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Address all correspondence to:
David S. Hogg
Editor, Southeastern Theological Review
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
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Determining the Indeterminate: Issues in Interpreting the Psalms

Jamie Grant
Highland Theological College UHI

Writing a commentary on the psalms is a funny business. No, not "funny ha-ha" but it is "funny strange." It is not just the challenges of the length of the book and the time that needs to be devoted to it. It is not even a matter of the complexity of the text or the lack of certainty regarding the meaning of so many poetic and liturgical idioms. Nor is it the problem of poetics and cola and defining stanzas and structure and all of the vagaries and uncertainties that come with any poetic text. The issue that strikes me as strange in writing a commentary on the Psalms is, as the title of this article suggests, the practice of trying to define that which is purposefully left vague in the psalms themselves. Allow me to develop this observation a little further by asking a question: Why is it that we look to the psalms commentaries to suggest background information that the psalms themselves do not provide for us?

Were one to pick up and read through almost any Psalms commentary it is likely to tell us that this psalm (for example, Psalm 88) is a "sickness psalm" or that another psalm (for example, Psalm 15) is an "entrance liturgy." Now, my intent is not to question the veracity of such statements—each and every such assessment, in so far as they are not contradictory, may well be entirely accurate. Rather the question swimming around my head is this: Why do we feel the compelling need to determine the indeterminate? To define that which is deliberately left undefined in the biblical text? Let me unpack this thought a little further.

The Psalms and Indeterminacy

There can be no doubt regarding the lasting popularity of the Book of Psalms. Throughout successive generations of communities of faith, both Jewish and Christian, the Psalter has retained a powerful place in the hearts of many believers. Robert Alter's observations illustrate this point ably: "Through the ages, Psalms has been the most urgently, personally present of all the books of the Bible in the lives of many readers. Both Jewish and Christian tradition made it part of the daily and weekly liturgy. Untold numbers have repeatedly turned to Psalms

for encouragement and comfort in moments of crisis or despair."[1] Susan Gillingham's excellent study of the reception history of the Psalms strikes a similar chord throughout, but her concluding comments add a significant element of explanation regarding the phenomenon of the psalms' lasting popularity: ". . . whether one looks at the reception history of psalmody from a historical, literary or theological point of view, the rich vibrancy of the Psalms, and their capacity to offer such a wide variety of interpretations, will be recognised not as a hindrance to reasonable faith but as a vital assistance to it."[2] Gillingham's words here, which echo the approach that she takes throughout the study, shed light on the continuing importance of the Psalter for the people of God. Firstly, it is possible for readers today to ask questions of the psalms that are historical, literary or theological in nature and as such there is a great depth in the reading of this literature and a wealth of answers to be found. The questions that can be asked of the religious poetry of Israel are practically inexhaustible because of the diversity of approaches with which one can interrogate the text. Secondly, the psalms—by dint of their historical vagueness—offer "such a wide variety of interpretations" that it is easy for the later reader to associate with the language and emotions of the original authors in one way or another. The indeterminacy of these poems gifts the reader a type of hermeneutical luxury that is simply not available in other biblical texts.[3] It seems that these are the very reasons for psalmody's enduring significance: (1) the variety of approaches with which one can come to the text, and (2) the fact that the psalms lend themselves to constant reappropriation in a wide variety of settings in human experience.

Patrick Miller comments helpfully on this matter:

> [The psalms] are not bound to the experiences of one individual and her or his personal history. They are by definition *typical*, universal. They were composed, sung, prayed, collected, passed on because they have the capacity to articulate and express the words, thoughts, prayers of *anyone*, though they do not *necessarily* do that. They speak to and for typical human situations and thus have the capacity to speak to and for us as typical human beings. They have to do with the experiences of human existence, not just Israel's existence or that of one human being.[4]

1. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (W. W. Norton: New York/London, 2007), xiii. It is, however, interesting also to note that Alter goes on to comment in the same paragraph, "But for all the power of these Hebrew poems to speak with great immediacy in many tongues to readers of different eras, they are in their origins intricately rooted in an ancient Near Eastern world that goes back to the late Bronze Age (1600–1200 b.c.e.) and that in certain respects is quite alien to modern people." This too is important to our consideration of the interpretation of the Psalms and we will return to this issue later in this paper in our consideration of possible historical settings for psalms.

2. Susan E. Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries*, vol. 1 (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 312.

3. Or, at least, not with many other texts. Although, it could of course be argued that the similarly ambiguous settings of the OT's wisdom literature provide equivalent flexibility for the reader.

4. Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 23.

And this is my point: if the power of the psalms is found in their indeterminate setting and their typical nature, why then in our analysis of the psalms do we so often seek to determine a setting when none is given? In this very act do we not—in some sense at least—contradict an important aspect of the communicative power of the OT's poetry? On the other hand, the discussion could be framed in more positive terms by asking the question: what benefit is there in positing a concrete historical setting or rubric in the discussion of a psalm? Essentially, the hermeneutical question discussed in this paper revolves around issues of benefit and cost. Interpretative comment on the psalms frequently calls upon a hypothesized historical setting, and the issue under consideration is whether the hermeneutical benefits of this reconstruction outweigh the potential costs of just such a practice.

The Problem with "Historical" Settings

At the risk of friends and colleagues being careful of what they say to me in the future, allow me to relate a conversation that I had with Prof. J. Clint McCann of Eden Theological Seminary at the SBL Conference in Philadelphia in 2005. We had been discussing a recent publication which took a canonical approach to the study of the Book of Psalms. The work had been positively reviewed, broadly speaking, but one reviewer had commented on her disappointment that the author had not interacted with certain key issues of historical background to the psalms under consideration in this book. I felt that the reviewer's point was reasonable enough and well made; however, Prof. McCann responded, "Well, yeah, but you wouldn't want to stake your house on any of these reconstructions, would you?" And, of course, Clint McCann is absolutely right: only the most foolhardy of home owners would wager his house against the accuracy of the reconstructed settings for psalms that we find in the commentaries.

This is clearly illustrated by the diversity of opinion that we see regarding the settings of psalms in the various commentaries. For example, Psalm 88 is frequently described as one of the *Krankenpsalmen*, a "sickness psalm," yet clear indications of the cause of Heman's lament are hard to find in the poem itself.[5] Certainly, he describes himself as "afflicted and expiring from his youth" (88:16 [15])[6] but need

5. Klaus Seybold does number Psalm 88 amongst the "psalms of the sick person" in his *Das Gebet des Kranken im Alten Testament* (BWANT 99; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1973), 117. However, more recent commentators tend to be cautious in attributing a particular setting to Heman's plea. A. A. Anderson, for example, comments: "The situation portrayed is life-long trouble (see verse 15)—perhaps some grave illness, although it would be pointless to speculate as to its exact nature. . ." (*The Book of Psalms, Volume II, Psalms 73–150* [NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972], 623). Equally, quoting Krieg, Zenger notes that "nowhere is any sickness mentioned" and "in view of the highly poetic form of this psalm, the attempts that have repeatedly been made to give a concrete biographical context to the origins and genre of the psalm are superfluous," (Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005], 393).

6. Translations throughout are mine unless otherwise stated.

the "affliction" (the generic and multivalent *ʿānî* in Hebrew) necessarily be physical? Most of the psalmist's assessments of his condition point to the psychological turmoil that he faces rather than referring to any specific sense of physical ailment. So, although a root cause in physical sickness is certainly possible, it is also at least possible to see Heman as depressed and potentially suicidal based on the text of Psalm 88. Could it be a desire to take his own life that brings him "close to death from his youth up" (ESV)? Perhaps such a scenario is "less likely" than the poem being rooted in long-term physical sickness but it is certainly not impossible. This dubiety regarding the specific biographical setting of Heman's poignant lament leads Goldingay to comment that Psalm 88: "actually tells us nothing concrete and specific about the nature of the suppliant's affliction, even whether or not it involved illness. It focuses more on a wide range of ways of expressing the implications of the affliction, especially abandonment by Yahweh and by other people (though there is no reference to attacks by other people, only by Yahweh). It is the lament of an outsider."[7]

It might be argued that choosing Psalm 88 as a counterpoint for this discussion skews the discussion because, as an illustration, it is particularly oblique or difficult. However, this question of the dubiety of historical reconstructions of the psalms struck me in particular when writing on Psalm 89. It has become commonplace for the commentators on the psalms to point to a post-exilic setting for Psalm 89. Weiser, for example, notes: "Most commentators seek to identify the catastrophe, which gave rise to this lament, which exposed the country to destruction and looting, and deprived the king of his autonomy, with the downfall of Judah in 587 b.c.; they therefore regard the psalm as belonging to the exilic or postexilic period."[8] And, in some sense, the natural reading of the text seems to be as a lament over the collapse of the Davidic line of promise in the fall of Jerusalem. Yet, even regarding a poem where it might be said that a more general sense of agreement prevails, there is still no reconstruction that is universally held by commentators.

Nahum Sarna, for example, argues from OT intertextual connections that Psalm 89 is best read as a lament over an attack on the Davidic king and not as a city lament over the ending of the Davidic line together with the destruction of Jerusalem.[9] The textual links with the Deuteronomistic History, especially Nathan's oracle, point to the lament being over a personal attack on the Davidide

7. John Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 2, Psalms 42–89* (BCOTWP 2; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 645.

8. Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (OTL; trans. H. Hartwell; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 591, although Weiser goes on to question this conclusion. See also Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBLDS 76; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 212–14 and "The Use of Royal Psalms at the 'Seams' of the Hebrew Psalter," *JSOT* 35 (1986): 85–94 or Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2 [Psalms 51–100]* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 405–6, for thorough discussions of the historical reconstruction that locates Psalm 89 as a post-exilic response to the loss of the Davidic king.

9. Nahum M. Sarna, "Psalms 89: A Study in Inner Biblical Exegesis," in *Biblical and Other Studies* (ed. Alexander Altmann; Philip W. Lown Institute of Advanced Judaic Studies 1; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 29–46.

rather than a threat to the integrity of the nation, he argues. Sarna, therefore, sees the most likely historical setting as being the Aramean-Israelite coalition attack on King Ahaz (Isa. 7; 2 Kgs. 16; 2 Chron. 28).[10] To many this may seem an unlikely reading of Psalm 89 and some will balk at Sarna's degree of specificity in his reconstruction. However, Sarna is able to put together a credible argument to such an extent that he is confident enough to comment that, "There cannot be the slightest doubt that the lament must reflect some situation prior to the Babylonian invasion."[11] And we must also bear in mind that several other commentators point to an original setting that predates the fall of Jerusalem.[12] So, if we cannot be absolutely certain even regarding the historical setting of the "clearest" of psalms, the question springs to mind: what value is there in these historical reconstructions of the settings that gave rise to psalms?

The Value of "Historical" Settings

From a hermeneutical perspective, then, just what is the value of positing historical settings to psalms that are purposefully ahistorical? If, as Miller and others argue, a good measure of the psalms' communicative power is to be found in their lack of historical specificity, why do scholars expend so much time, effort, paper and ink trying to establish a specific historical setting? There are probably two reasons that contribute to this norm: one sociological reason and one theological reason.

First, it is very difficult to buck the trend of community expectation. Psalms commentaries have, from the beginning, suggested a diversity of historical settings as the *Sitze* that ultimately led to the poetic expression of these events in praises or laments which were eventually included in the canonical Psalter. Every commentary from the Enlightenment onwards suggests possible historical backgrounds behind the contextless psalms. Therefore, a clear sense of expectation has developed over the years, making it nigh-on impossible to write on the psalms without making reference to questions of background. Thankfully, scholars tend now to be much more circumspect with regard to their historical assertions. Whereas, during the period in which form criticism dominated the study of the Psalter, one frequently encountered extensive and elaborate argumentation regarding the historical or cultic setting of a psalm or the layers of a poem's development, such discussion tends to be much more conscious of its own uncertainty in recent years.[13]

10. Nahum M. Sarna, "Psalm 89," 42–45.

11. Nahum M. Sarna, "Psalm 89," 43.

12. See, for example, Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms* (NIBCOT; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 355, and Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 639.

13. Analyses of the Psalter focussing strongly on questions of historical setting date back at least as far as the early work of Gunkel and Mowinckel where the dominant aim of form-critical studies was to establish the cultic role and the identity of the speaker of each psalm (Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *Einleitung in die Psalmen: Die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israels*

For example, it is refreshing to read in Goldingay's recent commentaries on the psalms the simple comment: "There is no indication of a date."[14] Of course, this is absolutely true of many of the psalms, but that has never prevented scholars from writing several pages discussing the various possible scenarios rather than simply acknowledging that the psalm is silent on the question of date or social setting. Thus, one reason for the practice of suggesting historical settings is simply the expectation that such discussion will be a part of any academic study of the Book of Psalms. Sociology definitely plays its part in forming the present approach to psalmic interpretation.

Second, there are also good *theological* reasons for suggesting historical settings to guide the interpretation of indeterminate psalms. The primary such reason is that the canonical Psalter itself sets such an example for us by the addition of historical superscriptions to psalms that would otherwise be of completely indeterminate setting.[15] Now, the origin of the superscriptions is a notoriously difficult topic to pin down, and this is not the place for a full or even extensive discussion, but it does seem that thirteen historical superscriptions have been deliberately added to their texts in order to provide the later reader with a suggested rubric for the interpretation of those poems.[16]

Gerald Wilson comments, "[t]he historical notices were appended possibly as the result of exegetical interpretation of the texts in the light of the presumed author's life setting."[17] In making this statement, Wilson essentially summarises Brevard Childs' lucid suggestions regarding the exegetical nature of psalmic super-

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[Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933] or Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* [Vols. I & II; trans. D.R. Ap-Thomas; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962]). This trend dominated Psalms studies up until the 1980s–90s and the development of the canonical approach to the Psalter. More recent examples of this type of study of historical background includes John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (2nd ed., SBT, vol. 32; London: SCM Press, 1986) and Steven J. L. Croft, *The Identity of the Individual in the Psalms* (JSOTSup 44; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987).

14. Goldingay, *Psalms 2*, 645.

15. Historical superscriptions set the scene for Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63 and 142. There is some diversity in this numbering. Some scholars would also include the superscription to Psalm 30—"A Song at the Dedication of the Temple" (*šîr-ḥănukkat habbayit*)—as a historical title. However, this does seem to be somewhat different from the other titles of this type which draw upon much more specific events from the life of David.

16. It would be inappropriate in an article of this length and nature to offer a complete consideration of the historicity, authorship, originality and editorial function of the psalmic superscriptions. So, for present purposes, it is probably sufficient to comment that the approach to the superscriptions applied in this article broadly reflects the suggestion of Gerald Wilson that: "The most usual scenario suggested [regarding the introduction of superscriptions to the text of the Psalter] sees three layers of accretion. (1) The liturgical elements were added—perhaps while the psalms were still in use in temple worship (thus the reference to the director), but perhaps representing notes appended when the psalms were gathered into more literary collections before inclusion in the Psalter. (2) Traditions of "authorship" were added, with collections developing around specific authors. (3) The historical notices were added—possibly as a result of exegetical interpretation of the texts in the light of the presumed author's life setting," (*Psalms—Volume 1* [NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002], 80).

17. Wilson, *Psalms—Volume 1*, 80.

scriptions.[18] Unpacking Childs' argument a little more fully sheds some light upon the question under discussion. First, Childs suggests that:

> The titles represent an early reflection of how the Psalms as a collection of sacred literature were understood. The titles established a secondary setting which became normative for the canonical tradition. In this sense the titles form an important link in the history of exegesis.[19]

Childs' suggestion that the historical superscriptions established a secondary setting that influenced later exegetical practice is significant to our discussion here and we will consider this further below. Before going on to do that, however, it is important to pick up on two further features of Childs' argument that also speak to the question of historical reconstructions. Firstly, he suggests that "the psalm titles do not appear to reflect independent historical tradition but are the result of an exegetical activity which derived its material from within the text itself."[20] Second, Childs considers the effects of the historic superscriptions:

> To summarise: the most important factor in the formation of the titles appears to be general parallels between the situation described in the Psalm and some incident in the life of David. Linguistic parallels, especially word-plays,were of secondary importance. There are signs to suggest a process of scholarly study of the Psalms in relation to other Old Testament passages, in which historical inferences and logical combinations were made and which went beyond a simple reading of the text. However, there is nothing to indicate that a set of hermeneutical rules had been developed as yet. At most one can recognise analogies in an exegetical method of inner-biblical interpretation which later developed into a full-blown midrash.[21]

This all leads Childs to conclude:

> The learned tradition of the study of Scripture which lay behind the formation of the titles would point to a type of scribal school but the purpose of the titles was far from academic. By placing a Psalm within the setting of a particular historical incident, the reader suddenly was given access to previously unknown information. David's inner life was now unlocked to the reader, who was allowed to hear his intimate thoughts and reflections. It therefore seems most probable that the formation of

18. Brevard S. Childs, "Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis," *JSS* 16, no. 2 (Autumn 1971): 137–49.

19. Childs, "Psalm Titles," 137.

20. Childs, "Psalm Titles," 143. Following a study of the inter-textual links between the Psalms that bear an historical superscription and the accounts of the events referred to from the life of David as presented in the Deuteronomistic History, Childs comments the psalms' titles reflect "considerable study of Scripture which goes much beyond noticing obvious allusions," ("Psalm Titles," 147).

21. Childs, "Psalm Titles," 147–48.

> the titles stemmed from a pietistic circle of Jews whose interest was particularly focused on the nurture of the spiritual life.[22]

Brevard Childs' thoughtful consideration of the historic superscriptions helps to unpack the theological value of suggesting historical settings to specific psalms. The main point is not whether the suggested setting is verifiable but rather is it *helpful* in opening up our understanding of the sense and meaning of the poem? Childs' suggestion is not that there was a definite historical link between the events of David's life and the psalms that bear these superscriptions. Instead, he suggests that the historical titles reflect a tradition of detailed study of the psalmic text and comparison with events from David's life as they are presented in the history books. Clearly, this practice is analogous to the academic quest for an historical setting lying behind the psalms. In suggesting possible historical backgrounds that could have led to the penning of a particular poem, scholars conduct a similar practice to the one carried out by the editors of the Psalter in adding historical titles to certain psalms. Looking for a possible *Sitz im Leben* is grounded in the detailed analysis of the text and, I would suggest, its intent is not simply historical. As is the case with the historical titles in the Psalter, the suggestion of a setting in life opens up the text to fuller investigation and deeper understanding. The value of suggesting background is not rooted in whether or not we can verify historical accuracy, it is rather found in the close reading of the text and the way in which such suggestions open up avenues for appropriation of that text.

Let me attempt to illustrate. The suggestion of multiple authors that Psalm 88 is rooted in the long-term sickness of the poet is ultimately unverifiable. We simply cannot tell. Nevertheless, that suggestion opens up a particular avenue for interpretation. The reader of those Psalms commentaries suggesting a background in physical sickness finds the poem opened up to them in new ways, offering particular avenues for appropriation. But what if the Psalm is not rooted in sickness? Does this not lead to inappropriate appropriation? Following Childs' argument above, the answer to that objection would have to be: "No, not really." For, although the historical titles suggest the rubric for interpretation based on events in David's life, that suggestion does not ultimately limit the multiplicity of potential avenues of appropriation in a wide variety of settings. So, the fact that Psalm 18 purports to be rooted in Yahweh's deliverance of David from the hand of Saul, in no way limits the song's relevance to a thousand other settings were God's divine intervention can be celebrated. Miller comments thus on the historical titles: "They suggest a circumstance in which the introduced psalm would be appropriate and thus provide an illustrative clue to interpretation."[23] And such is the net effect of proposing historical settings to the psalms. This is a practice that provides an "illustrative clue to interpretation" but does not necessarily limit interpretation to that particular context. It provides a framework, and in doing so, opens the text up to a variety of interpretations even beyond that setting. It

22. Childs, "Psalm Titles," 149.
23. Miller, *Interpreting*, 26.

is, of course, important to be honest regarding the lack of certainty with which we propose historical reconstructions of psalmic backgrounds, so that interested readers do not read "best guesses" as some sort of absolute, but even proposing a best guess in some way *opens the psalm to appropriation* rather than diminishing its communicative power.

The Priority of Canonical Settings

So, despite all of the difficulty that is inherent to the task of rooting psalms in a concrete historical setting, we can see that there is value in suggesting such potential frameworks for interpretation. However, historical settings must be read in the light of canonical settings and, if priority is to be given to either, it seems that there is a degree of definiteness in the latter which is often lacking in the former. Therefore, the canonical voice of a psalm should be clearly heard and, in some sense, that voice must take precedence over putative historical reconstructions.

A word of explanation is in order. Throughout many generations of Psalms scholarship it was simply supposed that the Psalter is an anthological collection of disparate individual compositions. The assumption was that each poem is an entity in its own right and therefore constitutes an insular pericope for the purposes of interpretation. The question of context was seldom, if ever, applied to the Book of Psalms. Such was the scenario up until the 1980s and the publication of Childs' *Introduction to the Old Testament Scripture*[24] and Wilson's *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (cited above). Childs' general suggestion that there are indications of purposeful editing within the Psalter was developed much more fully by Wilson in his published PhD dissertation. Again, detailed discussion of the development of a canonical approach to the Book of Psalms can be found elsewhere and lies outwith the purposes of this paper.[25] The net effect of the canonical reading of the Psalms is that each composition is now read within a literary context. As Clint McCann suggests, the Psalms are no longer to be read as the song book of Israel, they are instead to be read as a book like any other book of the Bible.[26] Summarising, this means that each poem is influenced by the context within which it is found—either simply by its juxtaposition alongside a neighbouring psalm or neighbouring psalms, or by its inclusion in a collection such as the Songs of Ascents, or by its placement

24. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979).

25. See, for example, David M. Howard, "The Psalms and Current Study," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (ed. Philip S. Johnston and David G. Firth; Nottingham: Apollos, 2005), 23–40, for an analysis of the development of the canonical approach to Psalms studies. See Jamie A. Grant, "Poetics," in *Words and the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory* (ed. David G. Firth and Jamie A. Grant; Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 187–225, for a summary and description of how the canonical method works.

26. J. Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Books of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993); "The Psalms as Instruction," *Int* 46, no. 2 (April 1992): 117–28.

and positioning within one of the five books of the Psalter.[27] As always, the context within which a passage is read will have an impact upon its interpretation.

How then do the questions of historical context and canonical context interact? And how does this impact interpretation? Let us take Psalm 89 as our example. The question of the historical setting of Psalm 89, as discussed above, is open to some debate. Many see it as a psalm that is either exilic or post-exilic that reflects upon the demise of the Davidic line following the fall of Jerusalem and (possibly) the "inglorious" return from exile. Other scholars reject this reading and see the psalm as reflecting on an attack on the Davidic line during the period of the Judean monarchy's existence. In terms of historical setting there is merit on both sides of the discussion and it is very difficult to come to a conclusive decision based on the content of the psalm alone. When we take canonical context into account, though, it becomes clear that—regardless of the original historical setting that led the poet to write the psalm—Psalm 89 should be read as a post-exilic psalm lamenting the loss of the Davidic line.

The historical setting of Psalm 89 is ambiguous, but its canonical setting is not. Psalm 89 is the concluding psalm of Book III of the Psalter; therefore, it is placed at a key editorial position in the book as a whole.[28] It concludes an editorial division (Book III) that is dominated by the imagery of exile. Psalm 73 laments—perhaps in the more generic sense of theodicy—the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous, but the ensuing psalms make it clear that this lament is specifically drawn from the events surrounding the destruction of the city and the temple. Psalm 74 responds to the destruction of the temple. Psalm 75 looks for God's divine judgement at the time he ordains. Psalm 77 seeks God's help in the time of trouble and torment. Psalm 78 decries the covenant unfaithfulness of God's people and longs for a day of covenant faithfulness under the shepherd, David. Psalm 79 laments the destruction of the city and the loss of life when Jerusalem finally fell to the Babylonian siege. Psalm 80 recounts the Exodus from Egypt and seeks the same from Babylon. Psalm 85 seems to be a psalm of return from exile. Psalm 87 resonates with the imagery of a restored Zion, once again at the heart of God's purposes for the nations and the earth. There can be no doubt that Book III is a collection dominated by lament over the exile and the removal of all of the external signs of Yahweh's covenant with his people.

This, therefore, is the canonical context within which we interpret Psalm 89. In terms of its original authorship, it is practically impossible to establish with any degree of certainty for its historical setting. But, on an editorial level, it is quite clear that Psalm 89 is to be read as a psalm that laments the passing of the Davidic line of promise. This is the literary context in which the psalm is placed and so provides a greater degree of certainty to any discussion of historical background.

27. See James L. Mays, "The Question of Context in Psalm Interpretation," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (ed. J. Clinton McCann; JSOTSup 159; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 14–20 and Grant, "Poetics."

28. Wilson, "Use of Royal Psalms."

Although Psalm 89 *may* have been written in response to a pre-exilic assault on the house of David, we read it now as a composition that questions God's faithfulness because yet another of the external signs of the covenant promise has been removed. This canonical setting opens a line of appropriation grounded in honest prayer as a response to God's frequently mysterious plan and purpose. Yahweh had promised David an eternal line and yet, at the time of editing, that line was no more. How then was God going to keep his promise? Christian readers read from the perspective of knowing the *denouement* of the story, but the canonical interpretation of this psalm encourages the reader to place himself in the shoes of one who is both baffled and troubled by the dark providence of God. This is an experience that may come upon anyone in the community of faith, at the most unexpected of times, so it is important that we allow the voice of the editors to speak. There is often greater clarity to be found in this voice than there is in the quest for historical setting, useful as this may be.

Conclusion

And so we return to the quotes of Alter and Gillingham with some observations: (1) Clearly, indeterminacy has opened and continues to open the psalms to continued appropriation and reinterpretation by each succeeding generation of faith. There can be no doubt that the lack of historical setting aids the applicability of the psalms to ever-new settings. This indeterminacy should be embraced hermeneutically and never removed by over-confident claims of historical certainty. (2) Suggestions of possible historical settings, such as the historical superscriptions, can provide frameworks that help readers to embrace the compositions of the Psalter as their own prayers and praises and pleas, by suggesting possible settings with which they can relate. (3) The canonical positioning of the psalms into collections and books provides another helpful layer of study that gives insight into how the editors of the Book of Psalms interpreted the individual compositions theologically. Nevertheless, in every investigation of the Psalter the primary task of the interpreter, as Gillingham suggests, is to embrace its great diversity. It is entirely appropriate when reading the psalms to ask questions of an historical nature, or of a literary nature, or of a theological nature. It is appropriate because we will find answers to all of these questions in this book that is "an anatomy of all parts of the soul."[29]

29. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), 1:xxxviii.