

## PSALMS 90–106: BOOK FOUR OF A FIVE-PART DRAMA

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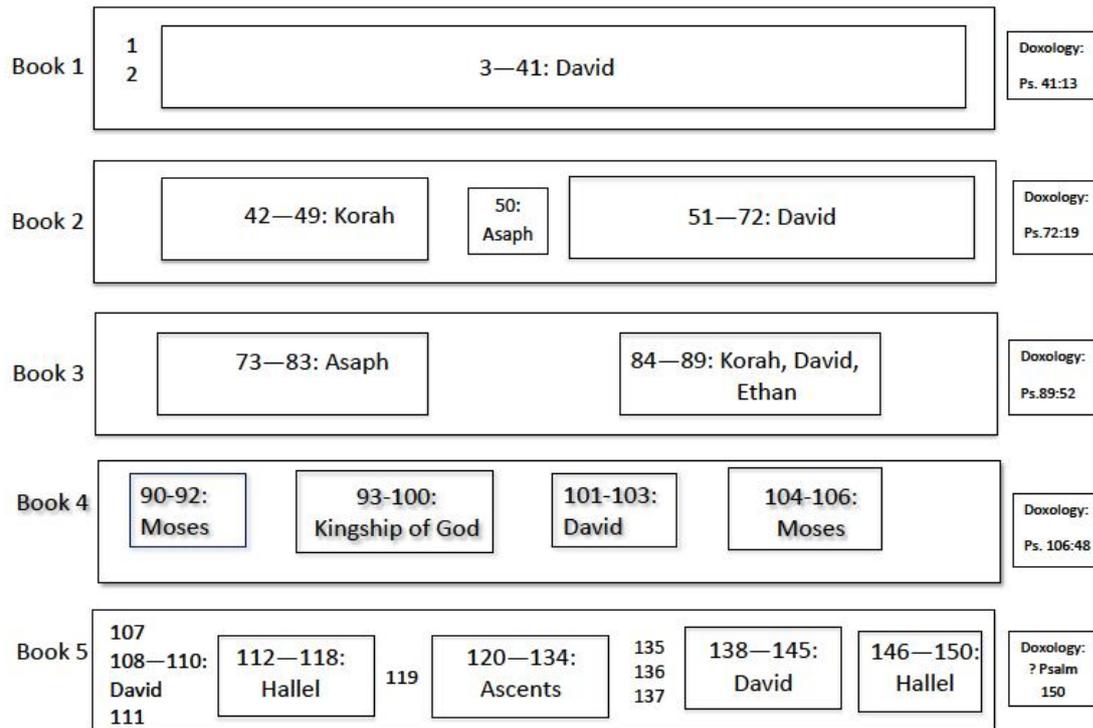
### Introduction

Most of us are used to studying and praying the psalms as single units of teaching, prayer and praise. However, the decision to focus on one entire book within the Psalter raises some very different issues. To what extent might the *Psalter as a whole* be read as a five-part drama, the development of a story, with each individual psalm playing its particular part? The division of the Psalter into Five Books has often been seen as a way of imitating the Mosaic Torah; thus here we have the ‘Torah of David’. So if the Torah of Moses comprises story through law, could the Davidic Torah comprise story through poetry and prayer? If so, what is this story about? And what part does Book Four, Psalms 90–106, play in this story? There are many ways of reading this story, but one way of reading it is to see it as a testimony, perhaps even a drama in five acts, to the rise and fall of the Davidic monarchy: this is one reason we call the Psalter ‘The Psalms of David’. In order to understand the purpose of *Book Four* in this unfolding drama, we need to view, briefly, the Psalter as a whole.

### The Psalter: A Drama in Five Parts

Each of the five books is marked out by a similar doxology added on to the last psalm in the book. However, not only are the books of different lengths, but the interest in the figure of David differs greatly within each of them. In Book One the heading ‘to David’ (דָּוִד) occurs over all but two psalms of the forty-one; in Books Two and Three ‘to David’ is the title over twenty-two of the forty-seven psalms. In Books Four and Five this superscription occurs in only twelve of the sixty psalms. So in Book One the figure of David is central, and in Books Two and Three he also dominant. What are we to make of this? Book One begins with Psalm 2 which is concerned the establishment of a new Davidic king; many of the psalms which follow are personal psalms, but the Davidic headings allow us to read them ‘through David’. So here David is a paradigm of obedience especially in times of suffering. Book Two begins with an emphasis on Jerusalem and the Temple (Psalms 42–49) but ends with an interest in David as a national hero, taking up stories about David from 1 and 2 Samuel. Book Two ends with a psalm headed ‘to Solomon’: given that many of the preceding psalms are about the difficult affairs of the nation, Psalm 72, with its Solomonic heading, reminds us of the later problems of the monarchy after the division of the kingdoms. Book Three includes many psalms which herald further the eventual decline of the Davidic covenant; Psalm 89 ends these first three books by speaking of David’s throne being ‘hurled to the ground’ with God seemingly hidden from his people (89:44-46).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Versification is from the *New Revised Standard Version*, unless otherwise stated.



Books Four and Five are very different in form and content and develop this drama in new ways.<sup>2</sup> In Book Four, especially, Moses is more prominent, and the Exodus traditions are as important as those of David and Zion. Here the psalms echo a constant theme of coping with loss: this seems to reflect on the experience of exile, with the land, Temple and King, the identity markers of the people, all having been removed. Book Five has many of the features of Book Four: but it reflects on better times, celebrating God’s return to Zion through the restored Temple.

Book Four is our focus today. It has seventeen psalms, mirroring the seventeen psalms in Book Three. In turn it has four collections of psalms. But first let me persuade you that the experience of the exile has influenced the compilation of this fourth book.

There is no doubt that the emphasis here on Moses and the Exodus traditions corresponds with other biblical texts which were written during the time of the exile. The best example is Isaiah 40–55, a prophetic book which also addresses the trauma of the people in Babylon. Interestingly, there are many common themes between Book Four of the Psalter and this exilic prophet. For example, Book Four begins and ends with pleas to God to ‘take pity’ on his people (90:13 and 106:45, using  $\mu\text{j } \text{ן}$ );<sup>3</sup> the beginning and ending of Isaiah 40–55 are on exactly the same theme (Isa. 40:1 and 54:11, also using  $\mu\text{j } \text{ן}$ ).<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of each book, in Ps. 90:5 and Isa. 40:6–8, human frailty is compared with grass ( $\text{רַיָּח}$ ). And in Pss. 96:1 and 98:1, as well as in Isa. 42:10, we read of the ‘new song’ which is to be sung to celebrate what God will later do for his people. Furthermore, the universal reign of God is defiantly declared throughout both works, for example in Ps. 96:4–5 and Isa. 40:18–23. Each denounces the worship of all idols, each playing on the He-

<sup>2</sup> This observation applies only to the Hebrew text. The Greek translation of Book Four has a more Davidic emphasis (for example, additional Davidic headings are given to Psalms 91, 93–99 and 104). And one of the Dead Sea Psalms Scrolls of Book Four (11QP<sup>s</sup>) displays a very different order, whereby Psalms 109 and 118 and 147 are all placed directly after Psalm 103. But this paper is about the story as is told in the *Hebrew Bible*, not least as it presents itself in the Masoretic Text.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Return O Lord! How long? *Have pity* on thy servants!’ (Ps. 90:3); and ‘*He caused them to be pitied* by all those who held them captive’ (Ps. 106:45 [Heb 47]).

<sup>4</sup> ‘*Comfort, comfort [pity, pity] my people, says your God.*’ (Isa. 40:1). ‘O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and *not comforted* [= ‘not pitied’] ...’ (Isa. 54:11).

brew words for 'gods' (μῦθῶ) and 'nobodies' (μὴτις): see Ps. 96:5 and Isa. 40:17-18.<sup>5</sup> There is however one key difference: Book Four is more explicitly interested in Moses – indeed, Moses is only mentioned once in the Psalter outside Book Four, but seven times within it<sup>6</sup> – whilst Isaiah 40–55 prefers not to refer explicitly to Moses but to the Exodus traditions in general as a basis for hope. Nevertheless, the experience of exile is a significant influence in each case.

So we shall focus on Book Four as part of the story of the rise and fall of the covenant with David. My own approach is like that of Erich Zenger, who also wrote on Book Four from a Christian perspective, seeing 'Israel und Kirche im gemeinsamen Gottesbund'.<sup>7</sup> Zenger made it clear that the two faiths are to be interpreted 'side by side', rather than using the psalms to argue for the superiority of one faith over the other.<sup>8</sup> So the two *Jewish* covenants of 'Moses and Torah' and 'David and Zion' and the later *Christian* covenant with its two parts, one of 'Jesus the Teacher', following the tradition of Moses, and the other of 'Christ the Messiah', following from the tradition of David, are inextricably bound together. We need to engage with each other in humility. After all, each faith tradition derives its identity not from its own merit but from the mercy (δσj) of a God who invites 'all who fear him' (Ps. 103:11, 17) to participate in his Kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

So Book Four is part of a larger drama: it tells its own story in four scenes. It starts with Moses the mediator (Psalms 90–92); it moves on to focus on the Kingship of God (Psalms 93–100); it pauses to reflect briefly on the experiences of a king like David (Psalms 101–103); and it ends again with Torah as Creation and Exodus come back in view (Psalms 104–106). There is much here which allows both Jewish and Christian readings, not only in theology, but also in experience. If the these psalms were to remind a beleaguered people, living in exile in a foreign land, that God was still on their side, there is much for us all to learn from them. This is not just about events in the sixth century BCE, but concerns circumstances which have been experienced continuously by Jewish and Christian communities through the ages; so all who feel like strangers and sojourners in a foreign land can participate in this story as well.

### **Scene One: A 'Moses Collection'** **Psalms 90–92: Seeking God's Refuge in Exile**

Psalms 90–92 share the common theme of the ephemeral nature of humanity and Moses plays a central part in 'communicating' this.<sup>10</sup> 'Moses, man of God' is not only in the heading to Psalm 90: parts of Moses' speeches in Deuteronomy 32 and 33 and Exodus 32 are interspersed throughout these three psalms as Moses represents the authoritative mediating voice from the past.<sup>11</sup> The three psalms move in an increasingly hopeful sequence from lament (Psalm 90) to divine promise (Psalm 91) to thanksgiving (Psalm 92). The key theme in these three psalms is that, rather than

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<sup>5</sup> See Creach (1998): 63-76.

<sup>6</sup> Outside Book Four Moses is referred to only in Ps. 77:21. In Book Four references are found in the title to Psalm 90 and in Pss. 99:6; 103:7; 105:26; 106:16, 23, 32.

<sup>7</sup> See Zenger (1991): 238-57.

<sup>8</sup> 'Israel und Kirche stehen von Gott her in einem spannungsreichen Verhältnis, das beide wahr- und annehmen müssen, damit sie – in messianischer Weggemeinschaft – ihrer gemeinsamen Aufgabe gerecht werden können, nämlich "Gottes Reich bei uns einzulassen", oder wenigstens "ihm den Weg zu bahnen", – beide in ihrer spezifischen Sendung!': Zenger (1991): 236.

<sup>9</sup> 'Israel und Kirche zugleich als "Volk Gottes" zu bezeichnen, müsste entweder den Begriff entleeren ... oder würde die Israel und der Kirche spezifisch zukommende Berufung nivellieren ... Wenn Israel sich diese Mitte des Bundes durch die Tora und durch die sich um die Tora als "Zäune" herumlegenden "Propheten" und "Schriften" von der rabbinischen Tradition auslegen lässt, und wenn sich die Christen diese Bundesmitte von Jesus Christus auslegen lassen, werden beide – auf je verschiedene Weise – Zeugen und Eiferer jenes Gottesbundes, der ihnen geschenkt ist – damit SEIN Reich komme': Zenger (1991): 254.

<sup>10</sup> See Wallace (2007): 88-94.

<sup>11</sup> Targum to Psalm 90 adds 'A prayer of Moses the prophet, when the people of Israel sinned in the desert'.

depending on any human institution, God is now the refuge of his people (Pss. 90:1; 91:1-2, 9-10; 92:12-13): he is to be found by 'night and day' (90:5-6; 91:5-6; 92:2).

**Psalm 90** reminds us immediately of Psalm 89, concerning the brevity of life (90:3-6; 89:47-48): we sense the people still living the judgement of God (90:7-10; 89:46) as the question 'how long?' is repeated in Pss. 90:13 and 89:46). Verses 1-6 lament human mortality;<sup>12</sup> vv. 7-12 reflect on God's wrath.<sup>13</sup> Verses 13-17 petition God to restore his 'dwelling place' with his people.<sup>14</sup>

Christian writers through the ages have commented on the theme of 'refuge in God' in this psalm, including Basil the Great and Athanasius.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the best-known Christian reading of this psalm in English, also focusing on the theme of God as Refuge, is the eighteenth century hymn by Isaac Watts:<sup>16</sup>

O God, our help in ages past,  
our hope for years to come,  
our shelter from the stormy blast,  
and our eternal home.

A thousand ages, in thy sight,  
are like an evening gone;  
short as the watch that ends the night,  
before the rising sun.

Time, like an ever rolling stream,  
bears all who breathe away;  
they fly forgotten, as a dream  
dies at the opening day.<sup>17</sup>

**Psalm 91** is set in the form of a divine oracle and as well as emphasising again that God is our refuge (91:2, 9) it stresses some deliverance from evil. The first promise of God as refuge (vv. 1-8) offers an extraordinary image of God as a mother eagle who protects his people from the 'snare and fowler' and the night-time and noon-day demons.<sup>18</sup> The second promise of refuge (vv. 9-13) refers instead to God sending protective angels.<sup>19</sup> The third promise (vv. 14-16) consist of eight blessings, using eight verbs of protection: here, unusually in the Psalms, God speaks in the first person.

The evidence from Qumran suggests that Psalm 91 was used as an apotropaic text on amulets, magical papyri and house walls (vv. 5-6 or 10-13 were used).<sup>20</sup> This suggests the background to the citation of vv. 11-12 by Satan in Jesus Christ's temptations: Satan states 'It is written, "He will give his angels charge of you" and "On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone"' (Matt. 4:6). Similarly v. 13, which refers to being unhurt by the lion and adder, is used in Lk. 10:19: in Christian tradition this later became known as an 'exorcism text' where Satan is described as a Hunter, and sin is personified as a wild beast, and Christ has power over

<sup>12</sup> Verse 2 uses *dly* and *lyj*, found also in Deut. 32:18.

<sup>13</sup> In v. 10 'seventy years' brings together the theme of human mortality and the years of exile (see for example Jer. 25:11, 12 and 29:10).

<sup>14</sup> *μjn* (v. 13) is also found in Deut. 32:36.

<sup>15</sup> Athanasius also used this psalm against the Arians in his defence of the 'eternity' of the Son: see Wesselschmidt (2007): 166-9.

<sup>16</sup> Unusually for Watts, no explicit Christian emendation is in fact to be found.

<sup>17</sup> See also Robert Burns, 'The First Six Verses of the Ninetieth Psalm' and J.H. Newman, who used this psalm at end of the 'Dream of Gerontius'; in Elgar's version this is sung by the souls in Purgatory ('Lord, Thou hast been our refuge in every generation / Come back, O Lord! How long: and be entreated for Thy servants / Bring us not, Lord, very low: for Thou hast said, / Come back again, ye sons of Adam') and is followed by the final chorus of Angels 'Praise to the Holiest in the height ...'

<sup>18</sup> This image is also found in Exod. 19:4 and Deut. 32:10-12 and here it may allude to the wings of cherubim in temple (1 Kgs 6:23-28) suggesting God's everlasting care for his people despite its destruction.

<sup>19</sup> This may allude to other Mosaic passages such as Exod. 23:20, 23 and 32:34.

<sup>20</sup> Psalm 91 is the 'Fourth Exorcism Psalm' in 4QPs<sup>b</sup> and 11Q11 (11QapocrPs).

both.<sup>21</sup> This association of Christ's protection over the night-time demons resulted in Psalm 91 being used in Benedictine tradition as the first psalm for Compline Psalms, as the monks sought protection through the night hours.

**Psalm 92**, 'A Song for the Sabbath' is linked to 91 by its reference to God as 'Most High' (92:1; see 91:1, 9) and to witnessing the downfall of the enemy (92:11; see 91:8). The reference to God being exalted 'on high for ever' in v. 8, at the heart of the psalm, points ahead to the first Kingship Psalm, 93:4. The whole mood of the psalm is of optimistic trust by one who feels secure in the promises of God. Verses 1-5 are a thanksgiving song; vv. 6-11 are a testimony to God's righteous judgement; and vv. 12-15 testify to God's blessings (using the same metaphor of the 'tree' in the Temple forecourts as is found in Pss. 1:3 and 52:8).

Although there is no reference to the Sabbath in the text, the sevenfold use of the name HaShem may have contributed to the title: this is 'A Song for the Sabbath'. Otherwise the divine order in creation is affirmed, for to remember the Sabbath is to remember that we are all made in God's image – thus opening the psalm up for Christian as well as Jewish use.

## Scene Two: The Kingship Psalms

### Psalms 93–100: 'The Lord Reigns!'

Psalms 93–100 explicitly and implicitly testify to a greater king than David: God alone is King. Moses and Torah still appear in these psalms<sup>22</sup> but it is the sovereignty of God over the entire cosmos which dominates this collection. Although Psalms 94 and 100 make less explicit references to God's Kingship, the whole collection may be seen as follows:

Psalm 93: God's kingship is for ever

Psalm 94: God will come to judge the nations of the earth

Psalm 95: God's people are called upon to acknowledge God as king

Psalm 96: 'Sing to the Lord a new song'

Psalm 97: God reigns in Zion

Psalm 98: 'Sing to the Lord a new song'

Psalm 99: God reigns in Zion

Psalm 100: The whole earth is called upon to acknowledge God as king

**Psalm 93** begins with 'The Lord reigns!' (על מלכותו, noting this is a verbal form): vv. 1-2 claim HaShem has always been king from time immemorial, and now through the praises of his people he becomes their king.<sup>23</sup> Verses 3 and 4 take up the myth of God's cosmic battle with the sea, and v. 5 affirms that Jerusalem ('thy house') is where God's eternal rule and earthly abode intersect.<sup>24</sup>

In Christian tradition Psalm 93 is used at the Feast of Ascension: God's victory over the cosmic and chaotic waters is another means of describing Christ's victory over death, so that the phrase 'Christ is risen!' has the same connotations as 'The Lord is king!' – i.e., an event in the past made present in worship and praise. The Gospel reading for Ascension Day, usually from Lk. 24:44-53, thus becomes the lens through which this psalm is read.

**Psalm 94** has a very different tone with its emphasis on 'God of vengeance' (אלהי נקמה). Nevertheless, the psalm picks up the theme in Psalm 92 of God as 'my Rock' (צור) in Ps. 92:15 (Heb v.16); here in 94:22 it is (ישלם צור). And the reference in Ps. 94:8 to dullards and fools (מורב and מולי) is

<sup>21</sup> Wesselschmidt (2007): 173-4.

<sup>22</sup> Pss. 93:5 and 94:12 refer to 'decrees' and 'Torah' respectively, and Moses and Aaron appear in 99:7.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Kgs 15:33 is a good example of the liturgical background for this claim.

<sup>24</sup> There are various similarities here with the ancient Song of the Sea in Exod. 15:1-18, where the battle with the sea refers not to creation but to the escape through the Red Sea; the hymn ends similarly with God celebrating his victory by making his abode in his sanctuary on earth.

is an echo of 92:6 (Heb v.7) (r[b and l]ysk). Psalm 94 begins as a lament, pleading with God to inaugurate on earth the rule celebrated in Psalm 93 (vv. 1-2, 3-7); it then turns into a didactic psalm, reminding the congregation of the depth and extent of evil (vv. 8-11, 12-15). It ends in the confidence that God will come to our aid, and by way of two rhetorical questions (vv. 16 and 20) affirms that justice will prevail.

This is a difficult psalm because of its theme of 'God of vengeance'. In Christian tradition the reference to the condemnation of the innocent to death (v. 21) has been interpreted as referring to the passion of Christ.<sup>25</sup> Augustine argued that the psalm is really about the conflict between Divine Grace and Free Will (seen especially in vv. 8-11) where God has to come to our aid.<sup>26</sup>

**Psalm 95** calls on God's people to acknowledge God as king. It is linked to Ps. 94:22 in its image of God as 'Rock' in v. 1. The myth of God's battle with the cosmic sea is again alluded to, but the psalm consists mainly of invitations to praise (vv. 1-6) and an exhortation to obedience by learning from the lessons of history (vv. 7-11).

In Christian tradition the very first call 'O come let us sing to the Lord', and the dual theme of worship and obedient faith with the final promise of 'rest' (v. 11), resulted in this being the key psalm which was recited at the beginning of morning prayer in the Liturgy of Hours.<sup>27</sup> Known even today as the Venite ('O Come ...') it is still a key psalm at Morning and Evening Prayer. Furthermore, the call to praise in v. 5, 'O come let us worship' inspired the Christmas carol 'Venite Adoremus' ('O Come all ye Faithful') with its theme of giving worship to Christ, the newborn King.

**Psalm 96** begins 'O Sing to the Lord a new song'. It also takes up again the combat myth which becomes the 'new song' of deliverance (vv. 1-6), regarding other deities as nothing – a theme most appropriate for the exiles tempted to worship what they could see and touch – Babylonian idols.<sup>28</sup> From this idea, other nations, with their deities 'dethroned', are thus called upon to praise the true Lord (vv. 7-10); heaven and earth are called upon to join in this praise to the God who has come and will come again (vv. 11-13).

This psalm is used in 1 Chron. 16:23-33, after Ps. 105:1-15; in a later period it was re-read as the fulfilment of the promises made to the exiles. Christians have re-read this again in the light of another fulfilment: God's Kingdom is always entering history, and the 'new song' now is the Kingdom of God inaugurated through Jesus Christ (Mk. 1:14-15). Psalm 96 is often used along with Psalm 97 and 98 in the liturgy for Christmas Day, sometimes with the Old Testament reading from Isa. 9:6-7 (on a royal figure who will bring in the righteous rule of God) along with Lk. 2:1-14 (on the birth of Jesus).

Verse 10 is perhaps the most controversial verse in this psalm. A mistranslation of the Greek into Latin reads 'The Lord reigns *from the tree*'; Christian illuminated manuscripts in the Middle Ages have interpreted this psalm with images of Christ on the cross.<sup>29</sup>

**Psalm 97** returns to a theme which ended Psalm 93: God's rule in Zion. Here the combat myth takes up imagery of God as Lord of the storm gaining victory over other deities (vv. 1-7) which culminates in Zion and Judah rejoicing at his exaltation (vv. 8-12).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See de Solms 2001: 460.

<sup>26</sup> Wesselschmidt (2007): pp. 181-3.

<sup>27</sup> The promise of rest for Christians is debated in Heb. 3:7-11, 15 and 4:3 and 7, which takes up vv. 7-11 of this psalm, and juxtaposes it with the theme of 'rest' in Gen. 2:1-4, arguing that Christians now enter the 'rest' achieved by Christ, which has been there from the beginning and promised in Psalm 95.

<sup>28</sup> We saw earlier how this theme of the new song and the nothingness of other gods was also used in the exilic prophetic book Isa. 42:10-12 and 43:16-21.

<sup>29</sup> Wesselschmidt (2007): 195.

Christians have interpreted the idea of God gaining victory over the gods and dwelling among his people to refer to the incarnation, where Christ personifies Zion; so this psalm, along with Psalms 96 and 98, became an important part of the liturgy for Christmas Day. It is also used at Epiphany, which celebrates the coming of the wise men to worship Jesus Christ as the King.

**Psalm 98** is paired with 96 in its call to 'sing a new song' (vv. 1-3) and, using imagery from a combat myth, calls on all the earth is called upon to worship the Lord as King (vv. 4-6); even the sea and floods, symbols of chaos, join in this celebration (vv. 7-9).

The Christian Fathers read both Psalms 96 and 98 as 'the church's song to Jesus Christ': the universal application of the psalm made such an appropriation possible, for this is a song for Gentiles as well as Jews<sup>31</sup>. With Psalms 86 and 97 it is part of Christmas liturgy, and here the Gospel reading is usually from Jn. 1:1-14. Verses 4-9 were the inspiration for Isaac Watts' Christmas hymn, 'Joy to the World'. Heinrich Schütz's 'Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied' was based on Psalm 98, as was James MacMillan's 'A New Song', recorded only in 2006.

**Psalm 99** is paired with 97, and again uses the myth of the victory of the storm god to celebrate God's universal world rule which is particularised in his dwelling in Zion (vv. 1-5). Moses the intercessor (as in Psalm 90) is recalled along with Aaron and Samuel (vv. 6-8) to illustrate again that God's Kingship pre-dates that of David. The psalm ends with a call to worship God in Zion (v. 9).

Again the 'indwelling' theme is taken up by Christians who see this is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. Giovanni Gabrieli's Motet for Six Voices, 'Timor and Tremor', is based upon this psalm.

**Psalm 100** is more of a thanksgiving than hymn, and is paired with 96 in its call to all nations to worship God in Zion with Israel, using a common exilic theme of the people as God's flock and God as their Shepherd (vv. 1-3).<sup>32</sup> The psalm ends with a call to process together to the Temple (vv. 4-5).

This perspective of God's 'steadfast love' being poured out over all the earth has made this a popular psalm for Christians. It was the inspiration for the sixteenth century 'All People that on Earth do Dwell', attributed to Louis Bourgeois of John Calvin's church in Geneva, translated from the French by William Kethe. A very different version from the same period is Christopher Tye's 'Omnes Gentes'. A century later Thomas Ken composed a doxology from this psalm which became known as the 'Old Hundreth':

Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow  
Praise Him, all creatures here below;  
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;  
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

It is intriguing to note that nowhere in the collection do we find any reference to David, although there are several references to God's choice of Zion, to which, after a victory over other nations and their deities, he will return. It is not hard to see why this collection would have been so important for the post-exilic community upon their return to Zion, for they were indeed without a Davidic king: here was their reminder that God always has been and always would be their King.

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<sup>30</sup> We may note how similar this is to the way the Babylonian god Marduk, after his victory over Tiamat, builds a sanctuary to dwell in; so too the Canaanite deity, Baal, celebrates his victory over Mot by building a palace.

<sup>31</sup> See Wesselschmidt (2007): 199 (Eusebius); also de Solms 2001: 473 (Athanasius and Augustine).

<sup>32</sup> See for example exilic texts such as Pss. 74:1; 79:13; Jer. 23:1 and Ezek. 34:31.

### Scene Three: A 'Davidic Collection' Psalms 101–103: Considering David

David returns briefly at this point, for Psalms 101 and 103 each have Davidic headings; the overall theme is one of suffering and God's compassion within it; and Psalm 102, without a Davidic heading in the Hebrew, also fits this theme.

**Psalm 101** speaks of an unnamed ruler who seeks to be a model servant of his people. The fact that Zion is referred to (v. 2, also found in the following psalm [102:21] and in the last psalm of the previous collection [100:4]), suggest this is an idealised Davidic king who first prays for divine favour (vv. 1-2) and then makes seven promises of fidelity (v. 3-8). The emphasis on obedience (admittedly without any specific reference to the Torah) reminds one of the Deuteronomic (and hence Mosaic) view of kingship as in Deut. 17:14-20, where the king is servant to the law.

A similar royal 'manifesto' of obedient service is also found in, for example, Lk. 4:16-21, where Jesus applies a similar passage concerning an obedient servant from Isa. 61:1-2.

**Psalm 102** is an individual lament, whose first part is a plea for God to hear (vv. 1-11), followed by a statement of confidence in the eternal God who once ruled from Zion as king and who will build up this city once again (vv. 12-22). The final part is a prayer for the psalmist's life to be spared (vv. 23-28). There are some correspondences with Psalms 90–92, for example the sense of permanence of HaShem contrasted with the fragility of human life in Ps. 102:13 was also expressed in Pss. 90:2 and 92:7.

One of the issues of interpretation in this psalm is whether the 'affliction' is, literally, about an individual or a dramatic personification of Zion itself, with some affinities with the book of Lamentations; if so, this links more with the theme of Psalms 93–100.

Cyril of Jerusalem writes about how this world will perish (vv. 18-28) but urges that humans can receive the gift of immortality through Christ.<sup>33</sup> However, the psalm has usually been read by Christians not so much doctrinally as personally: it has been marked out, from Augustine onwards, as one of the seven penitential psalms of the church.<sup>34</sup> In the Christian liturgical year it is often read on New Year's Day, in part because of its theme of the brevity of human life and the dependence of all humanity upon God.

**Psalm 103**, with its Davidic heading, continues the theme of divine permanence over human transience, but focuses on God's justice and compassion rather than judgement and anger. Verses 1-5 speak of God's forgiveness, reminding us of the image of the eagle in Ps. 91:1-6; vv. 6-14 are about God as healer of the nation, citing an early creed in Exod. 34:6-7 about God's mercy being greater than his anger. Verses 15-18 focus again on human transience, whilst vv. 19-22 emphasise divine permanence, reflecting again on the creed in Exodus 34. For those in exile this psalm, stamped with the authority of David in its heading and the authority of Moses in its Exodus creed, this would have been 'good news' indeed.

In Christian tradition Ambrose takes the imagery of the eagle and renewal of our youth (v. 5) as a reference to new birth after baptism.<sup>35</sup> The psalm has inspired several notable hymn-writers because of its themes of the mercy of God alongside his creative power. Henry Francis Lyte wrote:

Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven  
To his feet thy tribute bring;

<sup>33</sup> See Wesselschmidt (2007): 209-10. This is in part influenced by the way that Heb. 1:10-12 reinterprets Ps. 102:25-26 as the address of Christ stating his superiority over the angels.

<sup>34</sup> The seven penitential psalms are 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130 and 143.

<sup>35</sup> This is influenced by the tradition that the eagle could renew its plumage (and hence its youth) by flying near the sun and then plunging into the water.

Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven  
Who like me his praise should sing?

Joachim Neander's German chorale, *Lobe den Herren* was translated into English as 'Praise to the Lord! The Almighty, the King of Creation'; a much more recent version is 'Bless the Lord O my Soul', from *Godspell*.

This small collection echoes the 'Davidic piety' of the personal laments in Book One. It reminds us of how the *individual* is to be involved the restoration of a whole community. We return now to the more corporate themes in the last three psalms of Book Four – but the fact that the first and last verses of Psalm 103 ('Bless the Lord, O my Soul') are identical to the first and last verses of Psalm 104 show how important it is to see the connection between the personal and communal, as well as between the covenants with David and with Moses.

#### **Scene Four: Creation and Exodus** **Psalms 104–106: Reconsidering Moses**

Psalm 104 returns to the theme of God as Creator, and brings into the Psalter, for the first time, the expression 'Hallelujah!'. Psalms 105–106 turn to God as Protector of history, going way back to Abraham and then to the time in Egypt. Psalm 105 celebrates what God has done and Psalm 106 highlights what the people have not done, and Book Four ends with a prayer that God might gather his people from the nations (106:47).

**Psalm 104** is closely linked to Psalm 103 not only in the call to 'Bless the Lord, O my Soul' but also in the reference to 'his messengers' (*wykal m*) in v. 4 and in Ps. 103:20, as well as the use of verbs such as 'renew' (*vdj*) in v. 30 and Ps. 103:5 and the imagery of 'dust' (*rp[*) in v. 29 and Ps. 103:14. What is different, however, is that the image of God as the compassionate and healing parent in Psalm 103 has now been transformed into a hymn to God as the powerful cloud-rider and sustainer of all. Verses 1-18 develop the theme of HaShem as the storm god who defeats the forces of chaos, and who, like Baal at Ugarit, rides the cloud in a chariot (vv. 1-9) yet provides fertility for the whole world through its subterranean waters (vv. 10-12) and through its rains from above (vv. 13-18). Verses 19-30 develop the theme of HaShem as bringer of light and life into the world, using the imagery from the fourteenth century Egyptian hymn to Aten.<sup>36</sup> The psalm ends with a prayer for justice on earth (vv. 31-35).

Just as the Jewish poets adapted this hymn of creation from Canaanite and Egyptian ideas about God as Creator, so Christian writers have adapted the theme in this psalm in their own way. The references to the Spirit renewing Creation (vv. 24-30) have been read as references to the Spirit restoring the human race within the Church.<sup>37</sup> The early Church Fathers saw the expression of the Trinity here, in God the Creator, God the Word, and God the Spirit.<sup>38</sup> The references to the earth bringing forth wine, bread and oil in v. 15 allowed the Fathers to speak of ordinary things being given sacramental significance. Perhaps the best-known Christian adaptations of this psalm are the thirteenth-century 'Canticle to the Sun' by Francis of Assisi. Robert Grant (nineteenth century) wrote this version:

O Worship the King all glorious above;  
O gratefully sing his power and his love;  
Our shield and defender, the Ancient of Days  
pavilioned in splendour and girded with praise ...

<sup>36</sup> Aten imagery may be seen in 'when you dawn they live' and 'when you set they die' (vv. 22, 27-30). See Day (2013): 211-28. See also Dion (1991): 43-71.

<sup>37</sup> Lectionary readings often use this as a Pentecost Psalm with the Gospel readings as John 20:19-23, Acts 2:1-21.

<sup>38</sup> Wesselschmidt (2007): 235-6.

In **Psalm 105** we move from the universal focus on creation to the particular focus on Israel's history. Psalm 104:33 avows 'I will sing to the Lord'; Ps. 105:2-3 begins 'sing to him, sing praises to him!'. History, unusually for the Psalms, starts not with Moses but with Abraham (vv. 1-6; also referred to again vv. 9 and 22) and so to God's covenant with Israel's ancestors (vv. 7-11) and the entry into Canaan (vv. 10-15). The theme of adversity and triumph allows for the development of the theme, 'a foreign land': so the story of Joseph in Egypt (vv. 16-22) is followed by that of Israel in Egypt (vv. 23-38) and then Israel in the desert (vv. 39-45, ignoring the rebellion tradition which is so clear in Psalm 106).<sup>39</sup> The overall focus is not only on the gift of the land but also on the giving nature of God, who can always do new things.

The re-use of this psalm in 1 Chron. 16:8-22 bears testimony to the ways in which 'God's renewal through history' was understood upon the return to the land. Its partial use by the priest Zechariah in Lk. 1:72-73 points to another re-use, in a Christian context, this time viewed through the coming of Jesus Christ. Psalm 105 is also used at Pentecost to refer to the history and journey of all God's people, bound together in their covenant faith.

**Psalm 106** is, by contrast, a lament. Instead of the grace of God pervading the psalm, we are now faced with a constant sense of God's anger (although vv. 4-5 and 47 do show some hope in God's compassion). Some themes are shared, showing these psalms are to be read as a pair: just as Ps. 105:45 closes with 'Hallelujah', Ps. 106:1 opens with the same call to praise. God 'remembers' (using רָכַז) his people in Ps 105:42 and the people are to 'remember' (רָכַז) God in Ps. 106:4. Ham (the 'hater of Israel') is found in both Pss. 105:23, 25, 27 and 106:22, in the former as a sign of God's protection and in the latter as a sign of God's judgement. Moses is more central in Psalm 106: in Ps. 105:26 it is 'Aaron' who is chosen, whilst in Ps. 106:23 it is Moses, who also appears in vv. 16 and 32. There are also several correspondences with Psalm 90, for Exodus 32 is used again (Ps. 106:23), with the same call to repentance and the same appeal to God's steadfast love (Pss. 90:14 and 104:45).

After a prayer for God's favour to return (vv. 1-6) the focus is on Israel's rejection of God: the rebellion at the Red Sea (vv. 7-12), the testing of God in the desert (vv. 13-15), the uprising against Moses and Aaron (vv. 16-18), the Golden Calf (vv. 19-23), Baal of Peor (vv. 24-31), the waters of Meribah (vv. 32-33) and even child sacrifice (vv. 34-46). The psalm ends with another plea for God to gather his people from the nations (v. 47), reminding us of the plea to restore the monarchy in Ps. 89:49-51. The final doxology sits as oddly with this psalm as does the doxology at the end of Psalm 89: their purpose is to show this Book of psalms is complete.<sup>40</sup> Hence just as Book Four started with a call to repentance, it ends the same way.

Our different covenant faiths have come from the same roots, and each has had its fair share of experience of failure which has been overcome by the persistence of divine grace. Against this background, Book Four, despite all its vicissitudes, can be read and understood as a collection to inspire Jews and Christians alike to repentance and to encourage us all to hope for (and indeed, believe in) the renewal of our faith, in a manifestation which is both physical and spiritual.

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<sup>39</sup> The paired psalms which celebrate the Exodus theme do so positively on the one hand (Psalms 77; 80; 105) and negatively on the other (Psalms 78; 81 and 106).

<sup>40</sup> Interestingly although the psalm is used, along with Psalm 105, in 1 Chron. 16:35-36, only the doxology is used: nothing is made of the accounts of Israel's rebellion under Moses.

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