davidic covenant.¹ Over twenty years ago, Gerald Wilson demonstrated the purposed redaction of the Psalter by focusing on the endings of each book of the Psalter. Ten years later, Nancy deClaissé-Walford focused on “reading from the beginning” of those same texts.² According to their proposals, Book IV of the Psalter is the “theological pivot point.” Book IV provides the reader reorientation to Yahweh’s kingship following Book I & II’s original orientation of the Davidic covenant and Book III’s disorientation of exile. If Wilson and deClaissé-Walford’s readings of the text are correct and Book IV (specifically Ps 90) is the turning point in the story of the Psalter, then the third book of the Psalter moves the reader toward that climax and reorientation. The canonical position of the last six psalms of Book III focuses the reader on an exilic Israel searching for answers in advance of the ones provided by Book IV.

James Sanders notes that in times of crisis “only a story with old, recognizable elements has the power for life.”³ By the beginning of Book IV, Israel successfully finds that old story: Moses as messenger and Yahweh as King. In Book III, however, the disorientation of exile challenges the psalmists’ attempts to find hope in the traditional elements of faith. The disoriented psalmists desperately look to reorient their theology by appealing to Temple, land, and Davidic covenant.⁴ Unfortunately, those traditional elements are no longer capable of providing hope.

¹ Not all scholars are convinced of the Psalter’s intended redaction. See R. N. Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book* (JSOTSup, 222; Sheffield: JSOT, 1996).

² G. H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBLDS 76; Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1985); N. deClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997); See also R. E. Wallace, *The Narrative Effect of Book IV of the Hebrew Psalter* (StBL, 112; New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

³ J. Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 21.

⁴ W. Brueggemann, “Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function,” *JSOT* 17 (1980), 3–32 (5–6).

Communal laments dominate Book III. Using traditional form-critical categories ten of the sixteen psalms from Ps 74 to Ps 89 contain individual or communal lament characteristics.⁵ These laments provide a canonical context in which to read the psalms of Book III. The psalmists attempt to make sense of God from the context of exile. Within that context, the hymns of celebration found in Pss 84–89 become ironic expressions of a grieving Israel desperately holding on to what brought hope in the past. Psalm 84 ties the presence of the divine to the temple. The hopeful conclusion of Ps 85 is tied to the blessings that God will give the land (85:12). Psalm 87 again ties hope to Zion. In the climax of Book III, the reader finds that Ps 89 explicitly ties hope to David and the Davidic monarchy. Though the psalmists attempt to find hope in the “old story” of these symbols of God’s past provision, the laments found in Pss 84–89 remind the reader that those elements no longer provide hope.

THE METHOD

For centuries, people of faith attached significance to the editing of the Psalter as a single “book.” For Samson Raphael Hirsch, the struggle of David throughout the book of Psalms mirrors the struggle of the Jews throughout history.⁶ For St. Benedict, and the Benedictine monks who follow, the Psalter is a book that must be read in its entirety in a week for due diligence to be shown in service.

For the contemporary reader, however, there are obstacles to overcome. The post-Enlightenment mind continually struggles with the Near Eastern ability to find harmony in contrasting facts. The fact that the creation stories of Gen 1 and 2 were redacted together is not as shocking to the Western reader as the fact that the biblical text does not need to harmonize the differences. This kind of story-telling only emphasizes the distance between the post-Enlightenment reader and the biblical redactors. This gap is widened when the reader comes to the psalms. In the Psalter, no obvious attempt has been made to redact these individual “sources” into a seamless narrative. Yet, these individual psalms

⁵ Pss 74, 77, 79, 80, 82:8, 83, 85, 86, 88, 89:39–52; H. Gunkel & J. Begrich, *An Introduction to the Psalms: the Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (trans. J. D. Nogalski; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1998), 82; trans. of *Einleitung in die Psalmen: die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israels* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985, 1933); W. H. Bellinger, *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1990), 45; N. deClaisé-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 85–86.

⁶ S. R. Hirsch, *The Psalms* (trans. Gertrude Hirschler; 2 vols; New York: Philipp Feldheim, Inc., 1960).

have been collected into five units which are collected in a single book, a book that has traditionally been interpreted as “anthology.”

The work of Nancy deClaissé-Walford and Gerald Wilson laid the foundation for this methodology. Their theories regarding the theological redaction of the individual books of the Psalter suggested a purpose. Indeed, the redactional purpose mirrored the story of Israel. A subtle sense of “story” emerged for the reader of the Psalter.

While according to traditional form-critical categories the Psalter is not classified as narrative, there is a narrative impulse to biblical poetry. The broad narrative impulse throughout the entire Psalter when combined with the narrative settings of the individual psalms and the semantic and thematic connections Book III shares with other portions of the Psalter and the Hebrew Bible contribute to the sense of “plot,” which emerges for the reader. This plot provides a hermeneutical lens for the reader.⁷

What has emerged in this process is a methodology that takes a step away from the redaction concerns of Wilson, deClaissé-Walford and others. For this analysis, the process of the reading of the Hebrew Psalter is important. Micro-canonical issues, including poetic vocabulary and syntax, within individual Psalms are considered. Form-critical questions and historical questions regarding the editorial process of the Hebrew Psalter are noted; however, they are only important to this study as they inform the reading of the text—*Sitz im Leben* has been replaced by *Sitz im Buch*. The psalms also demonstrate a number of lexical and thematic connections with other psalms and with important narrative texts of the Hebrew Scriptures. Those connections allow the reader to “narrativise” the poetic text.

This reading takes the superscriptions of the psalms seriously, perhaps too seriously for some. While the majority of scholars might not go as far as von Rad and say the superscriptions “have no authoritative value,” many would also not allow the superscription to influence the context of the reading of the text to the degree this project does. If the reader is going to take seriously the canonical form of this text, however, the superscriptions have to be more than simply interesting. The superscriptions should find a significant place within the interpretation. When the text makes an association to a historical setting or with an individual, a canonical reader of the psalms needs to wrestle with the implications of that association. In this analysis, the superscriptions provide an interpretive setting through which a reader encounters the text.

If a compromise is when no one is happy, then this methodology is a good compromise. It is not narrative enough for the narrative critics. It does not emphasize the poetic structures as much as the poetic scholars would like. It is not form critical

⁷ Wallace, *The Narrative Effect of Book IV of the Hebrew Psalter*, 10–13.

enough for the form critics, and it is not anthropological or sociological at all. In the end, methodologies are best seen worked out with texts, as I will now demonstrate.

THE STORY THUS FAR

Psalms 84–85 and 87–88 represent the second collection of Korahite psalms in the Psalter. The first Korahite psalms begin Book II and the Elohistic Psalter, and they continue the lament focus of Book I. These early Korahite psalms parallel the Book III Korahite psalms with an emphasis on longing for God, lamenting God's abandonment, celebrating God's choice of Zion, and looking forward to a future promise of salvation.⁸

Constructing a history of the Korahites is only speculation.⁹ The Chronicler's history identifies the Korahites as the "doorkeepers" of the Tabernacle.¹⁰ If, as 1 Chron 6:31–38 suggests, this role continued in the temple, this fact might explain the strong emphasis on Zion and the temple which is found in both Korahite collections in the Psalter.¹¹

While the emphasis on David and Zion continue in Book II, the psalms are sung with a variety of voices. Where Davidic superscriptions dominate Book I, only eighteen of the thirty-one psalms in Book II have Davidic superscriptions. In addition to the Korahite collection Asaph is mentioned, and several psalms are untitled. Perhaps, the most significant of the Book II superscriptions comes at the end. In Ps 72, the reader finds the first psalm of Solomon and the blessings and security of the Davidic covenant transferred to Solomon and his descendants.¹² With his legacy secured, David can stop singing (72:20).

Though it might be a successful transfer of power and blessing between David and Solomon, the reader would certainly recall Israel's difficulties following Solomon's reign. That same decline occurs in the story of the Psalter as well. Though the singer of Ps 73 directly addresses God, that close relationship reveals questions about how just the world (and ultimately God) is. The evildoers continue to succeed, and God does nothing to remedy the situation.¹³

⁸ F.-L. Hossfeld and E. Zenger, *Psalms 2* (trans. G. Pizi; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 357.

⁹ For one of the more interesting speculations, see M. D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Sons of Korah* (JSOTSup, 20; Sheffield: JSOT, 1982).

¹⁰ 1 Chron 9:19

¹¹ Ps 46:4; 48: 1, 2, 11, 12; 84:7; 87: 2, 5; See G. Wanke, *Die Zionstheologie der Korachiten* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1966).

¹² G. H. Wilson, "The Use of Royal Psalms at the 'Seams' of the Psalter," *JSOT* 35 (1986), 85–94 (89).

¹³ C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalter* (trans. K. R. Crim and R. N. Soulen; Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 194; The psalmist is not unlike Job here. See J. C. McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of*

Psalm 74 moves from a lament of an individual in Ps 73 to a lament from the community and opens with a cry of desperation, “Why, O Yahweh, have you cast us away forever?” The reader finds that in Ps 74, the sanctuary of Yahweh and Yahweh’s Holy Mountain have been destroyed (74:7). The psalmist’s foes mock and destroy.

This struggle continues through the Asaph collection which makes up the first eleven psalms of Book III. Psalm 83, the last of the Asaph psalms, implores God to act against the enemies who have attempted to wipe out God’s people. The reader has found in Book III a holy mountain in perpetual ruins (74:3), God’s enduring **חסד** in question (77:9); a destroyed Jerusalem (79:1); and no mention of God’s king or anointed from Ps 73 through Ps 83. Book III is clearly an “exile” book.

J. Clinton McCann’s reading of Book III may find seeds of hope, which are brought to full realization in Books IV and V.¹⁴ Several of the Asaph psalms celebrate Yahweh as judge of all nations and remember the divine faithfulness to Israel in the face of Israel’s faithlessness.¹⁵ If the canonical setting of Book III is exile, however, understanding Yahweh as judge, even judge of other nations, would not necessarily provide a positive reorientation. Indeed, this concern finds expression in the questioning of the divine justice at both ends of the Asaph collection in Ps 73 and Ps 83. If Yahweh is divine judge, why do those judgments tarry and fail to satisfy (Ps 83:1–2)?

Robert Cole notes that throughout Asaph psalms, the psalmists ask God “Why?” [למה] and “How long?” [עַד־מַתַּי] the divine wrath will rest on the people (74:1, 10–11; 79:5; 80:5[4], 13[12]).¹⁶ In Ps 82:2 God responds with a similar question for the people, “How long [עַד־מַתַּי] will you judge wrongly and give favor to the wicked?” McCann calls Ps 82 the most important theological text in the canon as it gives the reader the standard of behavior by which God judges humanity and the divine council.¹⁷ Perhaps in

Psalms (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 140–44; J. F. Ross, “Psalm 73,” J.G. Gammie (ed.), *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1978), 161–75; and M. Buber, “the Heart Determines: Psalm 73,” J.L. Crenshaw (ed.), *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 109–18.

¹⁴ J. C. McCann, Jr., “Books I–III and the Editorial Purpose of the Hebrew Psalter,” J.C. McCann (ed.), *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, (JSOTSup, 20; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 100.

¹⁵ God as judge: Ps 75:3, 9, 11; 76:10, 13; Ps 82; Israel’s faithlessness and God’s faithfulness: Ps 77:12–21; Ps 78: 10, 17, 32, 40, 56; Ps 81

¹⁶ R. L. Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III* (JSOTSup, 307; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 132.

¹⁷ J. C. McCann, “The Single Most Important Text in the Entire Bible: Toward a Theology of the Psalms,” Rolf Jacobson (ed.), *Soundings in the Theology of Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, (Minne-

response to the numerous questions, Yahweh speaks directly from the divine council and makes clear that God's people must "give justice to the weak and fatherless," and "rescue the weak and the needy" (82:3–4). This answer, however, is not enough to satisfy the psalmist, since, after God confronts the people with the divine's expectations for justice in Ps 82, the psalmist confronts God in Ps 83 with the divine silence in the face of unjust nations.

Left with unsatisfying answers, Book III turns its attention to the elements which provided a focus for faith in the past. As the reader encounters Pss 84–89, the psalmist is desperately clinging to items from the time when God made sense and when God kept his promises. In Ps 78:68–70, the psalmist celebrates Zion, the temple, the land, and David. In quick order, Pss 84–89 remind the reader that faith in those specific historical symbols of God's faithfulness is misplaced.

PSALMS 84–86

The traditional setting for Ps 84 has generally been interpreted as pre-exilic.¹⁸ As already addressed, however, the reader who encounters the canonical Psalter reads this psalm in the context of a holy mountain which has been destroyed. That canonical context of exile is supported by some commentators using other interpretive methods as well.¹⁹ With an exilic setting providing a hermeneutic lens through which to read the psalm, Ps 84 becomes an ironic expression of hopelessness. "Better is one day in your courts"; and yet, the reader knows the courts are a perpetual ruin. The transformation of desert conditions (84:7[6]) becomes a metaphorical one, which speaks of Israel's future restoration while reminding them of their current despair.²⁰

The tents [משכן] of Yahweh may be "delightful" in Ps 84:2[1], and indeed, this is in keeping with the Korahite vision of the dwelling place of the divine.²¹ In Book III, however, the reader remembers that God's משכן has been defiled (74:7) and like the משכן of Shiloh (78:60) has been forsaken. When read in isolation, this psalm is read as an expression of hope found in the presence of the divine in the temple. In canonical context, however, this psalm is not an expression of hope and adoration as much as an expression of longing.

apolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2011), 63–76.

¹⁸ Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 56; W.O.E. Oesterley, *The Psalms* (London: SPCK, 1939, 1959), 387; C. Westerman links many motifs in the psalm to the "pre-David" era.

¹⁹ E.J. Kissane, *The Book of Psalms* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan Ltd, 1964), 386–87.

²⁰ M. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1990), 356.

²¹ Ps 43:3; 46:4

The seeds of lament are found within the psalm itself. Ps 84:10 implores that Yahweh, “See our shield, O God! Regard the face of your anointed!” It is the first mention of Yahweh’s anointed king since Ps 72, and it sets up a singular focus of Pss 84–89, namely David. Robert Cole suggests this first person plural in the midst of predominantly first singular verbal constructions and pronominal suffixes stands out from the rest of the psalm and is a deliberate attempt to connect this psalm in the mind of the reader with similar communal prayers, specifically 80, which is written entirely in the first person plural.²²

Psalm 85 then makes explicit the lamentation which was implicit in Ps 84. In a way reminiscent of material earlier in Book III, the psalmist has returned to questioning God directly. “Will you be angry at us forever?” (85:6[5]). As is typical with lament psalms, the psalmist rehearses God’s mighty acts on Israel’s behalf in the past.²³ The psalmist remembers the forgiveness of God in the past (85:2[1]) and the way in which God has been favorable to the land (85:1[2]).

Scholars have proposed an impressive range of settings for Ps 85. Many hold the position of Kissane. He locates the psalm to the post-exilic period, though he never names a specific cause which necessitates Israel to continue to pray for forgiveness and the fortune of the land.²⁴ Goulder, on the other hand, notes several interesting lexical connections to Exod 32–34. He imagines a pre-exilic national ceremony in which the two passages were used to focus the community on their sinfulness and need for God’s forgiveness.²⁵

The canonical context for the psalm, however, is neither in the settlement nor the post-exilic period. When the psalmist implores God to restore the fortunes of the land, the reader knows that in the context of Book III this land holds the destroyed temple (74:7). The land was afraid and still in the face of God’s judgment (76:10[9]), and the beasts of the land consume the flesh of God’s saints (79:2).

The appeal to the divine ends in Ps 85:9[8] with an interesting connection to Ps 84:10[9]. There, the psalmist entreats that God “look at” [ראה] the shield of Judah. Psalm 85 asks that God “show” [הראנו] “covenant faithfulness” [חסד].²⁶ In Ps 77:9[8], the psalmist wondered if God’s חסד had disappeared forever. In Ps 85—in the reality of exile—that question remains unanswered.

²² Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III*, 118–19.

²³ C. Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (trans. J. R. Porter; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 31–32.

²⁴ Kissane, *The Book of Psalms*, 392.

²⁵ Goulder, *The Psalms of the Sons of Korah*, 98–111.

²⁶ Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III*, 127.

The hopeful conclusion of Ps 85 is tied to the blessings that God will give the land (85:12). The prayer is that Yahweh will bless the land presently, as formerly, though the psalm lacks a specific complaint.²⁷ The exilic context of the psalm is reinforced by Moses Bottenweiser, who notes some interesting parallels between Ps 85 and Isa 40–55.²⁸ Ultimately, the psalmist recognizes that the current distress is connected to the disfavor of Yahweh. This prayer is, therefore, a petition for Yahweh's anger to end.

The final verses certainly can be understood as doxology and as a response to Ps 84.²⁹ That doxology, however, carries an undertone of anticipation.³⁰ The land, Israel's dwelling place, will be restored, but there is a recognition that the blessing of the land (and the ownership) is in the control of Yahweh.³¹

When the reader encounters Ps 86, David appears as the psalmist to lament the situation of Judah. The Davidic superscription recalls James Sanders's observation of Judah's need to appeal to an historic authority figure by which to answer the difficulties of exile. The name "David" will carry with it an ancient authority speaking on behalf of an exiled people and a metonym for Davidic monarchy itself.

He appears as the singer of a psalm for the first time since he was said to have finished singing in Ps 72. Though this is David's first explicit appearance in Book III, Cole maintains that Book III has a Davidic emphasis throughout.³² David appointed Asaph, Heman, and Ethan, who appear at the beginning and ending of the Book III.³³ It seems, however, that David is not satisfied speaking through intermediaries, and he appears as singer to voice Judah's concerns.

David's song offers no words of comfort. David's lament calls to mind the reality of the failure of Davidic monarchy. David is poor and afflicted (86:1). "In my day of trouble, I call on you" (86:7). David's defense is that he is חסיד (86:2), and those against him are prideful [זדים] and frightening [עריצים]. Perhaps, speaking to the doubt in the abundant חסד of the divine found in Ps 77:9[8] and 85:9[8], the psalm expresses confidence in the abundant חסד of God. In fact, the psalm reminds God of the divine's abundant חסד on three separate occasions (86:5, 13, 15).

Unfortunately for David, the exile has shaken his authority, and this is seen in subsequent psalms. Psalm 88:12[11] asks if God's חסד (which is abundant in Ps 86) can extend to the grave,

²⁷ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 367.

²⁸ M. Bottenweiser, *The Psalms* (New York: KTAV, 1969), 273–80.

²⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 366.

³⁰ D. Zucker, "Restructuring Psalm 85" *JBQ* 35 (2007), 47–55 (50).

³¹ Lev 25:23; 24:1; Ps 39:13[12]

³² Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III*, 177.

³³ 1 Chron 6:18, 24, 29; 15:17; 19:1

and although Ps 89:2–4, 25, 29, 34 [1–3, 24, 28, 33] give assurance that David has been forever entrusted with the divine **דָּסָה**, Ps 89:50[49] raises the question where that **דָּסָה** has gone in the face of the present distress.

The David of Ps 86 approaches the divine with a different tone than the reader has experienced to this point in Book III. Six times in the psalm, the psalmist uses emphatic speech to emphasize relationship.³⁴ Indeed, the singer of Ps 86 has the confidence of someone who expects Yahweh to respond.³⁵ Though David is afforded special status in the history of Israel, the expectation of the singer of Ps 86 may not be connected to any special position. In many of the psalms in Books I–III, a reader can find an expectation of Yahweh's responsibility to save the people. Dennis Tucker has suggested that language used in the Psalter reveals that a patron-client relationship existed in the background of a number of the laments.³⁶ When Yahweh, the faithful patron, fails to rescue the ones who are perishing, Yahweh's honor and faithfulness are compromised and the status of the covenant itself could be called into question.³⁷

The consequence of such failure is shame for the client (the community itself), and to a greater degree, shame for the Patron (Yahweh). Further, these psalms attempt to restore honor to the client-community by recognizing the shame of the failed Patron. The shamed Patron must act in a manner consistent with his reciprocal obligations to earn honor. Honor cannot be extended to the client-community until honor has been restored for the Patron.³⁸

Yahweh, as the faithful patron, has a responsibility, therefore, to take up the case of the victims (e.g., Pss 35:1 and 43:1) for relationships to be restored. In Ps 86, David stops short of demanding that Yahweh deliver him, but he does have a tone of confident expectation.

David's lament confirms for the reader the last of the three elements of traditional theology is in crisis. Though Ps 84 celebrates the Temple, the reader knows it is gone. Though Ps 85 looks forward to a restored land, the canonical context and lexical connections to Isa 40–55 reminds the reader that it is desolate and in need of restoring. David's appearance in Book III and confession of Yahweh's abundant **דָּסָה** is an indication questions remain about the Davidic monarchy—questions that are made explicit at the end of Book III.

³⁴ Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 36.

³⁵ J. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 279.

³⁶ D. Tucker, "Is Shame a Matter of Patronage in the Communal Laments?" *JSOT* 31 (2007), 465–480 (474–79).

³⁷ For Tucker, Pss 44, 74, and 79 are paradigmatic of this relationship.

³⁸ Tucker, "Is Shame a Matter of Patronage in the Communal Laments?" 475.

PSALMS 87–89

The celebration of Zion in Ps 87 comes after the despair and pleading of David in Ps 86. An exilic setting is provided by its canonical position, as well as from some form-critical readings of the text. Kraus reads the terminus a quo for Ps 87 as the exile.³⁹ Gunkel believes that the desire for Zion was inversely proportional to how easily a pious individual would be able to visit.⁴⁰ If one agrees with Gunkel's hypothesis, it would be easy to read Ps 87 and its enthusiastic praise for Zion in the context of exile.

Commentators remain uncertain of the original context of Ps 87.⁴¹ In the exilic context of Book III, however, it is natural to read Ps 87 as providing an eschatological hope in Zion.⁴² Rahab's mythological association and connection to the historical enemy of Yahweh would seem to emphasize the eschatological expectation of the world's submission to Yahweh (analogous to Mic 4 and Isa 2).⁴³ In the psalm, Zion is the universal spiritual center of the entire world and for all people.⁴⁴ The appearance of Babylon and Egypt (in the metaphor of Rahab)⁴⁵ in the psalm would reinforce reading the psalm in the context of exile since those two nations are two prominent destinations of the Judahite exiles. Here, both of these traditional enemies of God's people acknowledge the divine.

Like Ps 84, Ps 87 again ties hope to Jerusalem. Zion is the place where the Most High God [עליון] gives nations divine testimony of presence (87:5). Indeed, Zion is often a metaphor for divine presence.⁴⁶ God chose this location as a seat of power to execute dominion over all lands.⁴⁷ While this psalm is certainly an amplification of Ps 86:9, it is also a celebration of the sovereignty of the divine.⁴⁸

The immeasurable, ultimate hope of Ps 87 gives way to an immeasurable, ultimate despair in Ps 88. While some scholars deny the complete despair of Ps 88,⁴⁹ most find Ps 88 to be the desperate prayer of a sick individual who is near death. Weiser believes "this psalm is the lament, unrelieved by a single ray of comfort or

³⁹ H.-J. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150: A Commentary* (trans. H. C. Oswald; Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989), 186.

⁴⁰ Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 235.

⁴¹ E.g., A. Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 580; Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 185; Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 389.

⁴² M. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 389.

⁴³ M. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 389.

⁴⁴ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 389; Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 189.

⁴⁵ See Is 30:7; 51:9.

⁴⁶ W. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 24.

⁴⁷ Kraus, *Psalms 60–150: A Commentary*, 189.

⁴⁸ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 389; Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III*, 166.

⁴⁹ Goulder, *The Psalms of the Sons of Korah*, 203.

hope.”⁵⁰ Dahood calls it a “lament of a desolate man in mortal illness.”⁵¹ Kraus sees the psalm filled with “impenetrable darkness.”⁵²

Psalm 88 shares enough lexemic parallels with Ps 86 that Robert Cole feels it is appropriate to read each speaker as suffering the same affliction.⁵³ While one must be careful to distinguish between the sharing of commonly used words and phrases between psalms and the significant sharing of lexemes,⁵⁴ Cole believes the number of significant connections between the two psalms allows the reader to ignore the superscription and read the singer of Ps 88 as a future David.⁵⁵ M. D. Goulder’s reading of the text supports Cole’s royal reading showing that the royal quality of Ps 88 is not limited to the connections it shares with Ps 86. Goulder argues that Ps 88 belonged to an atonement ritual historically associated with a king.⁵⁶

The historic interpretation has connected the complaint of this psalm to sickness; however, no specific language is found in the psalm which necessitates that interpretation.⁵⁷ Marvin Tate notes a tradition of interpretation which interprets this psalm as a communal, exilic prayer of Israel.⁵⁸ An exilic reading would be fitting for the canonical setting of Book III.

The contrast between the positive, eschatological hope of Ps 87 and the dark reality of Ps 88 continues Book III’s pattern of alternating between hope and lament.⁵⁹ By Ps 88, however, the reader finds no word of trust in Yahweh’s ultimate deliverance and no attempt to appeal to a divine responsibility of deliverance. The psalm even lacks the petition which is typical for the lament psalms. It is as though the psalmist simply wanted to make God aware of the divine silence.

⁵⁰ Weiser, *The Psalms*, 586.

⁵¹ M. Dahood, *Psalms II:51–100* (AB, 17; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1968), 302.

⁵² Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 192.

⁵³ Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III*, 169–170.

⁵⁴ D. M. Howard, *The Structure of Psalms 93–100* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 22; Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book*, 28.

⁵⁵ Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III*, 170; To be fair, however, Cole believes that David is the dominant speaker across all seventeen of the Book III psalms.

⁵⁶ Goulder, *The Psalms of the Sons of Korah*, 201. See also John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (SBT; Second Series 32; Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1976).

⁵⁷ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 400.

⁵⁸ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 401. See E. Haag “Psalm 88,” E. Haag and F.-L. Hossfeld (eds.), *Freude an der Weisung des Herrn: Beiträge zur Theologie der Psalmen* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Biblewerk, 1986), 149–70.

⁵⁹ J. C. McCann, Jr., “Books I–III and the Editorial Purpose of the Hebrew Psalter,” 91.

Rahab redeemed and functioning on the side of the divine in Ps 87 becomes an ironic and troubling thing for the psalmist. In Ps 88 the watery chaos that is afflicting the psalmist is directly connected to Yahweh. It is the divine who is ultimately responsible.⁶⁰ The divine overwhelms the psalmist with his breaking waves (88:8[7]). God's wrath sweeps over the psalmist and surrounds the singer "like a flood" (88:17–18[16–17]).

The unanswered prayers of Ps 88:14[13] in the morning are also difficult. In Ps 46:6[5], the Korahite singer celebrates God's saving help coming in the morning.⁶¹ In Ps 49:15[14], the Korahite singer celebrates morning as the time the upright will be victorious over the wicked. The exile removes that hope, however, and by Ps 73:14, morning brings chastening. Finally, in Ps 88, Heman, the Korahite singer, laments that morning brings divine silence.

The silence is broken by Ps 89 by what first seems to the reader to be a hymn. The canonical setting for the psalm is a matter of debate. Cole feels that "without question Psalm 89 has been intentionally placed following the desperate and seemingly hopeless queries of 88 with praise and confidence."⁶² For Hossfeld, however, Ps 89 "can be read as an intensification of Ps 88."⁶³ When taken as a whole and in canonical context, Ps 89 would encourage the reader to maintain the exilic focus which has been clearly emphasized to this point. The psalm vividly contrasts the tension between "now" and "formerly"—present distress and past promise.⁶⁴

From the example of both sets of Korahite psalms, the reader might expect this psalm of Ethan the Ezrahite to mention Zion or Temple in a recitation of the faithfulness of the divine. Psalm 89, however, is silent on the matter. It seems that the preceding laments have finally shown those symbols of hope to be empty.

Ultimately, the beginning of Ps 89 ties hope to David and the Davidic monarchy. In Ps 89 the reader finds an inverted lament—the moment of trust comes before the complaint.⁶⁵ The singer builds the case for the inviolability of Yahweh's words (89:2–39[1–38]) and then moves to the question, "Why would God break his word and forsake the anointed?" (89:39–52[38–51]).

The reader of Book III has found the psalmists expect Yahweh to regard his anointed. The psalmists understand the relationship as closer than patron-client, and even closer than adoption.

⁶⁰ Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 113.

⁶¹ According to Tate (*Psalms 51–100*, 403), morning was when one should expect God's help; Cf. Pss 46:6; 90:14; 143:8; 2 Sam 23:3–4; Zeph 3:5).

⁶² Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III*, 203.

⁶³ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 397.

⁶⁴ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 415.

⁶⁵ Westermann along with others notes that the "Confession of Trust" typical to laments occurs after the petition. (e.g., see Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 52)

Indeed, a biological, paternal relationship is emphasized to stress the inviolability of the covenant.⁶⁶ In Ps 80:16[15], 18[17] and Ps 86:16, this “genetic” relationship between God and king is celebrated. That relationship is again stressed in Ps 89:28–29[27–28] and cited as evidence that the historical reality of exile is contrary to the nation’s expectations. Absolute claims are made for David as the recipient of the faithfulness of God.⁶⁷ Those absolute claims are quickly refuted by the reality of history. Instead of Yahweh’s eternal covenant with David being eternal, Judah’s king and future rest in the control of its enemies.⁶⁸

Though the doxology of Ps 89 demonstrates faith in the divine, it is a faith which is still grounded in the patron-client expectation that Davidic covenant will be honored. In Ps 89:51[50] the psalmist wants Yahweh to demonstrate the divine faithfulness so that enemies of the divine will have no reason to gloat. It is interesting to note that this argument is the same one used by Moses in Exod 32 when he pleaded with the divine on behalf of Israel, and Ps 90 is the “prayer of Moses, Man of God.”

CONCLUSION

The emphasis on the forsakenness of the eternal throne of David in Ps 89 may well be the overall concern of the last psalms of Book III. Each of the symbols of hope in Pss 84–89 is presented as prominent in the life of David: David wanted to build the Temple (2 Sam 7:2); David expanded the land (2 Sam 8:1–14); and David purchased Mt. Zion for the temple (2 Sam 24:18–25). Additionally, it is not uncommon for many of the laments of Book III to be associated with a ritual humiliation which is speculated by some to be experienced by the king every year.⁶⁹ That connection to royalty is more than merely speculative in Book III, however, as David himself appears to lament his station in Ps 86. Further, all of the superscriptions of Book III can be associated with David. David has been presented as appointing Asaph, who is the singer in Pss 73–83 (1 Chon 6:39). The Sons of Korah are said to be appointed by David to be “over the service of song in the house of Yahweh” (1 Chron 6:31–38). Heman and Ethan are also traditional Davidic appointees (1 Chron 6:18, 24, 29; 15:17; 19:1)..

These implicit and explicit connections to the character of David throughout Book III might suggest to the reader that, just as Marvin Tate calls Book IV a “Moses-book,”⁷⁰ Book III is a “David-book.” Instead of celebrating David, however, the psalmists of

⁶⁶ Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 192.

⁶⁷ Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment*, 24–25.

⁶⁸ Mays, *Psalms*, 288.

⁶⁹ J. H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (SBT; Second Series 32; Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1976).

⁷⁰ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, xxvi.

Pss 84–89 look to the “old story” of David seeking comfort and find, unfortunately, that they must instead lament the inability of that story to end the despair of exile. The psalmists focus on the elements which once brought hope: the temple, the land, Mt. Zion, and the Davidic monarchy. The reality of exile, however, makes clear that these symbols of hope are ineffective. The Temple (Ps 84), the land (Ps 85), and Zion (Ps 87), in the context of Book III have been seen to be empty and without the ability to provide hope.

The six psalms at the end of the Book III also demonstrate a couple of interesting patterns. Psalms 84 & 87 emphasize the Temple; Pss 85 & 88 are laments; and Pss 86 & 89 are Davidic. McCann observantly points out how Book III alternates between hope and lament.⁷¹ As the reader encounters each of these ancient symbols of hope, the subsequent lament reminds that the symbol is incapable of providing security. The canonical context shows the reader that the psalms of hope in Book III are examples of the psalmists “whistling past the graveyard.”

What the reader finds at the end of Book III is not the seeds of hope brought to full expression in Books IV and V. The reader finds the psalmist desperately clinging to the things which brought hope in the past and trying to make sense of their loss. This dispensing with the former symbols of hope prepares the reader for return to Moses and Mosaic covenant in Book IV. Davidic kingship and Zion gives way to Yahweh as king, enthroned forever.

⁷¹J. C. McCann, Jr., “Books I–III and the Editorial Purpose of the Hebrew Psalter,” 91.