

“Overturning Laments – An Assessment of the So-Called Prophetic Perfect Formulations in the Psalms”

Introduction

The addendum of praise, or a promise of praise, often found at the end of lament or supplication psalms has been the object of contention among scholars who have focused on the possible reasons for a movement from lament to praise. Usually seen as a sudden change in mood, it has been referred to as a *Stimmungsumschwung*, even though some have criticized this term.¹ Insofar as the wording refers to some future liberation, the texts in question are comprehensible. However, when the salvation asked for is expressed in the past tense as though already attained as so-called prophetic Perfects, the matter gets complicated.²

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¹ See Bernd Janowski, “Das verborgene Angesicht Gottes: Psalm 13 als Muster eines Klagelieds des Einzelnen,” *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 16 (2001): 25-53; Beat Weber, “Zum Sogenannten ‘Stimmungsumschwung’ in Psalm 13,” in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, eds. Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 126-127, 131 where, commenting on God’s act of salvation at the end of Ps 13, he states: “Letzteres liegt noch in der Zukunft, aber zugleich auch schon in der Vergangenheit – deshalb kann das Lob proleptisch schon erklingen, weil es aus der Retrospektive genährt wird.”

² Following Gunkel, the idea of a prophetic Perfect was endorsed by Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalmen 51–100* (Freiburg Im Breisgau: Herder, 2000), 79-80. See also Paul R. Raabe, *Psalms Structures: A Study on Psalms with Refrains* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 128, who takes the same stance with respect to נִפְלֵוּ (57,7). After giving an excellent introduction to

From a form critical perspective, formulations of positive outcomes reported at the end of laments beg the question: what import does such a formulation have on the particular psalm in which it appears?

In this regard, our aim is not to study what caused the shift from lament to praise, or the function of such a change in mood for a particular psalm analysed. I here propose a synchronic reading that takes the whole Psalter into consideration in order to evaluate the veracity of such positive expressions. If the *Gesamtinterpretation* proposed by a canonical reading is to be taken seriously, one must not only read the prophetic Perfects in relation to the respective psalms in which they appear. Moreover, one must gauge the extent to which they influence the reading of the Psalter and are to be read in relation to other literary phenomena in the whole book.

I will seek to show how, despite the validity of Walter Brueggemann's notions of orientation, disorientation and new orientation, when considering single psalms individually, the Psalter catapults the reader through a narrative of joy and distress which, nonetheless, has as its very basis an element of orientation which cannot really be relinquished. Out of the diverse descriptions which Brueggemann gives to the aspect of orientation, such as "joy, delight, goodness, coherence," it is specifically God's governing law and the reliability of God that mark the Psalter in an astounding manner.³ In other words, the uncertainty of a hearing may ensue from individual psalms, but not quite from the Psalter as a whole.⁴

The method adopted here is one of close reading where due attention is given to the following: significant lexemes and their impact on the reading of psalms (including neighbouring ones); the position of psalms, especially where sudden changes in mood occur between one psalm and another; redactional phenomena that point to the editors' intentions with regards to the collection of psalms as a unified whole. Hence, the reason for this study is to make a case

the problem of the Perfect tense in the Hebrew Bible used as an optative to express something wished or hoped for, Iain W. Provan, "Past, Present and Future in Lamentations III 52-66: The Case for a Precative Perfect Re-Examined," *Vetus Testamentum* 41, no. 2 (1991): 164-175, makes a clear distinction between prophetic and precative Perfects, where the latter are meant to express a request rather than the certainty of having been heard.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 19.

⁴ As regards such an uncertainty, see John Goldingay, *Psalms: Psalms 1-41*. vol. 1; BCOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); Federico G. Villanueva, *The 'Uncertainty of a Hearing'. A Study of the Sudden Change of Mood in the Psalms of Lament*. V.T.S 121 (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

for the hermeneutical impact of particular positive themes and concepts, which impact becomes evident when the whole structural edifice of the Psalter is taken into consideration. When taken together, these elements make for a particular reading of the individual psalms where longing and fulfilment are superimposed.

Positive Formulations Within Negative Outbursts: Authors' Views

Various interpretations have been offered to explain the inevitable tension produced by having a text that speaks of a *present* tribulation to which is annexed an affirmation of deliverance formulated in the *past* with reference to the very object of the lament.⁵ E. K. Kim dedicates a whole thesis to the debate, noting three main approaches:⁶

1. the giving of a priestly oracle⁷
2. the psychological motivation behind praise
3. a cultic actualization of *Heilsgeschichte*

⁵ These appear outside the Psalms too. See Erhard Gerstenberger, "Praise in the Realm of Death: The Dynamics of Hymn-Singing in Ancient Near Eastern Lament Ceremony," in *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts*, eds. Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2008), 124 for a number of texts which may be interpreted along these lines: Jonah's thanksgiving when still in the belly of the fish in Jon 2; Hezekiah's thanksgiving in Isa 38 when still sick.

⁶ See Eo Kon Kim, "A Study of the Rapid Change of Mood in the Lament Psalms, With a Special Inquiry into the Impetus for Its Expression (Facsimile of a Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the Union Theological Seminary, 1984, 98-158).

⁷ Concerning salvation oracles in individual complaints, Marko Marttila, *Collective Reinterpretation in the Psalms: A Study of the Redaction History of the Psalter* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 71-75 is in agreement with "the assumption that there were probably fixed written prayer formulae in the sanctuaries" (p. 74) which could be used by the supplicant depending on his or her condition (he refers to 1 Sam 1,1-28; Isa 38,1-22). F.-L. Hossfeld, "Synchronie und Diachronie – zur Konkurrenz zweier Methoden der Psalmenexegese im Blick auf das erste Psalmenbuch Ps 1–41," in "*Canterò in eterno le misericordie del Signore*" (*Sal 89,2*). *Scritti in onore del prof. Gianni Barbiero per il suo 70mo compleanno*, eds. Stefan M. Attard and Marco Pavan (Roma: Analecta Biblica – Studia 3, 2015), 239 takes a stand against this, saying: "Der Stimmungsumschwung kann nicht mit textexternen Vorgängen wie priesterliche und prophetische Kultorakel oder göttliche Traumorakel oder rituelle Leistungen des Beters, sondern allein durch den textinternen Gebetsprozess erklärt werden." Patrick D. Miller, "Prayer and Divine Action," in *God in the Fray*, eds. Walter A. Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 224-225 gives a theological explanation of the relationship between the act of trust and the transformation that is initiated by it in the process of petitionary prayer.

Kim gives his own interpretation for this change, namely the holy war faith that acts as a motivation for the sudden shift from lament to praise,⁸ however this assumption is hypothetical. More possible reasons related to what caused the shift were compiled by Villanueva: the invocation of the Divine Name (the Tetragrammaton), the assurance that comes from making a vow, asseveration by thanksgiving, trust in the warrior God, God's *hesed*, visualization of salvation, lament as thanksgiving.⁹ Villanueva rightly seeks to attribute to lament its due place in prayer, and he does so by lamenting the insistence of several scholars to quickly do away with this genre in order to emphasize the element of praise. My approach may fall within the scope of Villanueva's criticism. However, the aim of this paper is not so much to analyse the psalmists' reasons for such a mood u-turn in the composition, as to gauge the hermeneutical implications for the entire collection of psalms.

Before doing so, it will be helpful to attempt a perusal of some of the main interpretations of this phenomenon which deal specifically with when the salvation proclaimed is believed to occur. Gerstenberger averred: "Praise elements... function in individual complaints in a precursory fashion before salvation materializes, as buttresses of petition..."¹⁰ With reference to 54:8-9 and 56:13-14, Broyles stated: "Typical of such vows, thanksgiving is offered *in anticipation of the deliverance*."¹¹ Oftentimes, the stance of the psalmist as a believer is made to bear on such formulations, which are seen as "expressing the *conviction* of faith that his prayer has already been answered,"¹² or will be

⁸ E.g. Pss 3, 33, 59 and 18, 35 respectively. See Kim, *Rapid Change*, 188, 219. Fortunately, Kim states that what he seeks to establish is not that such changes imply a holy war *Sitz im Leben* but only the influence of the holy war faith; see Kim, *Rapid Change*, 222.

⁹ See Villanueva, *The 'Uncertainty of a Hearing'*, 4-15.

¹⁰ Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms. Part 1 With an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 85.

¹¹ Craig C. Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms: A Form-Critical and Theological Study*. JSOT.S 52 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 242. Emphasis added. The same phenomenon is observable outside the Psalms, as in Jer 20:10-13. Walter Baumgartner, *Die Klagegedichte des Jeremia* (Giessen: A. Töpelmann, 1917), 51 rightly criticizes the position of Cornill and Duhm who delete v.13 which constitutes, according to the author, anticipatory jubilation, "vorausgenommener Jubel." Therefore, though Duhm points out that the life of Jeremiah never really comes to a phase which justifies such a statement, Baumgartner still holds its authenticity.

¹² See John J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms. A New Translation with Introductions and Notes Explanatory and Critical* (London; Bell and Daldy, 1870), 1:414. See Louis Jacquet, *Les Psaumes et le coeur de l'homme. Étude textuelle, littéraire et doctrinale, II: Psaumes 42 à 100*.

heard.¹³ For instance, Ravasi speaks of “il dono *immaginato* come già concesso da Dio al suo fedele.”¹⁴ Regarding 54:9 (“for from all trouble it [God’s Name] has delivered me”) Perowne states: “The perfects in this verse denote not that the deliverance is already accomplished, but the confidence of faith that it will be, and give the reason for the thanksgiving of the preceding verse,”¹⁵ and Oesterley affirms: “the certitude that its utterance brings about what is desired is such that the psalmist can speak of his trouble as already past.”¹⁶ Goldingay holds that “the qatal statement is certainly one still made in hope.”¹⁷ In all this it is clear that the psalmist’s situation of distress is still present.

A different stance is proposed by Kraus who takes the final act of thanksgiving as that by which the rest of the psalm should be read. The lament thus becomes a narrative that describes an already past situation.¹⁸ He offers Isa 38,15 (אֵת הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת) as a comparison to עֲשִׂיתָ in 52,11 to show that, like Hezekiah’s prayer after his healing, this is an acknowledgment for what God has *already* done on behalf of the psalmist. Williamson too has suggested that such psalms were composed after the situation of distress and, hence, should be classified as thanksgiving psalms rather than lament psalms.¹⁹

Resorting to a cultic setting, Mannati labels Pss 54:56, and 57 as “liturgies centrées sur un oracle” which is “demandé et obtenu”; these psalms therefore

([Gembloux]: [Duculot], 1977), 202 regarding 54,8-9: “Libéré «in fide»”; also Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of the Psalmists* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 76, and Raabe, *Psalms Structures*, 128.

¹³ See S.B. Frost, “Asseveration By Thanksgiving,” *Vetus Testamentum* 8, no. 1 (1958): 381-382.

¹⁴ Gianfranco Ravasi, *Il libro dei Salmi. Commento e attualizzazione*. 51-100 (Bologna: EDB, 1985, 2002), 2:147. Italics added. Speaking of the yet unseen nature of the gifts/redemption for which the psalmist thanks God in these lamentations, Ringgren, *The Faith of the Psalmists*, 76 states: “Such thanksgiving would be an act of faith, for the deliverance would not yet be a reality.”

¹⁵ John J. S. Perowne, *The Book of Psalms. A New Translation with Introductions and Notes Explanatory and Critical* (1864; repr., London: Bell and Daldy, 1870), 1:420.

¹⁶ William O. E. Oesterley, *The Psalms: Translated with Text-Critical and Exegetical Notes* (New York, Ny: Macmillan, 1962), 283.

¹⁷ John Goldingay, *Psalms. Psalms 42–89* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 2:161-162.

¹⁸ See Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen*, 1. Teilband, *Psalmen 1–59* (BK XV; Neukirchen-Vluyn; Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 1:552-553. Yet, such a comparison between a narrative text in which the whole account of lament, divine intervention and thanksgiving are given, and a liturgical text such as this psalm which is meant to aid in prayer may not be appropriate.

¹⁹ See Hugh G. M. Williamson, “Reading the Lament Psalms Backwards,” in *A God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller*, eds. Brent A Strawn and Nancy R Bowen (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 3-15.

report the moment before and after an implied oracle.²⁰ Similarly, Weiser had set the two formally independent sections within the ambit of the liturgy where the recitation of the lament and the exaltation of God become one coherent event despite their otherwise different location in time.²¹ There have also been attempts to resort to the cult without pinpointing the historical setting of the lament and praise sections of a psalm. It has been suggested that the future tense in compositions like Pss 52, 56, and 64 with which these texts are translated might better be rendered in the present tense. For instance, Birkeland states: “All psalms of that kind can be understood as real cultic thanksgiving psalms in which the past suffering is dramatically actualized by means of a psalm of lamentation with prayers for salvation. In the actual cultic situation the king first acts as a sufferer, but the suffering ends in joy, with a thanksgiving psalm or a hymn to the king Yahweh.”²² In similar vein, Feuer claims that according to Tzidkas HaTzaddik, the simultaneous aspects of lament and praise witness to David’s belief “that his affliction and his acceptance were one.”²³

Such considerations generally deal with the question of time internally, that is with respect to where to position the different texts written by the author/s along a chronological narrative sequence of events. Indeed, they are very pertinent for *psalm* exegesis as such, though at times, asking whether one has or has not already received the salvation requested may not be the right question to put to the psalm. In any case, they deal with the *perception of the psalmist* and his immediate experience of events. My approach is concerned primarily with a synchronic *Psalter* exegesis, hence the focus is on the text such that the question of time is suspended and the truths professed therein are made to bear on the entire collection.

Beyerlin has correctly averred that apart from the movement from a negative to a positive outlook, one must be aware of other directions of prayer in certain psalms.²⁴ One could mention, for instance, even the shifts in groups of psalms, such as the lament Pss 42-44, the hopeful songs in Pss 45-48, and the subsequent lament overtones in Ps 49. Though, as Villanueva has reiterated, psalms sometimes

²⁰ Marina Mannati and Élisabeth De Solms, *Les Psaumes. Tome I, Introduction générale, Psaumes 1 à 31* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer. C, 1966), 65.

²¹ See Artur Weiser, *Die Psalmen* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 1:289.

²² Harris Birkeland, *The Evildoers in the Book of Psalms* (Oslo: J. Dybwad, 1955), 22-23.

²³ Avrohom Chaim Feuer, *Tehillim Treasury*. Inspirational Messages and Uplifting Interpretations of the Psalms of David, 35.

²⁴ For instance, Ps 86 alternates between petition and praise; see, W. Beyerlin, “Die Töda der Heilsvorkündigung in den Klageliedern des Einzelnen,” *ZAW* 79 (1967): 208-224.

go from a positive stance to a negative one, or alternate between these, this fact is somewhat immaterial for this study since an affirmation of victory is not necessarily debilitated if it is followed by yet more lament genre. My contention is that, irrespective of where praise or prophetic Perfects feature within a psalm or within the Psalter, their impact is equally effective.

The Influence of Psalms 1 and 2 on Successive Lament Psalms

The introductory role which Pss 1 and 2 play in the Psalter has well been established. William P. Brown put it succinctly in these words: “Psalms 1 and 2... serve as programmatic pieces designed to influence how one reads the Psalter selectively and discerningly.”²⁵ Similarly, several others have commented on how “one’s reading of them should be determinative for the interpretation of subsequent psalms.”²⁶ It is uncanny that Pss 1 and 2, which function as an introduction to the Psalter, do not have a title.²⁷ Despite their strong connections to Book 1 (especially Pss 40 and 41),²⁸ they are pertinent for the entire Psalter, as can be seen even by their connections with its penultimate psalm (Ps 149).²⁹ However, given the fact that Psalter exegesis, with the diverse theologies it exhibits, is still underway, I believe that the full implications of the position of Pss 1 and 2, as well as the hermeneutical readings they offer to the entire book, are still being brought to light.

²⁵ William P. Brown, *Psalms* (Nashville; Abingdon, 2010), 116-117.

²⁶ Robert Cole, “An Integrated Reading of Psalms 1 and 2,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26, no. 4 (June 2002): 75. On their introductory function, see Robert L. Cole, *Psalms 1-2: Gateway to the Psalter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013); Matthias Millard, *Die Komposition des Psalters: Ein formgeschichtlicher Ansatz* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Paul Siebeck, 1994), 125; Gianni Barbiero, *Il Regno di JHWH e del Suo Messia: Salmi scelti dal Primo Libro del Salterio* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2008), 87-91.

²⁷ See James Luther Mays, *The Lord Reign: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 123.

²⁸ Contrary to E. Zenger, who believed that Pss 1 and 2 were added to a complete pre-existing collection, Barbiero believes that their addition was accompanied by a reworking of Book 1; see Barbiero, *Il regno di JHWH*, 239; G. Barbiero, *Das erste Psalmenbuch als Einheit. Eine synchrone Analyse von Psalm 1-41*. Österreichische Biblische Studien 19 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 50-62.

²⁹ Connections between Pss 1-2 and 149 have been pointed out by Notker Fuglister, “Ein Garstig Lied – Ps 149,” in *Freude an der Weisung des Herrn. Beiträge zur Theologie der Psalmen, FS H. Groß*, eds. Ernst Haag and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1986), 104.

Pss 1 and 2 immediately display a huge contrast between the pious and the evil ones, the anointed one and the rebellious kings. This tension is what will characterize the larger part of the Psalter. Their combined message will teach the one meditating God's law day and night how to confront precarious situations. It is timely that Ps 2 was quoted by the early Church gathered in prayer in the face of a persecution wherein Herod and Pontius Pilate were spoken of as the nations rising up against the Lord's anointed. The perception of the apostles employing this psalm is what is most striking: "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 2:28). Their resorting to Ps 2 as a key to interpret the religio-political onslaught they suffered shows their belief in the fact that God was truly in control. God "had decided beforehand" how things would pan out, therefore, such a pre-established decree gave them the strength they needed in such a predicament.

At the very basis of Pss 1 and 2 is the concept of judgement. In Ps 1 it is eschatological, whilst in Ps 2, God's past choice is made to bear on the outcome of the ultimate judgement. The *Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang* logic that transpires from Ps 1 is shown, in Ps 2, to be dictated not by some vague universal principle but by divine ordinance. In this respect, the Second Book of Maccabees, which was written around the time when the Psalter was close to being crystallized, throws light on the Jewish mindset in situations of conflict. 2 Macc 9:4 recounts the last campaign of Antiochus Epiphanes where he seeks to attack the Jews of Ecbatana. After describing his fierce military advance, we read: "But the sentence of Heaven was already hanging over him" (τῆς ἐξ οὐρανοῦ δὴ κρίσεως συνουσίας ἀντὶ αὐτοῦ). The oracle pronounced in Ps 2 exudes this kind of awareness of divine governance such that subsequent causes for lament are read in relation to it. One notes that before such a military onslaught, the anointed one only proclaims or recounts: "I will proclaim the Lord's decree" (אֲסַפְּרָה אֶל חֶק יְהוָה 2,7). The notion of proclamation becomes immensely important, as we shall see again shortly. That such proclamations are formulated in the past tense, as is this oracle, should not be surprising.

Even when psalms are emotionally charged with imprecatory language which give the impression that the psalmist has lost it, appeal to God's sovereignty is ultimately at the basis of any request made. In his book *Praying Curses: The Therapeutic and Preaching Value of the Imprecatory Psalms*, Nehrbass suggests that imprecatory psalms are meant to transfer the responsibility from the believer to God.³⁰ In this regard, one notes that from the very start, in Ps 2, the Lord's

³⁰ See Daniel Michael Nehrbass, *Praying Curses: The Therapeutic and Preaching Value of the Imprecatory Psalms* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 150-153.

anointed one does not act in an way (except for uttering an admonition). He is told, in the oracle, that he will shatter the enemies (v.9), but then the anointed one simply proclaims the words of the oracle, threatening that it is God's wrath that will lead to their destruction (v.12).

It is in this light that one can better understand the tone with which Ps 2 begins. Here, the believer's stance is revealed, especially when read in relation to Ps 1 where an eschatological overcoming is envisaged. Given the assurances of stability granted to those who walk in the way of Torah and to the anointed Zion king, Ps 2 opens with the term למה ("Why...?"). Here, למה neither denotes a sense of distress or agitation due to a seemingly impending doom, nor does it bespeak doubt vis-à-vis God's favourable disposition towards his anointed one. Rather, it forms part of a question that expresses how nonsensical are the schemes of the enemies vis-à-vis the Lord's chosen one. Therefore, it betrays a sense of equanimity and invites the reader not to fret in the face of persecution. It is my contention that because Ps 2 presents David as being a securely established king, the consequent laments of the suffering David are relativized, impelling the reader to appraise the consequent prophetic Perfects in relation to the stance taken at the beginning of the Psalter.

Admittedly, the majority of times that the lexeme למה appears again in the Psalms, it reflects the impression that God is distant or silent. However, each time למה appears with regard to God, there is some kind of subsequent resolution:

Ps 10 ends with a proclamation of God's kingship and compassion.

Ps 22 ends with a declaration of praise for his dominion.

Pss 42-44 are followed by the praise of Ps 45.

Pss 74, 79, 80 and 88 (Book 3) are followed by the "YHWH reigns" of Book 4.

After a number of objections raised to God using the term למה, the lexeme appears in the final book of the Psalter once again, though this time not in relation to God's seeming inactivity, but rather in relation to the nation's mocking attitude vis-à-vis the God of Israel.

Not to us, Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory,
because of your love and faithfulness.

Why (למה) do the nations say, "Where is their God?"

Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. (Ps 115:1-3)

The Psalter thus begins to draw to a close on the same note on which it began. Structurally, the orientation towards a mindset of victory is made evident right from the start of the Psalter, precisely in the juxtaposition of Pss 2 and 3. The installation of the divinely appointed king in Ps 2 is described in terms of God's

terrifying rebuke addressed to those who dare conspire against him: “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them” (Ps 2:4); in v. 9 too, the fate of those who would rise against the anointed one is already decreed. In this light, the rebellion of Absalom referred to in the superscript of Ps 3 immediately emerges as a failed project. Despite the tragedy of the event recounted in 2 Sam 15 (Absalom’s rebellion), the psalm itself is more of a psalm of trust than a lament.³¹ Indeed, this is the first lament psalm with concluding prophetic Perfect formulations. These should be read synchronically in relation to the immediately preceding psalm, for both of them bear a verse that contains a description of God’s destructive force on the enemy, each of which employs two verbs: רָעַע (‘to break’); נִפְץ (‘to shatter’) in 2:9; נָכַח (‘to smite’); שָׁבַר (‘to shatter’) in 3:8. Bearing in mind the increasingly messianic aura with which David is imbued as the Psalter progresses, the king in Ps 2 might be seen as an anticipation of a Davidic-messianic figure, though this in itself could be a moot point.³² In any case, it is to be noted that Weber claims that Ps 3 forms part of the intended introduction of the Psalter.³³ His reason for doing so is that the first three psalms introduce “one of the specific themes, types and communicative groups of the Psalter.”³⁴ Ps 3 introduces the aspect of prayer which will remain heard throughout the entire book. What is being proposed in this article is a synchronic reading that, though

³¹ Beat Weber, “Das Königlich-Davidische Danklied 2 Samuel 22 / Psalm 18 Im Kontext von Psalm 1–18. Eine (Proto)Kanonische Lesung vom Ende der Samuelbücher her zum Anfangsbereich des Psalters hin,” in *Canterò in eterno le misericordie del Signore* (Sal 89,2). *Scritti in onore del Prof. Gianni Barbiero per il suo 70mo compleanno*, eds. Stefan Attard and Marco Pavan (Roma: Analecta Biblica - Studia 3, 2015), 192 states that reading Pss 2 and 3 in a *lectio continua* manner evokes not only 2 Sam 15 due to the superscript, but also 2 Sam 22 where David sings to God as his refuge and saviour. Hence, Ps 3 too is marked by confidence in God: “...den mit Ps 3 einsetzenden Klagebitten eine zuversichtliche und vertrauensvolle Gestimmtheit unterlegt.” In the same vein, Weber also says: “Von 2 Sam 22 her wird die Klagebitte in Ps 3... derart durch eine verstärkte Rettungszuversicht grundiert” (191).

³² For a Davidic aspect in Ps 2, see Barbiero, *Il Regno di JHWH*, 69, 74; Barbiero, *Einheit*, 47. Also see Peter C. W. Ho, “The Shape of Davidic Psalms as Messianic,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 62, no. 3 (2019): 515-531. Adam D. Hensley, *Covenant Relationships and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (S.L.: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2019) holds that, in the Psalter, the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants converge into a theological unity that points to a future Davidide.

³³ For Beat Weber, “Die Buchouvertüre Psalm 1–3 und ihre Bedeutung für das Verständnis des Psalters,” *Old Testament Essays* 23, no. 3 (2010): 836, 842, Pss 1–3 taken together represent the main message of the Psalter and the nucleus of its theology. See also, Beat Weber, “Moses, David and the Psalms: The Psalter in the Horizon of the ‘Canonical’ Books,” *Rivista Biblica* 68, no. 2 (2020): 187-212, esp. 190-191.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 190.

differing from the reason as to why Weber groups Ps 3 with Pss 1-2, endorses his position by adding one more reason why, taken together, Pss 1-3 highlight the relevance of such a placement. Though, genre-wise, Ps 3 and the consequent laments constitute a deliberate contrast in relation to Pss 1 and 2, they can be said to be immediately subordinated to the forceful triumphant and vanquishing tone of the first two psalms. This order should be seen as one important reason why Pss 1 and 2 were not placed as a conclusion to the Psalter, but rather as its introduction.

A similar scenario can be gleaned when reading the laments of the second Davidic group (see Pss 52-71) against the background of the event to which the title of Ps 51 alludes. Here, we refer specifically not only to the rebuke given by God to David through the prophet Nathan but, given David's admission of guilt in the psalm (הטאתי ליהוה), to the assurance he receives that he would not die (לא תמות 2 Sam 12:13). Likewise in Ps 3, thanks to Ps 2, *we know the end from the beginning*, hence the seeming risk that is run by David in Ps 3 is subordinated to a positive outcome that has already been guaranteed in the immediately preceding psalm. The way events unfolded confirms this reasoning, for David lived on, whilst Absalom met a terrible fate in battle. Hence, Pss 1, 2, and 3 *together* more aptly furnish the hermeneutical key with which to read the subsequent laments and prophetic Perfects. All the Davidic "suffering psalms" must be read in the light of an already established reality of his firm establishment.

Significant Redactional Phenomena

After the Torah, the next two major sections start with the same outlook. At the beginning of *Nevi'im*, in Joshua, the people have to go through the motions of struggles and war, but the land has already been given to them. Heading *Ketuvim*, the Book of Psalms shows how despite having to go through the motions of persecution and lament, the victory already belongs to the believer.³⁵ The Torah perspective in both is evident, but this is enforced by the notion of success.³⁶ Cole holds that the success mentioned in Ps 1:3b ("In all that he

³⁵ The points of contact between Joshua 1 and Pss 1 and 2 are explicated clearly in Cole, "An Integrated Reading," 78-79.

³⁶ Zenger attributed Psalms' "Spitzenposition" in the Writings to its Torah perspective; cf. Erich Zenger, "Der Psalter Im Horizont von Tora Und Prophetie: Kanongeschichtliche Und Kanonhermeneutische Perspektiven," in *The Biblical Canons*, eds. Jean-Marie Auwers and Henk Jan de Jonge (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 128-130. In later lists, Psalms was sometimes preceded by Job or Ruth; see J. C. Trebelle Barrera, "Origins of a Tripartite Old Testament Canon," in *The Canon Debate*, eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody: Hendrickson

does, he prospers”) refers to military enterprises and that this, together with the smashing of the enemies in 2:9, is to be related to Joshua’s depiction in Joshua 1.³⁷

The verb נתן (‘to give’) is used to denote God’s giving the Promised Land to his people. In the first part of Numbers it is used in the future, but from Num 20:1-13 onwards it is used in the past, even though the people have not yet entered it. The very inspection of the land constitutes a taking possession of it. As Jean-Louis Ska says concerning the spying of the land in Num 13-14: “It is a juridical act, a way of taking possession of the land *de iure*, before it will be possible to take possession of it *de facto*.”³⁸ In the oracle recited in 2:7-9, the verb נתן is in the Imperfect, but it is so only because the psalmist is recounting words pronounced by God in the past, with reference to the present. The nations and the ends of the earth have *already* been given to him as his possession.

Among the connections that Cole makes between the programmatic Ps 1 and Josh 8, he notes the adverb עתה (now): “ועתה from Josh. 1.2 is used at the point when the land is declared given to Joshua and the people, and similarly we find the identical form in Ps. 2.10 (ועתה) at the point when the kings are warned after being declared part of the inheritance of the son.”³⁹ In relation to the son, following the exaltation of God’s Torah in Ps 1, the first utterance of God is found in 2:6 and is in the Perfect tense: “But I have installed my king...” (ואני נסכתי מלכי). The realm from which God operates is that wherein all has been already established.

As for the redactional insertion of psalm titles, though the exact meaning of the tag למנצח is not known, some of the main Greek translations see it as an indication of a positive outcome. Theodotion renders it *eis to nikos* (“for the victory”); Symmachus uses *epinikios* (“song of victory”); Aquila has *tôi nikopoiôi* (“for the victor”).⁴⁰ This interpretation is intriguing as it may have been employed to bolster the notion of a final victory particularly in the lament psalms. In fact, the term למנצח is used as a tag nearly exclusively in the first three books of the Psalter, which is where the greatest number of laments features. A number of the

Publishers, 2002), 133. Tobias Häner presented a paper called “Ambiguous References and Ironic Allusions: The Joban Prologue in Discourse with Torah” in Warsaw at the EABS conference of 2019; also see Katharine Dell and Will Kynes, *Reading Job Intertextually* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013) for connections between Job and Torah.

³⁷ See Cole, “An Integrated Reading,” 79; 86 n. 24; 87.

³⁸ Jean-Louis Ska, “Old and New in the Book of Numbers,” *Biblica* 95, no.1 (2014): 113.

³⁹ Cole, “An Integrated Reading,” 78 n. 8.

⁴⁰ Tiziano Lorenzin, *I Salmi* (Milano: Paoline, 2000), 554 sees a connection between these concepts and the translations of LXX (*eis to telos*) and the Vulgate (*in finem*) which bear eschatological overtones.

most explicit prophetic Perfect formulations, such as Pss 6, 13, 22, 54, 56, appear precisely in these למנצח psalms.

Apart from this title tag, other lexemes are worth analysing. The first divine emotion that is expressed in the Psalms is God's laughter and his derision of the enemy in 2:4. His subsequent anger in the same psalm must be interpreted, not as a sign of raw, uncontrolled divine feelings, but rather as the strategy he uses to frighten and subdue his foes. Indeed, his anger seems to be his very tool of destruction, for it leads to the enemies' dismay in v. 5 and to their destruction in v. 12. Commenting on the verbs שחק ('to laugh'), לעג ('to mock'), and דבר ('to speak') in 2:4-5, Rashi states, "[Although these verbs appear to be future tense forms] they function [here] as present tense [forms]."⁴¹ This is unlike Prov 1:26 where Lady Wisdom would only laugh and mock the foolish when disaster befalls them. From the outset, the Psalter presents God as being in control, not after his foes meet their terrible fate, but whilst they are still engaged in their wicked scheming. The verb שחק with the meaning 'to laugh' is used a few other times, in the Imperfect, but each time in relation to the adversary (37:13; 52:8; 59:9). As for the verb לעג ("to mock / deride"), the fact that it has God as its subject only in 2:4 and 59:8, but has the foes as the subject in 22:8; 35:16; 44:14; 79:4; 80:7; and 123:4 does not contradict what has just been stated about the verb שחק, for mockery is the very offence that the pious Israelite experiences and this, often, constitutes the very reason for the composition of lament genre.

After the initial depiction of success and victory, the Psalter provides another related image which, once again, contributes to making prophetic Perfect formulations more fitting. A number of psalms provide an aura of equanimity through the concept of sleep or lying on one's bed. From the start, Pss 3 and 4 have the seriously persecuted David utter these words:

Ps 3:6 I lay down and slept; I awoke, for the Lord sustained me.

Ps 4:9 I will both lie down in peace, and sleep;
for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.⁴²

Then, at the end of the book, we find happy psalmists singing on their beds, planning a major coup which would bring the world under their control (149:5). The Hasmonian Ps 149 has been written or adapted to fit into a non-violent

⁴¹ Mayer I. Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms. With English Translation, Introduction and Notes* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1998), 177.

⁴² Another moment of persecution, most probably again at the hands of Absalom as in Ps 3, is found in 63,7 where David remembers the Lord whilst on his bed; see Stefan M. Attard, *The Implications of Davidic Repentance: A Synchronic Analysis of Book 2 of the Psalter (Psalms 42-72)* (Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2016), 248.

milieu wherein the enemy can only be engaged from a nonchalant attitude visible in these “warriors” who choose exquisite nocturnal praise over daytime battle cries. This could only come from those who have been assured of overpowering the enemy. These texts, enveloping the Psalter, contribute to building a particular worldview wherein rest and sleep is the best antidote to the attacks of the enemy. Israel does not call itself to a holy war of physical weapons. Its spiritual weapons, as we shall see, are more effective.

A read-through of Pss 144 and 149 yields telling observations. Ps 144 opens with “Praise be to the Lord my rock, who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle” and describes God as the one by whose strength the believer is saved. Thus God is a fortress, stronghold, deliverer, and shield. So where do the poet’s hands prepared for war and fingers for battle come in? They do so in the middle of the psalm where, contrary to the enemies whose mouth is full of lies, his own mouth is full of praise and he plays to God on the ten-stringed lyre, obviously employing hands and fingers:

Ps 144:9 “I will sing a new song to you, O God;
on the ten-stringed lyre I will make music to you.”
(note that one has ten fingers!)

Broyles stated that “the militaristic language is used figuratively to point to the aggressive resolve God’s people must maintain against the forces that threaten their security.”⁴³ But more than an aggressive resolve, it seems that this psalm deals particularly with the real nature of these weapons, which becomes clear from Lorenzin’s translation: “The songs of praise to God in their throat as a two-edged sword in their hands” (149:6).⁴⁴ Prinsloo speaks of v.6ab as a hinge that creates a continuum between the praise-oriented vv.1b-5 and the bellicose vv.7-9a.⁴⁵ If, as Cole asserts, the success mentioned in 1:3b refers to

⁴³ Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), 36.

⁴⁴ “I canti di lode a Dio nella loro gola come spada a due tagli in mano...” Lorenzin, *Salmi*, 534 n. 11; see p. 541. Italics added. He thus reads the *waw* as a case of “*waw adaequationis*.” Th. Booij, “Psalm 149,5: ‘They Shout with Joy on Their Couches,’” *Biblica* 89, no.1 (2008): 104-108 holds, rather, that the praises and swords are imagined or dreamed of in one’s sleep. Such an interpretation does not impoverish the theory being proposed here. At its close, the Psalter would thus be promoting the audacity to envisage victory, this being made possible by the several redactional elements that would justify such imagination. However, Willem S. Prinsloo, “Psalm 149: Praise Yahweh with Tambourine and Two-Edged Sword,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 109, no.3 (1997): 406-407 is somewhat against an overly eschatological interpretation of this psalm.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 405-406.

military enterprises,⁴⁶ then at the far ends of the Psalter we have intimations of or allusions to warfare and to victory therein, but in both cases this is wrought by pious devotion, not by military assault. The images of a sleeping psalmist in Ps 3 and the happy-ones on their beds in Ps 149 bind the whole collection together. One is justified to see a thematic link between these two images on three counts: (i) structurally, they occur at the far ends of the Psalter; (ii) similar links have already been noted for the word ברזל ('iron') which occurs in 2:9 and 149:8;⁴⁷ (iii) thematically, they stand out in that they depict rest in a bellicose context.

Finally, the doxologies are worthy of note, not merely as similar conclusory statements at the end of blocks of psalms, but as hermeneutically significant insertions that serve to uphold a correct outlook as one proceeds through the Psalter. Their laudatory nature creates reference points that orient the reader to God's sovereignty, whether the doxology was preceded by laments or followed by them. Barbiero and Gillingham are certainly right when they argue in favour of doxologies as being integral to the psalms to which they are attached.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, what is being affirmed here is not so much the degree to which a doxology belongs in the preceding psalm as its effect on the Psalter as a whole, this being enhanced by its rhythmic occurrence as one proceeds through the Psalter.⁴⁹

The Power of Proclamation

One gets a strong sense of the importance of proclamation from the first group of Korah thanks to a redactional element employed. In 42:9, the distressed psalmist states: "By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song (שִׁירוֹ) is with me...", a verse which Pieter van der Lugt considers to be the rhetorical centre of Pss 42-43.⁵⁰ But soon after this, the Korah group shifts to three שִׁירִים ("songs"

⁴⁶ See Cole, "An Integrated Reading," 79 n. 12; 86 n. 24; 87.

⁴⁷ See also n. 29 above.

⁴⁸ See Gianni Barbiero, "The Risks of a Fragmented Reading of the Psalms: Psalm 72 as a Case in Point," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 120, no.1 (2008): 67-91; Susan E. Gillingham, "The Doxologies and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter," in *Canterò in eterno le misericordie del Signore* (Sal 89,2). *Scritti in onore del Prof. Gianni Barbiero per il suo 70mo compleanno*, eds. Stefan M. Attard and Marco Pavan (Roma: Analecta Biblica - Studia 3, 2015), 205-219.

⁴⁹ In Attard, *The Implications*, 351-353, the author points out how the doxology of Ps 72 is particularly bound to important theological facts of Book 2, not just Ps 72 itself.

⁵⁰ See Pieter van der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry / II, Psalms 42-89* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 511, 535.

45; 46; 48), two of which are Zion psalms (Pss 46 and 48). In the same spirit of Ps 45, these latter psalms proclaim the old foundations of hope, namely the invincibility of Zion. Hence, these songs, affirming past realities as though they were presently accessible to Israel, constitute the praise which the psalmist sings in the night of sorrow mentioned in Ps 42.⁵¹

Indeed, proclamation in distress must have been given considerable weight by the redactors of the Psalms. Claudia Süßenbach points out that the place of the glorious, royal Ps 45 immediately after the lament psalms addressed to a distant God is, at first glance, surprising.⁵² She goes on to say that this psalm brings in an element of hope. We believe that this is true, but what is intriguing is the means by which that hope is professed: the psalmist resorts to speak out his beautiful words to the king, who allegorically represents God.

Ps 45:2 My heart is overflowing with a good theme;
I recite my composition concerning the King;
my tongue is the pen of a ready scribe.

The lovely words recounted by the fathers in the communal lament Ps 44 become the lovely words proclaimed by the believer in Ps 45. The former recounting (ספרו־לנו) in 44:1 can be related linguistically to the poet of Ps 45 whose tongue is like the pen of a skilful scribe (סופר v. 2). The sudden, unexpected celebration of Ps 45 following Pss 42-44 can be explained in terms of a desire to proclaim God's bond with his people. The psalms' redactors did not feel the need to gently steer away the reader from lament towards positive formulations of faith. Rather, we witness a sudden resolve to praise God, that is to shift from pondering on the community's predicament to reaffirming the divine promises made.⁵³ The Piel ספר ("to recount") plays an important role in the Psalter. After its use in 2:7, it appears several more times, even in contexts that depict some dreadful situation.⁵⁴ On a broader scale, the YHWH *malak* psalms in Book IV function as a declaration of God's power within the context of the exile depicted in Ps 89. One cannot fail to mention that מלך is in the Perfect tense.

Such literary phenomena related to content or redaction have a didactic role in that they teach the reader how to approach the lament genre. Gillingham

⁵¹ See Attard, *Implications*, 72-75.

⁵² See Claudia Süßenbach, *Der elohistische Psalter. Untersuchungen zu Komposition und Theologie von Ps 42-83* (Tübingen: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 365.

⁵³ "...Ps 45 epitomizes a human resolve to proclaim God's grandeur and his own resolution to unite his people to himself." Attard, *Implications*, 56-57.

⁵⁴ See in particular, 9:2.15; 22:23.31; 26:7; 71:15; 73:28; 78:4; 79:13; 102:22; 107:22; 118:17-18.

has emphasized the didactic function of Ps 2 and explained that, in the Greek translation of קיח ("to laugh") and לעג ("to mock"), "The vision is not so much about a present drama, as presented in the Hebrew, as teaching about what will take place at a future point in time."⁵⁵ However, the Hebrew text presents God's defiance as being situated in the present. Essentially, if God's first reaction to the enemies' onslaught is laughter, the psalmist's first reaction is proclamation. What I would like to add, therefore (and this is crucial here), is that the didactic function is not, primarily, vis-à-vis the nations (as may be suggested by the Greek δράξασθε παιδείας in 2:12, meaning "seize upon instruction!"), but it is aimed at the reader who must emulate the stance of God and the anointed one from the outset.

Taking the cue from scholars who evaluate the distressful and joyful aspects of a psalm in form-critical terms related to the chronology of events, we should broaden our perspective to read the victorious outbursts in terms of a predetermined and programmatic mindset that influences the whole book. The fact that Davidic psalms are still found after Ps 89 shows that the influence of Pss 1-2 on the Psalter is so great that Ps 89 could not bring David's prayers to an end, hence affirming that despite indications to the contrary, the declaration made in Ps 2 was still valid.

Conclusion

From a historical critical point of view, prophetic Perfects create confusion, which is why scholars have either simply attributed them to the psalmist's faith, or have delved deeply into historical-critical considerations. Such considerations bring into play the aspect of the time of composition or the different stages of the formation of the psalm in question. However, the Psalter is structured in such a way as to enhance a better synchronic reading that holds together various phenomena that appear in the whole book. In the larger scheme of things, prophetic Perfects have an influence not only on the psalms they appear in, but also on the book as a whole. Moreover, they are but one among several literary devices that, together, contribute to making the Psalter a victory book.⁵⁶ These

⁵⁵ Susan Gillingham, *A Journey of Two Psalms: The Reception of Psalms 1 and 2 in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 28. See also 294-295; "the direct divine authority of the promises... are more clear in the Hebrew" (p. 28).

⁵⁶ This statement is made with full respect towards the very real turmoil expressed in the lament psalms grouped or scattered throughout the Psalter. In a conversation with Beat Weber, to whom I am indebted, he only partially agreed with the idea of the Psalter being a victory book ("Auf gewisse Weise schon"), but he also expressed his reservations, particularly the following:

include, among others, the divine affirmations in Ps 2, the distribution of the concept of proclamation (such as the insertion of the שִׁירִים after Pss 42-44), the title tag לְמִנְצָה, the YHWH *malak* psalms, the Davidic compositions after Ps 89, the doxologies at the end of each book (particularly at the end of Ps 89), and the victorious Ps 149. From a diachronic perspective, each of these devices must have been inserted at different stages in the gradual process of the formation of the Psalter, but each was a pertinent addition that bolstered a specific worldview. Hence, the phenomenon of *Stimmungsumschwung* cannot be seen in isolation. Brueggemann's notion of orientation should be made to apply not only to particular psalms but to the Psalter as a whole, for despite its multifaceted narratives and its emotional highs and lows, the collection instils a positive mindset.

Such conclusions may seem to undermine the pain that gave rise to these Davidic words of distress. However, one needs to distinguish between the original setting of those laments and the present one. As they stand, the *Sitz im Buch* of the laments which are indeed expressed with deep pathos, tinges them with or even engulfs them by an awareness of its ephemeral nature from the very start. In light of the question as to whether a precative Perfect grammatical formulation can have a bearing on the theology of the Book of Psalms, this paper expresses the view that the hermeneutical import of the original laments that bore those formulations changed when those laments were inserted in the Psalter and when the various redactional elaborations on it were made.

A prophetic Perfect has to do with that realm of truth to which the psalmist has access. Ps 73 offers an excellent example of the transition from a mundane perspective marred by ignorance to one that is based on facts (cf. vv.16-17). This is not to underestimate the value of lament, trauma literature and the like, but to ensure that suffering is seen from the right perspective and expressed in the modality of a true believer. Lament will always have its rightful place in worship, at times forming an integral part of it, but the Psalter has structural elements which increasingly militate against embracing a spirit of lament. The prophetic Perfect formulations are conducive to ascertaining the right disposition of the lamenter.

there are numerous laments in the Psalter; Ps 1:6 will only come true in the future; Ps 2:8-9 are formulated as a request; and there is a time delay between these verses and 2:10-12; despite the positive outcome for David in relation to the superscript of Ps 3, his problem in the psalm is still resolved by fleeing from Absalom; and Ps 3 shifts between need and confession, and between the present and the past (3:5-7). This said, it is important to note that the notion of the Psalter being a victory book must be understood not in terms of a *fait accompli*, but rather in the mental orientation that it instils in the reader.

They are not only a question of *faith*, which undoubtedly is a constitutional element in the creation of psalms and Psalter, but primarily a question of *truth*.⁵⁷ The fact that the final editing of the Psalter happened at a time when apocalyptic imagination was rife, hence affirming the indomitable reign of God which was drawing nigh, may have had an influence on this editing more than has hitherto been acknowledged. Indeed, the initial expression of laughter that characterises God's stance vis-à-vis the assaulting foes is meant to rub off on the reader of the psalms who, as a result, must always approach situations of distress with a smirk that betrays a contended confidence in the superiority of God and the believer.

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⁵⁷ Speaking about the attacks of the foes, the ultimate target of which is God, Tiziano Lorenzin, *I Salmi*. LiBi 14; Milano: Pauline, 2000²2002), 566 opines: "Egli [Dio] solo è in grado di stabilire la verità, quando ogni risorsa umana è radicalmente impotente. Perché la verità sia ristabilita è necessaria la punizione dell'empio."