From Lament to Praise: How the "Seam" Psalms Can Teach Us to Walk the Godward Path

J. Nathan Clayton, assistant professor of Old Testament, North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois

According to the Apostle Paul, all of Scripture is "God-breathed" and has been given to us as tools for "teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness," for the purpose of equipping the "servant of God" for "every good work" (2 Tim 3:16).[1] Furthermore, our Lord has provided the church with gifted leaders, including pastoral shepherds and teachers, to equip believers for faithful ministry (Eph 4:11–16). As Thomas Oden has noted, shepherding is a "pivotal analogy" for pastoral leadership in the church. While some in our day may be suspicious of this "premodern image," Oden argued that the Good Shepherd teaching of John 10:1–18 retains "contemporaneity," as it contains such key themes as the intimacy of the shepherd's knowledge of the flock, or the shepherd's feeding and leading of the flock.[2] The shepherding image, then, remains relevant, "[i]t is as much needed amid the concrete canyons of modern urban centers as it is in the rural scenes in which its intriguing images were spawned."[3]

An ongoing question for pastor-shepherds to address is: are the people of God being fed a regular, balanced, and life-giving diet of the Word

1 Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the NRSV. In the original context of this passage in 2 Timothy, Paul's reference to "Scripture" (Greek: *graphē*) has to do with the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. For current Christian readers, this "Scripture" now properly includes both Old and New Testaments. As William Barclay (*The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, Daily Study Bible Series, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 199), noted, "[i]f what [Paul] claims for scripture is true of the Old Testament, how much truer it is of the still more precious words of the New."

2 Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (New York: HarperCollins, 1983), 51.

3 Oden, 59.

of God? The challenge of diminishing biblical literacy in our culture remains. According to a recent study, while Bible users increased in the United States in 2021, only "one in six adults reads the Bible most days during the week."[4] Furthermore, for most Christians, it is obvious that the New Testament—with its focus on the ministry of Jesus Christ and on the early Christian church—should be a staple of the teaching and preaching of the church. In contrast, what can be less clear is the necessity of regular engagement with the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, or with the "First Testament," as John Goldingay calls it.[5]

My general goal here is to encourage church leaders to include Old Testament texts and themes as a regular part of their teaching and preaching ministries. As Goldingay notes further, there are certainly "tough aspects" to the Old Testament (at least for our contemporary sensibilities) that "the church might want to avoid," but importantly, "the Old Testament is *not basically hard or demanding news to swallow, but good news that has not been heard*."[6]

One Old Testament book that offers fairly direct and approachable content is the Psalter. For example, the Reformer John Calvin in his commentary on the Psalms encouraged the exegete-pastor to attend the "school of the Psalms."[7] In this essay, we will focus on the structure of the book of Psalms. If pastor-shepherds are to lead the flock towards "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13), then they are to guide the flock on the Godward path (Prov 1:1–7; Matt 7:24–27). My claim is that an analysis of the structure of the Psalms provides one ministry perspective through which those who may perceive God as remote, inaccessible, or distant can be shepherded on the path that leads to a transformative experience of God's proximal presence. As Gundersen notes, "The Psalter seems to tell a story—moving from lament to praise, from affliction to celebration."[8] To sketch out this approach, I will first highlight some recent scholarship that emphasizes reading the Psalms as

4 Barna Group, "State of the Bible 2021: Five Key Findings," May 19, 2021, https://www.barna.com/research/sotb-2021.

5 John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, Volume 1: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 15.

6 Goldingay, 23 (emphasis added).

7 Robert Martin-Achard, *Approche des Psaumes*, *CahT* 60 (Neuchatel/Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1969), 13 (my translation).

8 David "Gunner" Gundersen, "A Story in the Psalms? Narrative Structure at the 'Seams' of the Psalter's Five Books," in *Reading the Psalms Theologically*, ed. David M. Howard Jr. and Andrew J. Schmutzer (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2023), 95.

a purposefully shaped book. Then, I will offer some brief observations on the major groups of "seam" psalms, the hinge psalms for the five books of the Psalter: Pss 1–2, 41–42/43, 72–73, 89–90, and 106–107.

The Shape of the Psalms: The Five Books and Their Seams

Engagement with the canonical shape of the Psalms, as reflected in the Masoretic Text, occurred even in earlier generations of the church.[9] Since the early 1980s, however, much recent scholarship of the Psalms has decidedly focused on elucidating the significance of the final form of the Psalter.[10] In this approach, not only are individual psalms analyzed for their discrete rhetorical content and message, but also, such issues as the location of certain psalms within the whole Psalter and its five books, the links between various psalms, and the function of smaller collections of psalms are brought to the fore.[11]

The division of the Psalter into five books is foundational to these discussions: Book I (Pss 1–41), Book II (Pss 42–72), Book III (Pss 73–89), Book IV (Pss 90–106), and Book V (Pss 107–150). Most modern translations include these five book titles. The recognition of the five books comes from the biblical text itself: each book concludes with a doxology (see Pss 41:13; 72:18–19; 89:52; 106:48; 145:21). The language of these doxologies is linked by common motifs.[12] Furthermore, the doxology in Ps 145:21 can be seen as the conclusion to Book V, while all of Pss 146–150 can then be read as the explosive, praise-centered conclusion of the whole Psalter.[13]

The psalms located at the "editorial seams" of these five books take on particular significance when thinking of the narrative structure of the

9 Note Steffen Jenkins, "The Antiquity of Psalter Shape Efforts," *TynBul* 71 (2020): 161-80.

10 A foundational study here was Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBLDS 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985).

11 Two recent essays that synthesize this major movement in the study of the Psalms are: Kyle C. Dunham, "Viewing the Psalms through the Lens of Theology: Recent Trends in the Twenty-First Century," *JETS* 2023 (66): 455–72; David M. Howard Jr. and Michael K. Snearly, "Reading the Psalter as a Unified Book: Recent Trends," in *Reading the Psalms Theologically*, 1–35. While this approach dominates, some scholars disagree and argue that the focus in the study of the Psalms should remain the individual psalms. On this view, see for instance John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 3: Psalms 90–150*, *BCOTWP* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 11.

12 For example, compare "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen" (Ps 41:13), with "Blessed be the lord forever! Amen and Amen" (Ps 89:52).

13 Following Gundersen, "A Story in the Psalms," 94–95.

Psalter. These six sets of psalms (more or less) are usually defined as seam psalms: (1) Pss 1–2, (2) Pss 41 and 42–43 at the transition from Book I to Book II, (3) Pss 71–72 and 73 at the shift from Book II to Book III, (4) Pss 88–89 and 90 at the intersection of Books III and IV, (5) Pss 106–107 at the interface of Books IV and V, and (6) Pss 146–150 at the end of the Psalter. As David Howard and Michael Snearly demonstrate, scholars have taken the analysis of the significance of these five books in the Psalms in two major directions that center "around the role of 'David.'"[14]

In the first approach, only Ps 1, with its Torah-wisdom emphasis, is viewed as the introduction to the Psalms. Here, the first major unit is viewed as Books I-III (Pss 1–89), ending with pointed failure of the Davidic covenant in Ps 89. Thus, with these "wisdom/democratizing approaches," "[t]he rest of the Psalter attempts to deal with this 'failure,' focusing on Yahweh's (not David's) eternal kingship and the importance of Torah obedience."[15] In the second approach, defined as "royal/messianic," many scholars have "pushed back against the idea of a 'failed' Davidic covenant and have emphasized instead the persistence of the figure of 'David' through to the very end of the book, including a vision for a future 'David' (or 'Messiah')."[16] Here, both Ps 1 (with its wisdom focus) and Ps 2 (with its royal, messianic focus) are viewed as the introductory psalms to the Psalter. We proceed based on the assumptions of this second approach. Our goal is to highlight some key observations related to the first five groups of seam psalms noted above.

The Gateway to the Psalms: Psalms 1 and 2

The Godward path from lament to praise begins with the "gateway" Pss 1 and 2.[17] Davidic psalms are central to Book I (after Pss 1–2, only

14 Howard and Snearly, "Reading the Psalter," 5.

15 Howard and Snearly, 4 (and note further pp. 5–10 of their essay for their overview of this approach). One example of this democratizing perspective is Erich Zenger, "The Composition and Theology of the Fifth Book of Psalms 107–145," *JSOT* 80 (1998): 77–102.

16 Howard and Snearly, "Reading the Psalter," 6 (and note further pp. 11–21 of their essay for their discussion of recent works that follow this perspective). An example of a work developing this royal, messianic approach is Peter C. W. Ho, *The Design of the Psalter: A Macrostructural Analysis* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019).

17 Note Patrick D. Miller, "The Beginning of the Psalter," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann, *JSOTSS* 159 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 83–92. See also Robert L. Cole, *Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter*, *HBM* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012).

Pss 10 and 33 are anonymous).[18] David's voice of lament dominates over hymnic praise.[19] Psalms 1 and 2 have many links.[20] Here, I highlight three: (1) both psalms are anonymous; (2) as an inclusio, Ps 1 begins with a "blessed" (ashere) statement (Ps 1:1a) and Ps 2 ends with a "blessed" statement (Ps 2:12b); (3) in Ps 1:2, the blessed person "meditates" (Hebrew verb is *hagah*) on Yahweh's law, while in Ps 2:1, the nations "plot" (this translates the same Hebrew verb, *hagah*) against Yahweh.

Psalm 1 plainly highlights the contrasted ways of the righteous and the wicked (*tsadiqim* and *reshaim* in 1:6). First, in vv. 1–2, the source of the truly blessed person is not found in the devolving path of increasing sin that leads away from the presence of God (v. 1). In a sense, Ps 1:1 reveals to us what a lack of pastoral shepherding can lead to: sheep who wander and who fall into trouble. In stark contrast, true and lasting blessing is found in a full-fledged and daily engagement with God's instructive, revealed Word (his *torah*, in v. 2). Second, two images from the natural world are employed to illustrate these contrasting ways. The godly one is compared to a regularly watered tree that provides fruit in season (v. 3). Thus, the godly one is blessed, and can be a blessing to others, insomuch as she is nurtured by God's living Word. In contrast, the wicked one is compared to rootless chaff that is blown away (v. 4). Third, Ps 1 concludes in vv. 5–6 with a description of final outcomes (that include eschatological overtones, in my view): the righteous will endure in the proximal presence of Yahweh, while the wicked will be condemned to final distance from God.

Psalm 2 is a royal psalm. In vv. 1–3, earthly leaders express their desire to revolt against Yahweh and his "anointed" (*masiakh* in v. 2). In vv. 4–9, Yahweh responds by further affirming the role of his "king" (*melekh* in v. 6) and his "son" (*ben* in v. 7) in judging these rebellious nations. In vv.

18 Psalms 9 (a Davidic psalm) and 10 together make up one acrostic poem in the Hebrew text, so they are very closely linked. Also, in my view, the Hebrew phrase *ledavid* ("of David") in the titles of the Davidic psalms indicates that King David was the human author. For a recent defense of this traditional view of the Davidic authorship of the *ledavid* psalms, see Bruce K. Waltke and Fred G. Zaspel, *How to Read and Understand the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Crossway, 2023), 33–46, 499–518.

19 deClaissé-Walford notes: 59 percent of Book I's psalms are laments and 20 percent are hymns. See Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, *NICOT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 27.

20 For succinct analyses of the fuller links between Psalms 1 and 2, see for instance Gundersen, "A Story in the Psalms," 81–84, and Ho, *The Design of the Psalter*, 65–70.

10–12, the psalm concludes with both a rhetorical call for earthly leaders to serve Yahweh (v. 11) and his son (v. 12), and with a general affirmation of the blessed nature of all who remain in proximity with—who take refuge in—Yahweh's son (v. 13). A Christian reading rightly affirms the interplay between the imperfect fulfillment of the kingly promises of Ps 2 with the human Davidic kings and the perfect outworking of these claims through the messianic son of Yahweh. The repeated failures seen in the human leadership of King David (2 Sam 11–12, for instance) and his descendants (for example, Manasseh in 2 Kgs 21) should naturally move our interpretive lens to the divine, sinless work of Christ the King.[21]

Thus, a ministry perspective rooted in the structure of the Psalms begins with a wisdom emphasis on the godly person needing to daily be rooted in, and nurtured by, the life-giving Word of God. But also, this pattern ought to emphasize active dependence on Yahweh's messianic king. This should include a deep-seated acknowledgment that standing in the eschatological "congregation of the righteous" (Ps 1:5) comes only with living today in the refuge of Yahweh's royal son (Ps 2:12). Thus, "just as [Yahweh's *torah* in Ps 1] brings happiness to the righteous, so a divine decree ensures the final victory of Yahweh's anointed one [in Ps 2]."[22]

From Book I to II: Lament in Psalms 41 and 42–43

Most scholars agree that praise and lament are the two major genres of psalms—or as Brueggemann describes them, psalms of orientation and disorientation.[23] As noted above, disoriented Davidic lament is a dominating tone in Book I. This emphasis essentially continues into Book II, where David's voice is also joined for the first time by the

21 Theologically, then, Christ can be understood as the "second David," who perfectly embodies the kingly expectations of the Davidic covenant promises of 2 Sam 7. On this hermeneutic of interpreting the Psalms as Christian believers, note the helpful discussion in Waltke and Zaspel, *How to Read*, 23–32.

22 Jean-Luc Vesco, *Le Psautier de David traduit et commenté I*, *LD* (Paris: Cerf, 2006), 66 (my translation). As Gundersen ("A Story in the Psalms," 83) also notes, "Psalm 1 anticipates eschatological judgment and vindication" and "Psalm 2 then sets a trajectory that is at once royal, messianic, global, and eschatological."

23 See Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary, Augsburg Old Testament Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 25–50 (for his discussion of psalms of orientation), 51–122 (for his discussion of psalms of disorientation). And see Brueggemann, 123–167, for his discussion of psalms of "new orientation." For a practical overview of the literary genres of the biblical psalms, see Rolf A. Jacobson and Karl N. Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's Guide for Discovery and Engagement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013).

Levitical perspective.[24] This parallels the historical movement of ancient Israel's united monarchy, where David eventually enlisted non-Aaronite Levites to help prepare for the temple in Jerusalem, and this included song and music (see 1 Chr 16 and 25). Specifically, Book I concludes with an individual lament of David in Ps 41 and Book II opens with a Levitical psalm of lament in Ps 42 (and Ps 43, an anonymous psalm closely linked to Ps 42).

Psalm 41 is framed with the term "blessed" (*ashere*) in vv. 1 and 13, and thus links back to the "blessed" introductory frame we highlighted in Ps 1:1 and Ps 2:12. At the end of Book I, the voice of David is not the oriented kingly voice of praise, but a clearly disoriented voice of human suffering. Indeed, in Ps 41, David is sick and yearns for God's restoration (vv. 1–3). Here, the "blessed" ones are those who consider the "*dal*" (the poor, the weak). David further calls out to God for healing and for deliverance from the taunts of his opponents who seem to rejoice in his sickness (vv. 4–10). As Charry remarks, Ps 41 "teaches us that even if our dearest companions forsake us, God knows the truth of our innermost self and forever holds us fast."[25] Psalm 41 concludes with the expression of a renewed faith in God in vv. 11–12 (and Book I's doxological conclusion in verse 13).

Psalm 42 opens Book II in lament and is structured around this repeated refrain (in vv. 5 and 11): "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God." This refrain also concludes anonymous Ps 43, in v. 5, so that Pss 42 and 43 are very closely linked.[26] In between each of these three refrains, the longing for God's presence is paramount in the midst of challenging circumstances, as expressed in various images: "Thirst and Tears (42:2–6); Cascades and Abysses

24 Psalms 42–50 are mainly Levitical. Note the titles: "Of the sons of Korah" for Psalms 42, 44–49, and "of Asaph" for Psalm 50. See further my essay, J. Nathan Clayton, "Perceptions of Divine Presence in the Levitical Psalms of Book II: The Paradox of Distance and Proximity," in Howard and Snearly, *Reading the Psalms*, 271–82. Also note my broader discussion of the ministry of the Levites in J. Nathan Clayton, *Symbol, Service, and Song: The Levites of 1 Chronicles 10–29 in Rhetorical, Historical, and Theological Perspectives* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021), 1–38.

25 Ellen T. Charry, *Psalms 1–50: Signs and Songs of Israel*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015), 41.

26 Note, for example, the helpful discussion of the links between these two psalms in Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms Volume 1*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 668–70, who reads them as a single unit.

(42:7–12) … My Fortress and the Holy Hill (43:1–5)."[27]

At least two issues stand out for us. First, Ps 41 affirms a faith that is not triumphalist but is cognizant of human suffering. Here, integrity (*tom* in Ps 41:12a) is closely linked with the worshiper's faithfulness in serving those on the margins (the *dal* [poor, needy] of Ps 41:1), despite the reality of sickness. In Ps 41, it is this integrity that enables the renewed experience of the blessing of God's presence (Ps 41:12b). Second, the journey from a soul that is downcast and in turmoil to a soul that is renewed in praise of God and in confidence of one's salvation is found only in active hope in God (note the verb *yachal* in the refrain of Pss 42:5, 11; 43:5). Thus, our ministry pattern for the Godward path develops. The calls to be nurtured by God's word (Ps 1) and empowered by God's king (Ps 2) are now supplemented by appeals to serve others, even the least among us, out of our own weakness (Ps 41), and to root our journey through human suffering and turmoil with a Yahweh-centered hope (Pss 42-43).

From Book II to III: Kingship and Wisdom in Psalms 72 and 73

The shift from Books II to III represents a significant transition in the Psalter. While the literary voice of David is at the forefront of Pss 1–72, in Pss 73–89 (Book III), we encounter just one psalm of David, Ps 86, "A prayer of David." The rest of the psalms of Book III are Levitical. Also, Ps 72, at the end of Book II, is only one of two psalms with the title "of Solomon" (the other is Ps 127). After the extended doxology in Ps 72:18–19 (marking the end of Book II), the final verse of the psalm states: "The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended" (Ps 72:20). Of course, in the final form of the Psalter, further psalms of David occur (especially in Book V). It is possible that the colophon at Ps 72:20 indicates that during the open canonical period of the Old Testament, an initial collection of psalms, used in Levitical worship at the Jerusalem temple, could have included much of the psalms that we find in Books I and II of the final canonical version of the Psalms in the Masoretic Text. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it is possible that this collection could have come together after David's reign or after his son Solomon's reign, during the united monarchy of the tenth century BC.[28] Some see

27 See Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary*, *ECC* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 351.

28 Note the seminal discussion of this issue, and related compositional issues, in Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 139–228. For a helpful discussion of the canonization of Old Testament texts, see for instance Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 101–17.

David as the human author writing a blessing to his son Solomon; others regard the human author as Solomon. As Wilson notes, "[r]egardless, the clear intent of the heading is to associate Solomon in some fashion with the vision of the enduring kinship articulated in the psalm."[29]

Thus, Ps 72 is clearly a royal psalm. In it, the psalmist appeals for Yahweh to enable the king to lead justly (vv. 1–4). The text also envisions a kingly reign that enables the people to properly fear Yahweh (vv. 5–7). In vv. 8–11, this psalm further calls out for human rulers beyond Israel to accept the worldwide dominion of this Davidic king. In Ps 72:12–14, we see that the reign of this Davidic king is marked by effective and just care for the "poor" and the "needy" (*evyon* and *dal*, see Ps 72:13). Before the concluding passages that we noted above (vv. 18–20), the main section of Ps 72 concludes in vv. 15–17 with a prayer that the king would be blessed (vv. 15–17a) so that, ultimately, all people and all nations may be blessed (v. 17b). As such, in my view, Ps 72 links back to Ps 2 and extends the tensive interplay between human Davidic kings and the divine Davidic Messiah. As Broyles observes, in Ps 72 we find the portrait of both king and Messiah, with emphases on compassionate justice and vigorous royal protection.[30]

In turn, Ps 73, a Levitical wisdom psalm, opens Book III and expands on the wisdom foundation provided in Ps 1. In the opening section, the Asaphite Levitical psalmist knows (at least intellectually) that God is good to the righteous (v. 1). However, in the first main section of the text (vv. 2–12), the psalmist expresses his jealousy with regard to the wicked who seem to be prospering without God—in dissonance with the perspective on the wicked established in Ps 1. Being in God's presence (as mediated by the temple experience) is what enables the psalmist to renew his perspective (vv. 13–28) and reaffirm that being "near God" as true "refuge" represents the ultimate good (v. 28), in contrast to the judgment reserved for those "far from" God (v. 27). As Kraus summarizes, "The final truth that God overturns everything is revealed."[31]

For our purposes, I emphasize two issues. First, Ps 72 reminds us that

29 Wilson, *Psalms Volume 1*, 985. Note that in the Hebrew title of Ps 72:1, *lishelomoh* ("of Solomon"), "*li*" represents the spelling here of the inseparable preposition lamed (ל). This preposition has the basic meaning "of," but can also be translated "for." See the introductory discussion of this type of preposition in Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 48.

30 Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms*, *NIBCOT* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 298.

31 Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald, CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 92.

the Godward path should be marked by an embrace of the model of the Davidic king who seeks the good of others, even the marginalized (and this expands on themes we observed in Pss 2 and 42), and who invites all peoples to experience his blessing. Second, Ps 73 draws our attention to the significance of a ministry shepherd who regularly encourages the pursuit of God's wisdom and the renewal of God's presence, so as to endure through a temporary world where evil often seems to have the upper hand.

From Book III to IV: Divine Presence in Psalms 89 and 90

In Book III, we move away from the royal voice of David that was central to Books I-II. As noted above, the human literary voice in Book III is mainly Levitical and often dark in tone. The themes of the uncertainty of ancient Israel's divided monarchy (from the later tenth to the early sixth centuries BC) and, especially, the divine judgment of exile from the land (in the early sixth century BC) feed many of the psalms of Book III. For example, in Ps 74, the Asaphite psalmist is anguished over God's judgment (seemingly experienced in the exile) as foes have ravaged the temple (v. 4) and set it on fire (v. 7). It is only reflection on God's past mighty acts (vv. 12–23) that enables a measure of reorienting perspective for the psalmist. Psalm 88, in turn, represents the darkest moment of Book III, if not of the whole Psalter—so much so that Brueggemann views it "an embarrassment to conventional faith. It is the cry of a believer…who desperately seeks contact with Yahweh, but who is unable to evoke a response from God."[32] Indeed, Ps 88 does not offer a renewal of perspective, as many psalms of lament do. It concludes with divine wrath and darkness (vv. 16–18).

This brings us to Ps 89, the concluding text of Book III. A first, the psalm seems to primarily focus on a renewed confidence in God's work through the covenant promises made to David (vv. 1–4), with a lengthy celebration of God's work in creation (vv. 5–18) and of the goodness of the Davidic king (vv. 19–38). Further, however, a strong disjunctive clause introduced by the phrase "but now" (*veatah*) in v. 38 leads to an acute lament over God's apparent rejection of his covenant promises with the Davidic king. Note the language of Ps 89:38–39: "But now (*veatah*) you have cast off and rejected, you are full of wrath against your anointed (*masiakh*). You have renounced the covenant of your servant, you have defiled his crown in the dust." Psalm 89 concludes with an appeal for God to reveal himself in blessing for his people, as he is perceived as

32 Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 78.

utterly distant (vv. 46-51; with v. 52 as the doxology concluding all of Book III). Book III ends, then, with a disoriented tone. The worshiper is uncertain about God's ultimate faithfulness. Ancient Israel's experience of the exile (or the impending exile) would be a relevant initial context for this dark tone of lament. If the Jerusalem temple is destroyed and there is no longer a Davidic king on the throne, how can God still be present and in control?

As a response, Book IV opens with Ps 90, a poem that emphasizes the eternal goodness of God, in contrast to the fleeting nature of humanity's existence. As Tucker and Grant argue, Book III is dominated by "imagery of exile" and its "associated theological crises," and it is "Psalm 90 and Book 4…that respond to the crisis of faith voiced [in Book 3]."[33] Psalm 90 is the only psalm attributed to Moses: "a prayer of Moses the man of God."[34] In this way, readers are taken back to God's redemptive work well before the time of David, to the covenantal promises made through Moses (see Ex 19, for example). Even as God can be perceived as distant (as in much of Book III), Ps 90:1 notes that God has always been the "dwelling place" (*maon*) of his people. Thus, the psalmist further reminds us that human life is short (vv. 3–6), that God's judgment on our lives is just (vv. 7–11), and that, consequently, we are called to depend on God's wisdom to live out faithfully the limited time that he grants us on earth (vv. 12–17).

These two psalms, at the seam of Books III and IV, teach us to walk the Godward path in a number of ways. I will note three here that pastoral shepherds might reflect on further for their patterns of ministry. First, disorientation is a part of this Godward path. Second, if received rightly, divine judgment for the righteous can serve as a refinement in our calling to walk God's way of wisdom faithfully. Third, our understanding of how to experience the presence of God can be limited and in need of expansion, as it was for the ancient Israelites suffering through exile.

From Book IV to V: Divine Redemption in Psalms 106 and 107

Many scholars argue that Book IV represents a response to the Israelites' exile with an emphasis on the enduring kingship of God. As Tucker and Grant have noted further, "[a]lthough Book 3 closes with a

33 W. Dennis Tucker Jr. and Jamie A. Grant, *Psalms, Volume 2*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 333.

34 Tucker and Grant, 28, note that "[s]ome have referred to Book 4 as a 'Moses Book' because of the considerable attention given to Moses, as well as the exodus and wilderness traditions."

lament over the fallen Davidic monarchy, Book 4 offers a *daring word of hope* declaring that Yahweh remains Israel's true king, thus ensuring that hope remains."[35] In Book IV, indeed, we encounter six enthronement psalms (Pss 93; 95–99). In these poems, divine kinship is emphasized, as seen with the refrain "the LORD reigns" (*yhvh malakh*), as in Pss 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; or 99:1. Psalm 95, for example, opens with a call to sing out joyfully in praise (vv. 1–2). What is the specific reason given in this psalm? Verse 3 provides an answer squarely centered on the unique kingship of God: Yahweh is a "great God" (*el gadol*), a "great King" (*melekh gadol*) "above all gods" (*al kol elohim*).

Furthermore, Book IV concludes with two longer historical psalms, Pss 105 and 106. Both of these psalms review key moments in Israel's history and her covenantal relationship with Yahweh. Psalm 105 is especially focused on God's faithfulness to Israel, with key moments from the Pentateuch employed as examples, such as the deliverance from Egypt and Moses's divinely ordained leadership in the wilderness (Ps 105:23–42). Psalm 106 also recounts Israel's history but does so with a different emphasis. The psalmist, indeed, reflects on the miraculous delivery from Egypt through Israel's arrival in the land "by giving considerable attention to the obstinate and rebellious spirit of God's people as they made their way to the promised land."[36] Psalm 106:13–14 illustrates this point well: "But soon they forgot his works, they did not wait for his counsel. But they had a wanton craving in the wilderness, and put God to the test in the wilderness." Thus, while Ps 105 accentuates God's faithfulness, Book IV concludes with the theme of the *people's* unfaithfulness pervading Ps 106.

The conclusion of Ps 106 stands out. In vv. 40–43, as a consequence of Israel's generational faithlessness, God "gave them into the hand of the nations" (v. 41). As Estes notes here, "[t]hrough it all the Lord was more than patient and gracious to his people, but their habitual rebellion kept bringing them lower and lower. Eventually their downward trajectory led to the tragedy of captivity."[37] At the end of Ps 106, the tragedy of exile from the land dominates the psalmist's perspective. Still, God hears the cry of the people in captivity, remembers his covenant, and expresses his lovingkindness (*khesed*) abundantly in Ps 106:44–46. Note, then, the significance of Ps 106:47 (the final verse in the poem before the doxology

35 Tucker and Grant, *Psalms*, 28 (emphasis added). Also note the overall discussion of the editorial purpose of the Psalter in Tucker and Grant, 24–29.

36 Tucker and Grant, 28 (emphasis added).

37 Daniel J. Estes, *Psalms 73-150*, *NAC* 13 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2019), 306.

of Ps 106:48 that concludes all of Book IV): "Save us, O LORD our God, and gather (the verb is *qavats*) us from the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise."

In turn, at the opening of Book V, Ps 107 provides a response to this call in Ps 106 for God to gather his people from exile. The language of Ps 107:2–3 is noteworthy: "Let the *redeemed* of the Lord say so, those he *redeemed* from trouble and *gathered* (the verb is also *qavats*) in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south." In the perspective of Ps 106, then, the psalmist is *yearning* for God's ingathering, which highlights the desire to be in God's presence. At the opening of Ps 107, this yearning has been fulfilled, as the psalmist calls for praise on the basis of God *having* brought back his people. In this way, the theme of the "restoration from exile" anchors Ps 107 (ultimately, as a fulfillment of the divine promise of regathering given in Deut 30:1–10).[38]

After this initial call to praise in vv. 1–3, the psalm presents in vv. 4–32 a detailed reflection further describing the experience of deliverance from exile. As Estes observes, four metaphors are employed, such that "[v]iewing the same event through four different lenses is a process of meditation that leads the worshipers to appreciation and praise for the Lord."[39] Thus, in Ps 107, the experience of being delivered by God from exile is compared to being freed from the desolation of the desert (vv. 4–9), to being liberated from prison (vv. 10–16), to being relieved from the oppression of desperation (vv. 17–22), and to being delivered from the raging sea (vv. 23–32). Psalm 107 concludes with a call to praise in vv. 33–42, and in v. 43 with a call to *wisdom* rooted in the steadfast character of God: "Let those who are wise (*khakham*) give heed to these things, and consider the steadfast love (*khesed*) of the Lord." VanGemeren highlights the significance of v. 43 when he writes that "[t]he conclusion to this psalm transforms the hymn of thanksgiving and praise to a wisdom psalm. The righteous will become wise by studying the acts of the Lord in the affairs of man."[40]

In these ways, the editorial seam found at Pss 106 and 107 provides further development for our reflection on a ministry pattern rooted in the basic structure of the Psalter. First, we note that readers are more clearly

38 See Estes, 311.

39 Estes, 311.

40 Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *Volume 5: Psalms – Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gabelein, vol. 5 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gabelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 688.

presented with the aspect of God's unique power in redemption. The movement in the Psalms is toward a full-fledged recognition of God's supreme kingship. Second, we see that presence with God is viewed as the ultimate blessing. Justly exiled because of persistent covenantal disobedience, at this juncture in the Psalter the people of God can still experience the blessed proximity of God *through* his judgment and eventual renewal. Finally, we note the consistent theme of calling worshipers to walk God's way of *wisdom*, as a means of moving forward on the path from lament to praise—and as a way of moving from the experience of God as distant to the experience of God's proximity.

Conclusion: The Journey to Yahweh-Centered Praise

In the Psalms, the Godward journey ends in exuberant praise, even, in Ps 150, with a call to eschatologically infused instrumental praise, as Teram argues.[41] Overall, Pss 146–150 represent the end point of the worshiper's journey from lament to praise. Gundersen nicely captures the relationship between the seam psalms (and their brief doxological conclusions) and this final praise-centered destination, when he writes:

> The doxological rivers in Psalms 41, 72, 89, 106, and 145 flow into the dancing ocean of 146–150. The promise-prayers asking that "the whole earth be filled with his glory" (72:19) and that "all flesh bless his holy name" (145:21) are fulfilled in the universal symphony of every-creature praise in 146–150.[42]

My goal in this essay has been to sketch out the idea that the structure of the Psalter, as anchored in key seam psalms, may provide one ministry pattern through which those who feel they are far from God can be shepherded on the path to greater proximity with God. In these reflections, I have emphasized five sets of "seam" texts and their interwoven themes: (1) the foundational themes of wisdom and, ultimately, messianic kinship, in Pss 1 and 2; (2) the interplay of lament and service to others in relationship to the worshiper's integrity in Pss 41 and 42–43; (3) the relationship between kinship and wisdom in Pss 72 and 73; (4) the varying perspectives on God's presence in Pss 89 and 90; and (5) the developing understanding of divine redemption in Pss 106 and 107.

Ultimately, we should note that a healthy ministry perspective on this Godward path will recognize that it is *cyclical* on this side of the

41 See Jonathan Teram, "'There Are No Words': Instrumental Music and the missio Dei," *The Covenant Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (Winter 2021): 12–13.

42 Gundersen, "A Story in the Psalms," 94.

eschatological consummation that the redeemed will experience in the new heaven and in the new earth (see Isa 66:22–23). In this fallen world, as we anticipate in hope "that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay" (Rom 8:21), we ought to remember that we will often move back and forth on this path from lament to praise. But the pastor-shepherd's call remains: to keep encouraging the people of God to faithfully journey forward, as empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Godward path we have observed in the structure of the Psalter represents one pattern through which we can encourage this journey of faith. As Ho argues regarding the contributions of the Psalter's Davidic psalms, they "identify, first, the establishment of a human monarch who later fails. This is then followed by the establishment of *an ideal messianic Davidic king, who ushers in the paradisical shalom for the people of God*."[43] In the end, then, we ultimately depend on the work of the divine, Davidic king to bring us home.

43 Ho, *The Design of the Psalter*, 264 (emphasis added).