

When God Is the Problem: From Allegation to Apologia in the Psalms

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Eight psalms of lament accuse God of indefensible behavior, make no confession of culpability for his actions, and offer no expression of trust or praise. Yet rather than moving the reader away from God, these psalms actually provide a path back toward him and demonstrate the possibility of relationship with God despite difficult circumstances.

Despite their complaints and expressions of intense need, the laments of the Psalter typically conclude with words of confidence in the Lord. A psalm may begin with desperate questions: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1).¹ But, even so, it will conclude with exuberant praise: “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations” (22:27-28). In fact, the conciliatory move from complaint to confidence/praise is common enough that it is an established element in the form of lament.²

For other laments, however, such a movement does not come so easily. Eight psalms (Psalms 38, 39, 44, 60, 80, 88, 89, 90) lack the genre-typical shift to a confident conclusion.³ Instead, these psalms conclude with images of intense suffering

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

² As a starting point for the discussion of lament as a whole, see: Kathleen Billman and Daniel Migliore, *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006; previously Pilgrim, 1999); Sally Brown and Patrick Miller, eds., *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Scott Ellington, *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008); Eva Harasta and Brian Brock, eds., *Evoking Lament: A Theological Discussion* (London: T & T Clark, 2009); Michael Jinkins, *In the House of the Lord: Inhabiting the Psalms of Lament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998); and Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012).

³ A total of 17 psalms conclude with motifs other than praise and/or an expression of confidence in the Lord, but unlike the eight psalms addressed in this paper, nine make no explicit accusations against the Lord (Pss 25, 51, 70, 74, 120, 123, 137, 141, 143).

(44:25; 80:16a; 88:17,18b; 89:50b-51), accusations against God (44:23-24; 60:9-10; 88:16,18a; 89:49), or final requests (38:21-22; 39:12-13; 44:26; 60:11; 80:16b-17,19; 89:50a; 90:15-17). Psalms 39 and 88 exemplify such conclusions:

Hear my prayer, O LORD,
and give ear to my cry;
do not hold your peace at my tears.
For I am your passing guest,
an alien, like all my forebears.
Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again,
before I depart and am no more. (Ps 39:12-13)

Your wrath has swept over me;
your dread assaults destroy me.
They surround me like a flood all day long;
from all sides they close in on me.
You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;
my companions are in darkness. (Ps 88:16-18)

These psalmists neither mention a movement toward praise nor seem to be able to imagine such an event occurring. Three reasons may be given for this hesitancy.

First, such a movement seems unlikely because of the psalms' extensive, explicit, and harsh accusations against God.⁴ They attack the Lord with such brutal abandon that, as Bruggemann suggests of Psalm 44, we may be dazzled that they made the canon at all.⁵ The indictments in Psalms 60 and 89 exemplify these attacks.

O God, you have rejected us, broken down our defenses;
you have been angry; now restore us!
You have caused the land to quake; you have torn it open;
repair the cracks in it, for it is tottering.
You have made your people suffer hard things;
you have given us wine to drink that made us reel. (Ps 60:1-3)

You have renounced the covenant with your servant;
you have defiled his crown in the dust. . . .
Moreover, you have turned back the edge of his sword,
and you have not supported him in battle.
You have removed the scepter from his hand,
and hurled his throne to the ground. (Ps 89:39,43-44)

Without wishy-washy ambiguity (for example, "God allowed it to happen, but

⁴ Nine other psalms also include direct accusation against God: 22 (vv. 2,15), 30 (v. 7), 32 (v. 4), 66 (10-12), 71 (v. 20), 73 (vv. 13-14), 77 (vv. 4-10), 102 (vv. 10,23), 108 (vv. 10-11). These nine psalms, however, conclude with strong confidence or praise.

⁵ Walter Bruggemann, "The Psalms as Limit Expressions," in *Performing the Psalms* (eds. Dave Bland and David Fleece; St Louis: Chalice, 2005) 38.

did not cause it to happen”) these poets emphatically charge God (“you”) with gross negligence and wrongdoing. Six categories of accusations emerge within these eight psalms:

1. *Overwhelming Anger*. You (God) are inexcusably and overly angry (38:1,3; 60:1,3; 80:4; 88:7,16-17; 89:38,46; 90:7,9,11). You have overwhelmed us with your waves (88:7,16-17) and your terrors (88:16).
2. *Failure in Battle*. You have failed to go out with our armies (44:9, 60:1,10; 89:40,43). Instead, you have turned back our sword (89:43), broken down our walls (80:12; 89:40), and empowered our enemies to victory (44:10; 89:42). Because of you, your people are regarded as sheep for slaughter—and massacred all day long (44:11,22).
3. *Mistreatment of Your People*. You have made us suffer hard things (60:3; see also 88:15-16). You have broken us (60:1), crushed us (44:19), shot us with arrows (38:2), and brought your hand down hard on us (38:2-3; 39:10). You made us drink wine that caused us to stagger like a drunkard (60:3), fed us the bread of tears (20:3; see also 80:5), and gave us tears to drink (80:5-6). You have imprisoned us (88:8), thrown us into the lowest pit (88:6), and plunged us into darkness (44:19; 88:6).
4. *Humiliation of Your People*. You have humiliated us (44:9). You have made us the butt of every joke (44:13-14; 80:6; 89:41) and covered us with shame (89:45). You have caused friends to abandon us (88:8,18).
5. *Abuse of Life*. You have made human life short (39:5), turning us back to dust (90:3) and sweeping us away (90:5). Human life is no more than a vapor (39:5), a dream (90:5), or grass that withers under a hot sun (90:5-6). Because we pass all our life under your anger, our days are only toil and trouble and come to an end like a sigh (90:9-10). You consume everything humans hold dear (39:11).
6. *Infidelity to the Covenant*. You have broken covenant (89:39,49). You have emasculated our king (89:45) and thrown the crown of your anointed one to the ground (89:39,44). You have rejected your own people (44:9,24; 60:1,10; 88:14; 89:38,46; 90:11)—sold us out for nothing, no profit or cost (44:12), and you have scattered us among the nations (44:11).

God’s behavior has been and continues to be indefensible, according to these psalms. In addition, these psalms bring into question the matter of trust because of God’s actions. Consequently, the literary problem created has no easy resolution, especially in view of the second common feature.

This second feature is the poets’ denial of any guilt or culpability for God’s actions. In Psalm 44, the writer asserts the innocence of his/her community (44:17-19). Four other psalms (Psalm 60, 80, 88, 89) do not assert innocence, but neither do they mention or accept guilt that would justify the Lord’s actions. Three psalms acknowledge sin, yet the problem is not human failure but God’s over-reaction (Psalm 38, 39, 90).

In Psalm 38, the psalmist confesses sin (38:4,18) but begs the Lord to stop punishing while he is still so angry (38:1). Psalm 39 recognizes God’s chastisement for sin (39:11) and asks for deliverance from “all my transgressions” (39:8). But elsewhere, the poet begs God to stop the beating (39:10), treat him/her with appropriate respect (39:12), and if nothing else, “Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again” (39:13). The writer’s difficulty is not sin but God’s inexplicable and overwhelming response.

In Psalm 90, the psalmist accuses God of setting “our iniquities” in front of him as one who keeps a ledger of sin (cf. 130:3), kindling and rekindling God’s burning and unending fury (90:7-9,11). If only, as the psalm continues, God would “make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil” (90:15), then the scales of justice would even out.

The final troubling feature of these psalms is the density of evocative metaphors used to portray God’s activity.⁶ God’s wrath is a storm surge that overwhelms like a flood, closing in and sweeping over us (88:7,16-17). While God hides from his people (88:14; 89:46), he also throws them into deep dark pits with no escape (44:19; 88:6), and beats them with his hand (38:2; 39:10).

Like an archer, the Lord shoots his people with arrows (38:2); like an unquenchable fire (89:46) or a moth, the Lord consumes what is dear to humans (39:11). The “Shepherd of Israel” (80:1) has abandoned the flock, scattering it among the nations (44:11) and selling it cheap for slaughter (44:11-12,22).

The master vintner, after transplanting a vine from Egypt to the land of promise (80:8-11), has now broken down the protective walls of the vineyard, letting everyone who passes by take its fruit (80:12) and allowing the boar from the forest to ravage it (80:13). As Hossfeld and Zenger point out in reference to Psalm 80, these images express the “utter contradictoriness and absurdity” of the Lord’s behavior.⁷

These eight psalms whose conclusions lack praise or an expression of confidence in the Lord stand out as a group on the basis of: (1) their direct and specific charges against the Lord, (2) their protests of innocence or assertions that God’s anger is out of balance with their sin, and (3) the density of their evocative metaphors for the Lord’s abusive activities.

From the perspective of these psalms, the Lord has failed to live up to covenant promises. Their prayers address the one responsible for the collapse of their lives and their world, and they refuse to make any movement toward praise or confidence in this God. Here, the issue is not the Lord’s forgiveness, but whether the psalmists can overcome the Lord’s failures.

⁶ William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). See especially chapter 5, “The Voice of Many Waters: From Chaos to Community,” 105-134.

⁷ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Eric Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* (Hermeneia; trans. Linda Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 315.

APOLOGIA

Despite that these psalmists voiced and inscribed accusations against their God, this paper works from the hypothesis that they wrote on behalf of—not against—faith for relationship with the Lord, not dissolution of that relationship. The inclusion of these eight psalms within the canon of Scripture supports this hypothesis. The question is, how do these psalms overcome what they themselves describe as a devastating breach of trust?

It might be nice if God were to respond to the accusations, acknowledge divine failures, and do what the psalmists ask (80:18)—though one may want to consult Job before demanding God’s response to an accusation. Painted with broad brushstrokes, these eight psalms ask or hope for a variety of responses from God.

Psalms 38 and 39 wait and hope the Lord delivers before it is too late (38:15,21-22);⁸ Psalm 39 asks God for treatment under the laws of a passing alien or else to turn his gaze away, “so I may smile again” (39:12-13);⁹ Psalm 44 merely wants God to wake up (44:23-26);¹⁰ Psalm 60 asks for help against the foe (60:11); Psalm 80 asks God to see (80:3,7,9,14); Psalm 88 wants God to hear (88:1,2,9,13);¹¹ Psalm 89 begs the Lord to remember (89:47,50);¹² and Psalm 90 asks for happy days to equal the number of days God has afflicted Israel and to prosper the work of their hands (90:15,17).¹³

⁸ In addition to standard treatments in commentaries and journals, six of the eight psalms (60 and 80 are the exceptions) are discussed in secondary literature readily available to ministers and other scholars. For Psalm 38, see Kristin Swenson, *Living through Pain* (Waco: Baylor University Press) 111-135; David Firth, *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock—previously Paternoster, 2005) 115-125; and Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 105-107.

⁹ For Psalm 39, see Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 110-113.

¹⁰ For Psalm 44, see Walter Brueggemann, “The Psalms as Limit Expressions” in *Performing the Psalms*, 38-41; John Mark Hicks, “Preaching Community Laments” in *Performing the Psalms*, 71-74; Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 51-55; Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 164-167; and Lyn Fraser, *Prayers from the Darkness* (New York: Church Publishing, 2005) 39-40.

¹¹ For Psalm 88, see Brueggeman, *Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1984) 78-81; Creach, *Destiny of the Righteous*, 67-68; Swenson, *Living through Pain*, 137-155; and Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 167-169.

¹² For Psalm 89, see Mark Love, “Going to Church in the Psalms” in *Performing the Psalms*, 159-168; Creach, *Destiny of the Righteous*, 67-68, 91-93; and Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 169-171.

¹³ For Psalm 90, see Brueggeman, *Message of the Psalms*, 110-115; W. Dennis Tucker Jr. “Exitus, Reditus, and Moral Formation in Psalm 90” in *Diachronic and Synchronic: Reading the Psalms in Real Time* (JSOTSup 488; eds. Joel Burnett et al.; London: T & T Clark, 2007) 143-156; Patrick Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 125-130; J. Clinton McCann Jr., *Great Psalms of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 103-113; and Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 107-110.

But even if God should do exactly what these poets ask, resolution of the relationship is still not assured.¹⁴ Such resolution might be easy in financial exchanges but not in relationships, matters of the heart, and most of all, matters of trust.

However, a literary analysis reveals the subtle and not so subtle ways the writers and editors seek to breathe new life into their fragile relationships with God. In what follows, this paper identifies six ways these texts lead their readers toward a renewed life with God—four within the psalms themselves and two created by their contextual placement.

THE PSALMS

The psalms themselves, within their own textual limits, work toward new life with God in at least four ways.

First, these writers provide the words necessary for the relationship to have a chance of survival. In instances of disappointment (real or imagined), words spoken to another constitute a desperate grip on the other; continued speech refuses to let pain rule the day and silence have the final word. Just so, these psalms provide a language for responding to the unimaginable, the moments that threaten to leave us speechless before God.

Although the candor of these psalms is shocking, the real threat is not blasphemy but speech that betrays the truth of what has happened and the resulting feelings—or even worse, silence: the greatest threat to a relationship. Consequently, with their tenacious, raw speech, these psalms declare they are not yet finished with God, not willing to give up on this relationship.

On the one hand, one might consider such language to be a helpful catharsis, vomiting out all the anger and disappointment. But if, as Israel claims, prayer is dialogic speech with an active listener, then this awful language is not about a cathartic binge but about communication and understanding.¹⁵ These psalms direct their words to the Lord, Israel’s covenant partner, with the expectation that he will hear and respond.

¹⁴ As a whole, the eight psalms include diverse requests that may be grouped into five categories. First, the poets ask God not to forsake or be far off (38:21), to hear or accept their prayer (60:5; 80:1; 88:2), see or observe (80:14), stir or awaken (44:23,26; 80:2), and hurry (38:22), or conversely, to turn “your gaze away from me” (in other words: leave me alone, 39:13). Second, they ask God to turn (80:14; 90:13), shine (80:1,3,7,19), remember (89:47,50), help (38:12; 60:11), have compassion (90:13), restore (60:1; 80:3, 7, 19), save (80:2), not allow the enemy to rejoice (38:16), redeem (44:26), heal or mend (60:2), and to give favor (90:17), victory (60:5; 80:2,3,7,19), life (80:18), and love (90:14). Third, they ask the Lord not to punish while angry (38:1) and to stop beating them (39:10). Fourth, these psalmists also ask God to teach them (90:12), make God’s work manifest to them (90:16), make them glad (90:15), and prosper their work (90:17). Fifth, Ps 80 asks the Lord to strengthen the “one at your right hand” (80:17).

¹⁵ Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 106.

For this reason, Walter Brueggemann asserts and warns, “Israel’s candor about its life knows no limit. One can say anything. Israel will speak the truth, because failure to speak the truth will result in denial and grudging, paralyzing submission.” These psalms model the candor required of those who believe and give permission to a faith community “to practice candor in its own life in the presence of God.”¹⁶

On the other hand, providing a language is far more important than most recognize. Language not only communicates thoughts and emotions, it constructs them. Without words, we are unable to make sense of our experiences. As James Mays puts it, “faith follows speech; believing is enabled by language.”¹⁷

Faith may seek understanding (Anselm), but it cannot do so without language. Consequently, these eight psalms lead us toward reconciliation with God by providing words, a language to understand our lives and to articulate our feelings and thoughts to our covenant partner—maintaining a tenacious hold onto God no matter the circumstances.

A second way in which these psalms lead their readers toward God is by retelling God’s past faithful engagement with Israel. Five of the eight psalms under consideration include some rehearsal of God’s fidelity (Psalm 44, 80, 88, 89, 90).

The most extensive is the first thirty-seven verses of Psalm 89 which, to use the psalmist’s own words: “declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens” (89:2). Of special interest is the Lord’s covenant with David and his family: “I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations” (89:4).

Psalm 44 also begins by recounting what “our ancestors have told us, what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old” (44:1). In this case, God’s faithful action included the conquest and settlement of the Promised Land (44:2-3), as well as a recent, unidentified victory in which God “saved us from our foes” (44:4-8).

Psalm 80 addresses the “Shepherd of Israel” who is “enthroned upon the cherubim” (80:1), images that evoke memories of when this shepherd-king led Israel in victory.¹⁸ It then rehearses the story of the exodus, conquest, and settlement through an extended metaphor of a master gardener transplanting a vine (80:8-11).

In two other psalms, the rehearsal of God’s past action is brief, limited to initial verses that assert a prior life-giving relationship with the Lord. In Psalm 90, the poet opens:

¹⁶ Brueggemann, “The Psalms as Limit Expressions,” in *Performing the Psalms*, 40-41.

¹⁷ Mays, *Preaching and Teaching the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 23.

¹⁸ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 313.

LORD, you have been our dwelling place
 in all generations.
 Before the mountains were brought forth,
 or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
 from everlasting to everlasting you are God. (90:1-2)

And in even shorter form, Psalm 88 begins, “O LORD, God of my salvation” (88:1a), which asserts a memory of the Lord’s past salvation and hope for the future. Though not much of a rehearsal of God’s past saving actions, it is all the poet can muster.

These rehearsals of God’s past faithfulness work in at least two directions. First, they remind the Lord of his promises and past fidelity, motivating him to act because of these prior commitments and to be consistent with prior behavior. Second, they work to reframe for the reader the current crisis within a broader panorama of the Lord’s reliability.

Without denying or excusing God’s present failures, the poets remind the reader the Lord has historically been faithful to his promises and to his people. Their review suggests that patience and a broader view of events may prove the Lord to be faithful again, even in what presently appears to be traitorous action.¹⁹

The third internal move toward relationship is unique to Psalm 60 (of the eight psalms); an oracle of salvation appears to encourage the reader toward trust and renewed relationship with the Lord:

God has promised in his sanctuary:
 “With exultations I will divide up Shechem,
 and portion out the Vale of Succoth.
 Gilead is mine, and Manasseh is mine;
 Ephraim is my helmet;
 Judah is my scepter.
 Moab is my washbasin;
 on Edom I hurl my shoe;
 over Philistia I shout in triumph.” (Ps 60:6-8)

The oracle, most likely spoken by a cult prophet or priest in the divine first-person (“I will”), answers the prior lament in the psalm with a confident declaration that God will reconquer lost territories (60:6), reclaim key tribal lands, and put them to use in his campaign against Israel’s traditional enemies (60:7-8).²⁰ In oppo-

¹⁹The role of memory is strengthened by other psalms that make direct accusations against the Lord but conclude with confidence or praise. Five psalms refer to the Lord’s prior work in the world or the psalmist’s life (22:3-5,9-10,27-18; 66:6-9; 71:6-8,15-17; 77:11-20; 102:12-22,25-28), and three psalms assert that the Lord has heard and granted what they requested (30:1-4,11-12; 32:1-2,5,11; 73:16-20,23-28). See especially 66:6-9 and 77:11-20.

²⁰Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 100-101.

sition to other claims in the psalm, it asserts God's intent to take covenant ownership of the people, repair their defenses, and restore them (60:1).

Such good news would seem to resolve the conflict: God is coming as a divine warrior to set things right. But even so, resolution does not appear to come so easily. In response to the oracle, the psalm questions God's sincerity.

Each rhetorical question in 60:9 ("Who will bring me to the fortified city? Who will lead me to Edom?") speaks on behalf of skeptical people who have difficulty believing God's claims because of their recent experience with him: "Have you not rejected us, O God? You do not go out, O God, with our armies" (60:10).

Thus, the unspoken answer to the rhetorical questions of 60:9 is "not God; God is the one who has rejected us." Despite the oracle of salvation, renewed trust does not come so quickly; an oracle may lead toward reconciliation, but it cannot make reconciliation happen.

Fourth, the remaining two psalms lead their readers toward God via a difficult Job-like quest. Psalms 38 and 39 lack any reminder of the Lord's faithfulness by which they might reframe the present crisis (as in Psalms 44, 80, 88, 89, and 90), and they lack an oracle of salvation (as in Psalm 60). Instead, the question raised by these two psalms is whether a person will remain faithful to the Lord when there appears to be no good reason to do so.

In Psalm 38, the writer is overwhelmed by physical, social, and spiritual (theological) collapse. Wounds "grow foul and fester" (38:5), friends stay far away (38:11), and the writer waits for a God who appears nowhere in sight. What is a person to do?

Worse, the poet of Psalm 39 tried not to speak and was silent for a while, but it didn't work. Not talking about the problem just complicated matters: "my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me" (39:2-3). Then it came out: you (God) are to blame ("it is you who have done it," [39:9]).

God has been relentlessly beating the psalmist and he or she is exhausted, "worn down by the blows of your hand" (39:10). Any reminder of God's love or oracle of salvation is nonexistent. There is nothing other than a desperate plea for God at least to keep hospitality standards for a passing guest or alien (39:12),²¹ and if not, then "Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more" (39:13). What else can a person hope for?

These two psalms raise a question similar to that of the Satan in the Book of Job, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (Job 1:9). If God removes protective hedges and takes away blessings, if God does not respond with the help desperately needed—what then? Is it possible for these psalmists (and their readers) to have a relationship with an unresponsive God?²²

²¹ See Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 105-107.

²² On Job's lament, see the excellent essays by Claudia Welz, "Trust and Lament: Faith in the Face

External to these psalms, the context responds with assurance of God’s hearing and helping (40:1-3) and a blessing for those who rely on him (40:4). But inside, these texts lead the reader to expressions of pain, frustration, and doubt. And they leave the reader to decide whether to live with a God who disappoints. This answer is not what the poet or readers want, but it is the only possible way forward.

So despite appearing to move the reader away from God, these eight psalms actually lead the reader toward him in at least four ways: (1) by providing the language needed to speak of difficult matters with God; (2) by reminding the reader of God’s past faithfulness and so reframing the present crisis within the larger history of God’s reliability; (3) by asserting an oracle of salvation; and (4) by leaving the reader with the question of whether to continue serving an unresponsive God.

Thus, each psalm makes relationship with God possible, providing a path back toward him. Further, if these psalms are accepted as liturgical texts, available for use in the First or Second Temple, these literary moves within the texts are especially important for assuring hearers of the possibility of relationship with God despite difficult circumstances.

CONTEXTS IN THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Only recently has research begun to consider that the Psalter is not a haphazard collection of psalms indiscriminately thrown together. The past forty years of research has worked out the hypothesis that the Book of Psalms is composed of psalms and groups of psalms that have been selected, edited (in some cases), and deliberately placed into their present position.²³ Self-evident in the Psalter is the arrangement of the psalms into five books, the conclusion of each book denoted by a doxology: Book I (Psalms 1–41, doxology in 41:13), Book II (42–72, 72:18-20), Book III (73–89, 89:52), Book IV (90–106, 106:48), Book V (107–150, doxology the whole of Psalm 150). The current research, however, reaches well beyond this arrangement to propose a movement through the struggles and eventual collapse of the Davidic monarchy (Books I–III), to the proclamation that the Lord reigns (Psalms 93–99), and the dominance of praise (Books IV–V).

Of course not all interpreters accept the arguments set forth by Wilson, deClaissé-Walford, and others.²⁴ However, this paper accepts their thesis as a work-

of Godforsakenness” in *Evoking Lament*, 118-135, and Scott Ellington, “Risking the World in Job” in *Risking Truth*, 94-129.

²³ See Gerald Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBL Dissertation Series 76; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985); Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997). In a more accessible form, see the essays in *Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (JSOTSup 159; ed. J. Clinton McCann Jr; JSOT Press, 1993).

²⁴ See J. Reindal, “Weisheitliche Bearbeitung von Psalmen: Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der Sammlung des Psalter,” in *Congress Volume, Vienna 1980* (VTSup 32; Leiden: Brill, 1981) 333-356.

ing hypothesis to consider how the contexts of the eight psalms in question may or may not contribute to some settlement of issues between the psalmists and God.

Consideration of the literary contexts of each of the eight psalms suggests two additional ways in which the Psalter leads the reader back toward God. First, Psalm 60 is rewritten later in the book (Psalm 108). To be more precise, part of Psalm 60 is recast, along with part of Psalm 57, into a new psalm: 57:7-11 + 60:5-12 = 108:1-13.

What is fascinating about this new creation is how the redactor has scuttled the complaint portion of each earlier psalm. The accusations of divine misbehavior in Ps 60:1-4 have been set aside, as have the complaints of Ps 57:1-6.

Consequently, with the exception of a verse or two that slipped by the editor's knife (108:10-11), the result is the birth of a new lament psalm of great trust. The new composition does not and cannot occur until after the major shift in the Psalter that takes place at the end of Book III and beginning of Book IV, specifically, the collapse of the Davidic monarchy and the proclamation that the Lord reigns.

A casual reader (or listener) is unlikely to remember Psalm 57 and 60 well enough (or at all) to recognize what an editor is doing in Psalm 108. On the other hand, a reader who participates in regular praying through the psalms may well catch the editor's wand. It is also possible that the argument sketched above could historically work in reverse; Psalm 57 and 60 could both be editorial creations out of Psalm 108. Regardless of historical development, however, on a contextual-literary basis, the reader will encounter Psalm 57 and 60 before reading Psalm 108.

A second way the literary contexts of these eight psalms lead the reader toward God is by their various placements within the literary contexts of Books II–IV of the Psalter. Psalms 38 and 39 are placed near the end of Book I (Pss 1–41). Psalm 44 is preceded by only one psalm (Ps 42–43)²⁵ at the beginning of Book II (Pss 42–72). Psalm 60 is set midway through Book II, just as Ps 80 appears midway through Book III (Pss 73–89). Psalms 88 and 89 conclude Book III, and Ps 90 begins Book IV (Pss 90–106). Each of these eight psalms are set in pivotal positions at the seams and mid-points of Books II and III in the Book of Psalms.

As others have demonstrated, the first three books of Psalms lead the careful reader (1:2) on a journey through the ups and downs of God's commitment to David's family and to Israel (2:7-9).²⁶ God's anointed and the nation he leads face constant and increasing threats throughout Books I–III, highlighted by the place-

²⁵ Psalm 42–43 may be recognized as one psalm on the basis of the recurring refrain in both psalms (42:5,11, and 43:5), the lack of a superscription on Psalm 43 (the surrounding psalms from Psalm 34 to Psalm 70 have superscriptions), and the common theme developed from Psalm 42 to 43.

²⁶ See, for example, deClaisse-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning* and the essays in McCann, ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*.

ment of Psalm 38 and 39 near the end of Book I and the placement of Psalm 44 near the beginning of Book II.²⁷

At the end of Book III, the nation and David's dynasty collapse, as reflected in the final two psalms of Book III (Psalms 88 and 89) and the first psalm of Book IV (Psalm 90). The story is not over, however. Psalms 88 and 89 are not the final word on God's relationship to Israel, nor is Psalm 90's lament for the death of the nation without hope.

As Psalm 90 opens Book IV, a reversal of fortune is just ahead. Despite the collapse of the nation and its king, Pss 93–99 declare the Lord reigns (93:1; 94:2; 95:3; 96:10; 97:1; 98:6; 99:1).²⁸ Life with God is still possible then, if the reader keeps reading. Books IV and V reverse the collapse documented by these eight psalms. The Lord has once again proven himself faithful by reasserting his reign over Israel and the world.

The immediate contexts of Psalm 38, 39, 44, 60, and 80 also suggest the same movement as found in the book as a whole. Psalms 38 and 39 are followed by thanksgiving and confidence (40:1-10) and lament with great confidence that God will deliver (40:11-17). Book I then concludes with an individual thanksgiving psalm (Psalm 41). Psalm 44 is followed by a celebration of the king on his wedding day (Psalm 45), a psalm of confidence in God (Psalm 46), and then the declaration the Lord reigns: "For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth" (47:2).

Psalm 60 is followed by a lament that prays for the king: "Prolong the life of the king; may his years endure to all generations!" (61:6). It is followed by a psalm of trust in God who alone is "my rock and my salvation" (62:2), and another lament that concludes, "the king shall rejoice in God" (63:11).

Psalm 81 responds to Psalm 80 with instruction. God did rescue Israel from Egypt (81:6-7), but Israel has refused to listen and submit herself to God (81:8-11); if Israel would obey, "Then I would quickly subdue their enemies, and turn my hand against their foes" (81:14).²⁹ Psalm 82 then describes God as King over the divine council of gods: Israel's God is still the King of kings.

In addition to what has already been said above about Pss 88–90, Hossfeld and Zenger point out: (1) Ps 88 concludes the Korahite sequence of 84–85 and 87–88 and "sues for realization of the vision of salvation proposed in 84–85 and 87;"³⁰ (2) Psalms 88 and 89 are carefully linked;³¹ (3) Psalm 89 has a special rela-

²⁷ For a careful reading of Books I–III, see J. Clinton McCann Jr., "Books I–III and the Editorial Purpose of the Hebrew Psalter," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, 93-107.

²⁸ See James Mays, "The God Who Reigns: The Book of Psalms," in *Preaching and Teaching the Psalms*, 69-78.

²⁹ See Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 317.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 397.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 412.

tionship to royal psalms, bridging back to Psalms 2 and 72 and pointing forward to Psalms 110 and 132,³² and (4) Psalms 89 and 90 are closely linked.³³

CONCLUSION

These eight psalms, despite their harsh and unrelenting charges against God, lead readers on a path toward the God who has betrayed and hurt them. They provide a language for dialogue and reframe the present crisis within God's past faithfulness; they also play a key role in developing the message of the Book of Psalms, encouraging exhausted readers to keep going—to patiently live and read a little further, waiting for the renewal of God's reign. Unexplored in this study are the communal aspects of these psalms, their shared crisis, and the significance of lament for the church and pastoral ministry, for which readers can turn to excellent essays by Duff, Fraser, and Jinkins.³⁴

Even so, renewal of a broken relationship is not a simple transaction or a process that can be rushed. Restoring confidence in place of shattered trust cannot be achieved in three or even four guaranteed steps, especially when the offending party (the Lord), with one exception, does not acknowledge guilt or explain why the hurtful behavior was necessary.

These psalms may lead the reader toward God, but they cannot force her or him to forgive God for the unexplained and unjustified past and trust God again. In this case, the relationship may come down to an act of human mercy and faithfulness. **SCJ**

³² Ibid., 402.

³³ Ibid., 413.

³⁴ Nancy Duff, "Recovering Lamentation as a Practice in the Church" in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, 3-14; Lyn Fraser, "Remember Your Congregation: Psalms in Communal Prayer and Worship" in *Prayers from the Darkness: The Difficult Psalms*, 33-49; and Jinkins, "The Church as a Community of Lament" in *In the House of the Lord*, 32-73.