

THE LEVITICAL PSALMS OF BOOK III: INTENSIFYING PARADOXICAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE DIVINE PRESENCE

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ABSTRACT: In Book III of the MT Psalter (Psalms 73-89), all of the psalms, save for one (Psalm 86, a Davidic poem), are Levitical. Building on recent approaches that emphasize a royal, Davidic frame to the whole Psalter, this essay makes the case that the Levitical psalms of Book III contribute to the major theme of intensifying paradoxical perceptions of God's presence, rooted in three supportive sub-themes: (1) the presence of God is perceived as distant, and even absent; (2) the presence of God is perceived as proximal, via the theme of God's sovereign rule over creation; and (3) the presence of God is perceived as proximal, via the themes of holy space and Zion. This analysis is worked out through four major groupings of Levitical psalms in Book III: (1) the framing psalms (73, 89); (2) the lament psalms (74, 77, 79, 80, 83, 85, 88); (3) the praise psalms (75, 76, 84, 87); and (4) the historical or prophetic psalms (78, 81, 82).

KEYWORDS: Psalms: Book III; Levitical psalms; divine presence; divine absence; paradox

Introduction: Book III and Some Recent Research¹

Martin-Achard (1969: 12, my translation) argued that John Calvin, with his sixteenth century commentary on the Psalms, 'inaugurated a new chapter' in biblical exegesis, since he went 'straight to the text and sought to explain it as precisely as possible.' Perhaps a further chapter has been instigated, since, over the past few decades, an influential approach to the study of the Psalms has emphasized the search for coherent theological meaning(s) from the canonical shape of the whole Psalter, not only from the message of its individual psalms (see further Howard Jr. and Snearly 2023; Dunham 2023; Kuntz 2012; Howard Jr. 2005, 1999; and on the poetry of the Psalms, see Jones 2023).

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This approach to the Psalms is not without its skeptics, to be sure. Goldingay, for instance objects to this approach as being too subjective and argues that ‘the main focus of Psalms study needs to be the individual psalm.’ (Goldingay 2008: 11; see also Whybray 1996: 33-35). Others have challenged this approach by means of diachronic textual arguments, which include appeals to issues beyond the MT of the Psalter (Willgren 2016, for example, and see a response to Willgren in Ho 2019: 58-61). Nonetheless, we proceed here on the assumption that a ‘shape and shaping’ approach to the study of Psalms remains fruitful, as it is rooted in the textual data of the MT Psalter. While interest in the canonical shaping, or ‘editorial criticism’ (Grant 2008: 149-56), of the Psalms is not unique to our time (Jenkins 2020: 161-180), it has certainly flourished in recent decades in several directions.

A significant impetus for this development was the publication of Gerald Wilson’s *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Wilson 1985; note deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner 2014: 1-12). For Wilson, in Books I-III (Psalms 1-89), the royal character of David dominates; after Psalm 89, in Books IV-V (Psalms 90-150), this royal Davidic figure dissipates, in favor of a sharper focus on the kingship of Yahweh, with the Davidic character being presented as a more chastened human entity (Wilson 1985: 199-228). This ‘chastened’ human king David, especially in Book V, models how the godly ones ought to recognize the true, divine king (Wilson 1985: 228).

As Howard Jr. and Snearly (2023: 4-5) note, many scholars have followed Wilson’s general approach with the basic understanding that smaller collections of psalms are viewed as working together to constitute the actual literary environment of a ‘book’ for reading the message of the Psalms. Still, differences of emphasis exist within this broader scholarly stream. For those following Wilson’s main views, positing a two-stage composition of the book of Psalms remains key: first, Psalms 1-89, and second, Psalms 90-150. Also, here, Psalm 1 (a wisdom psalm), *without* Psalm 2 (a royal psalm), is usually understood as the introduction to the Psalter. Further, Psalm 89 and its pivotal statement of the ‘failure’ of the Davidic covenant (Psalm 89:38-52, MT 39-52) is central. These ‘wisdom/democratizing’ approaches attempt to deal with this ‘failure, [by] focusing on Yahweh’s (not David’s) eternal kingship and the importance of Torah obedience’ (Howard Jr. and Snearly 2023: 4-5). Thus, the *wisdom* frame of the Psalter is emphasized, rather than a *royal/Davidic* covenant literary frame (see further deClaissé et al. 2014: 21-38).

In contrast, others view the role of ‘David’ in the structure of the Psalter as more prominent. Significantly, here, *both* Psalms 1 and 2 are understood as the introduction to the Psalter: Psalm 1 emphasizes the way of wisdom and its obedience to Torah, while Psalm 2 accentuates Yahweh’s sovereign choice of ‘establishing the anointed Davidic king (*mashiach*, ‘messiah’) on Mount Zion’ (Howard Jr. and Snearly 2023: 5).

For example, in this general view, one author reads Psalms 1 and 2, with their closely linked poetical structures and thematic developments, as ‘the programmatic overture to the Psalter,’ that ‘highlight the righteous man planted in the paradisaical garden and the Messianic king reigning in Zion respectively’ (Ho 2019: 70, 80-81). Mitchell (1997), Grant (2004), and Robertson (2015) represent significant studies within this approach. These perspectives can be defined as ‘royal/messianic approaches,’ since they understand ‘David—and, by extension, the anointed Davidic king—as the central figure, along with Yahweh himself, of the book [of Psalms] from beginning to end’ (Howard Jr. and Sneath 2023: 11; see further Waltke and Zaspel 2023: 477-497).

A scholar who has recently contributed to this ‘royal/messianic’ approach is Ho (2023; 2019a; 2019b). With his macrostructural proposal of an ‘unfurling of the Davidic covenant,’ he attempts to move beyond what he views as a current impasse in deciphering the ‘logic behind the arrangement of the Psalter’ (Ho 2023: 36-37). Ho’s is a detailed proposal with many angles (Ho 2019: 82-133). I merely highlight here his view (Ho 2023: 59) of the unfolding Davidic theme in three major sections of the Psalter: (1) Book I (Psalms 1-41): Establishment of the Davidic Kingship and Zion (with Psalms 1 and 2 as prologue); (2) Book II (Psalms 42-72): Fall of the Davidic Kinship, and Book III (Psalms 73-89): Fall of the Zion-Temple; and (3) Book IV (Psalms 90-103): Kingship of YHWH and Ideal David, and Book V (Psalms 104-150): Establishment of the Ideal Kingship and Zion. Further, Ho notes how each of these three major sections are introduced by groups of psalms (Psalms 3-14, 42-49, and 90-103) that are all focused on Yahweh’s or Messiah’s kingship; he also highlights the way these three sections conclude with groups of psalms (Psalms 35-41, 84-89, and 135-150) that are ‘consistently focused on a supplicating, afflicted Davidic figure’ (Ho 2023: 59). This helps us see that in the Psalms, a ‘metanarrative [emerges that traces] the establishment and fall of the historical Davidic kingship and Zion temple, followed by the reestablishment of the ideal (yet afflicted) Davidic figure and Zion temple built by God’s own hands’ (Ho 2023: 62).

In previous research, I have focused on texts connected to the Levitical singers in Chronicles and in the Psalms (see Clayton 2023; 2021; 2006). In this essay, my goal is to focus on broad themes in the Levitical psalms of Book III (Psalms 73-85, 87-89) and their potential contributions to a developing ‘royal/messianic’ macro theme in the structure of the Psalter. In a recent essay (Clayton 2023), my goal was to examine how the Levitical psalms of *Book II* (Psalms 42-72) contribute to the Psalter’s theme of the godly one perceiving Yahweh as both present and absent. My basic suggestion there was that the Levitical psalms of Book II develop the pattern of a paradoxical perception of God’s presence. My goal here is to apply a similar methodology to the Levitical psalms of *Book III* (Psalms 73-89). As noted earlier, the Davidic literary

voice is prominent in Book I. It continues into Book II but is also joined by the Levitical voices of Korahite Psalms 42-49 and Asaphite Psalm 50. In Book III, the Levitical literary voice takes center stage, since, within the seventeen psalms of Book III, only Psalm 86 is Davidic, and the rest are Levitical.

I am suggesting that the Levitical psalms in Book III take on the role, begun in Book II, of presenting intensified paradoxical perceptions of God's presence, and, relatedly, in the sense, these psalms could be read as also highlighting the weakness of a merely *human* Davidic agent. This approach could help give further detail to our understanding of the larger function of Book III in the Psalter. As noted above, Ho suggests that the Psalter moves from the foundations of Davidic kingship and the centrality of Zion (Book I) to an idealized perspective on the kingship of Yahweh, on David, and on Zion (Books IV and V). This movement takes us through the fall of the Davidic kingship (Book II) and the fall of the Zion-Temple (Book III). The Levitical psalms are concentrated in Books II and III, where these literary 'falls' occur. I am proposing that these Levitical psalms contribute to these literary 'falls,' by means of the language of paradox when it comes to perceptions of the divine presence.

As with my earlier study (Clayton 2023), I will proceed here based on a definition of paradox in a study by Santos (1997: 452-53). He has suggested that 'a [literary] paradox is a statement that departs from accepted opinion (the etymological nuance), or an apparently self-contradictory or absurd statement (the derivational nuance). Thus a 'paradox' is an unusual and apparently self-contradictory rhetorical statement or concept that departs dramatically from accepted opinion' (Santos 1997: 453). Further, the *derivational* meaning of a paradox entails 'an apparently self-contradictory statement or concept that can convey unified truth (the polaric aspect), despite existing contrariness of two opposing assertions (the antinomic aspect)' (Santos 1997: 453). On this basis, we will explore the following question: to what extent may the perceptions of divine presence in the Levitical psalms of Book III be understood as evincing intensifying paradox, mostly in this derivational sense? (note chart 1) That is, is a polaric and unified truth of Scripture—that God dwells with his people and remains present and faithful even through judgment (including the fall of the Davidic kingship and of the Temple at Zion)—communicated antinomically through two opposing claims—wherein the Levitical psalmists perceive God as both present and absent?

Further, I am suggesting that the following three 'sub-themes' further support the main point raised above (as noted in chart 1): (1) the presence of God is perceived as distant, and even absent, through the general language of human disorientation, and of divine judgment, which ultimately leads to either restoration or irrecoverable distance; (2) the presence of God is perceived as proximal, especially through the clarity

of God’s sovereign rule over all of creation, which ultimately includes Israel and the nations; and (3) the presence of God is perceived as proximal, especially by means of the language of holy space and Zion.

Our analysis may now proceed, so as to highlight some broad ways in which these themes play out in four major groupings of the Levitical psalms of Book III: (1) the framing psalms framing (73, 89); (2) the seven lament psalms (74, 77, 79, 80, 83, 85, 88); (3) the four praise psalms (75, 76, 84, 87); and (4) the remaining Levitical psalms that are either more historical or prophetic in tone (78, 81, 82).

Chart 1: Claim and Sub-Themes
Claim: The Levitical psalms of Book III contribute to the major theme of intensifying paradoxical perceptions of God’s presence.
Sub-Theme I: The presence of God is perceived as distant, and even absent, through the general language of human disorientation.
Sub-Theme II: The presence of God is perceived as proximal, especially through the clarity of God’s sovereign rule over all of creation, which ultimately includes Israel and the nations.
Sub-Theme III: The presence of God is perceived as proximal, especially by means of the language of holy space and Zion.

The Literary Frame of Book III: Levitical Psalms 73 and 89

In contrast to Books I-II and IV-V, Book III is framed by two Levitical psalms: Psalm 73 at the beginning (title: “A psalm of Asaph”) and Psalm 89 at the end (title: “A *maskil* of Ethan the Ezrahite”; for a recent discussion the psalm titles, see Waltke and Zaspel 2023: 499-518). The wisdom themes of Psalm 73 are often noted. For example, Jacobson and Jacobson (2013: 74) posit that Psalm 73 is a ‘good example’ of a wisdom psalm, with its instructional tone, especially in the first half (verses 1-14), and its wisdom terminology overall (such as the theme of the wearisome task of seeking to understand, found in Psalm 73:16 and Ecclesiastes 1:8). Other proposals regarding the basic genre of Psalm 73 have been made (de Claissé-Walford et al. 2014: 584). Terrien, for instance, pointed to the possibility of ‘an autobiographical confession’ or

a ‘paracultic’ poem (Terrien 2003: 526). I have suggested that Psalm 73 might be understood as evincing both wisdom and eschatological themes (Clayton 2021: 234–258; 2006). Understood at the broadest level, Psalm 89 is often described as a type of community lament, but there is clearly a mix of genres. Estes notes that it is royal in its content, but in its form, it combines elements of ‘hymn, divine speech, and lament, even ending on a note of protest’ (Estes 2019: 160).

Overall, Psalms 73 and 89 represent significant ‘seam’ psalms within the whole Psalter, in their framing of Book III. In a well-known essay, McCann described Psalms 73 as a ‘microcosm of OT theology’ (McCann 1987). Building on Brueggemann’s categories, Tucker and Grant (2018: 59) note that ‘the process of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation occurs on a macro level within the book of Psalms but is also reflected on a micro level in Psalm 73 itself’ (on the function of wisdom psalms overall, note Petrany 2014). Thus, Psalm 73 marks not only the transition to a new book, but also a transition in the whole Psalter. As a royal psalm, Psalm 89 opens in praise to Yahweh for His good provisions. However, with the sudden rhetorical turn in verse 38 (MT 39), which decries the loss of the Davidic leader, deClaissé-Walford observes that ‘Book III of the Psalter [in Psalm 89] ends with the community of faith lamenting and asking questions of its God: Who are we? Who will lead us? Who will help us survive in this new world?’ (deClaissé-Walford et al. 2014: 34).

For the purposes of this essay, I offer two observations on these bookended psalms of Book III. First, we should note their contrasting rhetorical movements at the macro structural level (see the summary in chart 2 below). In fact, we might posit that these two psalms are paradoxical both in their literary *form* and in the theological *content* that these contrasting forms develop. That is, when it comes to the psalmist’s perception of God, Psalm 73 begins in disorientation and ends in reorientation, while the overarching movement of Psalm 89 is exactly opposite. An initially positive perception of God’s lovingkindness and faithfulness (notably with the Davidic covenant promises, rooted in an awareness of 2 Samuel 7:17) is scrambled by the end of the psalm, with a disoriented perception as to the possibility of God’s enduring presence and faithfulness.

Chart 2: Comparing the Macro Structures of Psalms 73 & 89	
Psalm 73	Psalm 89
I. Verse 1: Introduction <i>The psalmist states a reliable tradition about God:</i> God is: (a) good (<i>tov</i>) to Israel (b) to those who are <u>pure in heart</u> (<i>bare levav</i>).	I. Verses 1-4 (MT 2-5): Introduction <i>The psalmist states a reliable tradition about God:</i> God is worthy to be praised, since he has made a covenant (<i>berit</i>) with his chosen one/servant David: (a) David's offspring will be established <u>forever</u> (verses 1a, 2a; MT 2a, 3a: <i>olam</i>; verse 4a; MT 5a: <i>ad olam</i>). (b) David's throne will endure for all <u>generations</u> (verses 1b, 4b; MT 2b, 5b: <i>ledor vador</i>).
II. Verses 2-14: <i>Experiential disconnection with this reliable tradition about God:</i> The wicked (<i>reshaim</i>; verses 3, 12) appear to prosper; so, why bother with pursuing the way of Yahweh; why bother trying to keep one's heart clean (verse 13: "In vain <u>I have kept my heart clean</u> [<i>zikiti levavi</i>])?	II. Verses 5-37 (MT 6-38): <i>Aligned perspective regarding this reliable tradition about God:</i> (a) Verses 5-18 (MT 6-19): God is worthy to praised as He is Creator of all things, and He has blessed Israel. Verse 8a (MT 9a): O LORD God of hosts, who is <u>mighty</u> (<i>khasin</i>) are as you are, O LORD. Verse 17b (MT 18b): By your favor <u>our horn is exalted</u> (<i>tarim qarenenu</i>). (a) Verses 19-37 (MT 20-38): God is worthy to be praised because he has promised enduring covenantal faithfulness to the line of David. Verse 24 (MT 25): My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him, and in my name shall his horn be exalted.

III. Verses 15-26: <i><u>Aligned perspective regarding this reliable tradition about God:</u></i> The psalmist’s prayerful reflection of the reorienting presence of God renews the appreciation of the truth that God will, despite any present circumstances, justly judge the wicked. Verse 17: “Until I went <i>into the sanctuary of God (el miqdeshe el)</i>, then I discerned <u>their end (le’akharitam)</u>.”	III. Verses 38-52 (MT 39-47): <i><u>Experiential disconnection with this reliable tradition about God</u></i> The psalmist laments the apparent rejection by God of the promised covenant faithfulness to the line of David. Verse 39 (MT 40): You have renounced the covenant (<i>berit</i>) with <u>your servant (avdekha)</u>, you have defiled <u>his crown (nizro)</u> in the dust.
IV. Verses 27-28 Conclusion: <i><u>Confidence in the final justice of divine proximity and distance</u></i> Verse 27a: “Those who are <u>far from you (rekheqekha)</u> shall perish” Verse 28b: “But for me it is good to be <u>near (qirabat)</u> God.”	IV. Verses 46-52 (MT 47-53): Conclusion <i><u>Doubt in the final justice of divine proximity and distance</u></i> Verse 46a (MT 47a): How long, O LORD? Will you <u>hide yourself forever (tisater lanetsakh)</u>? Verse 49 (MT 50): Lord, where is <u>your steadfast love of old (khasadekha hari’shonim)</u>, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?

More specifically, Psalms 73 and 89 both begin with the statement of a reliable tradition about God (see points I in chart 2). In Psalm 73:1, the psalmist states that God is good (*tov*) to Israel, to those who are pure in heart (*bare levav*). Similarly, in Psalm 89:1-4 (MT verses 2-4), the Levitical psalmist begins with a central, reliable Old Testament tradition. God is worthy to be praised, since he has made a covenant (*berit*) with his chosen one, with his servant David: David’s offspring will be established forever (verses 1a, 2a; MT 2a, 3a: *olam*; verse 4a; MT 5a: *ad olam*); and David’s throne will endure for all generations (verses 1b, 4b; MT 2b, 5b: *ledor vador*).

Further, the first major unit in Psalm 73 (verses 2-14) details the psalmist’s *experiential disconnection* with this psalm’s reliable tradition about God, while, in contrast, the first major unit in Psalm 89 (verses 5-37, MT 6-38), develops the notion of an *aligned perspective* regarding this psalm’s reliable tradition about God (see points II in chart 2). Indeed, in Psalm 73, the wicked (*reshaim*; verses 3, 12) appear to prosper,

so, the Levitical psalmist expresses initial doubt as to the benefit of pursuing the way of Yahweh (see verse 13: 'In vain *I have kept my heart clean* [*zikiti levavi*']). On the other hand, in Psalm 89: 5-37 (MT 6-38), the psalmist makes two major points that are aligned with previous revelation in the Old Testament. First, in Psalm 89:5-18 (MT 89:6-19), the text affirms that God is worthy to be praised as he is Creator of all things (for instance, 89:8a; MT 89:9a) and, especially, has blessed Israel (for example, 89:17b; MT 89:18b). Second, Psalm 89 moves on in verses 19-37 (MT 20-38) to further affirm the worthiness of expressing praise to Yahweh, because of God's promise of his enduring covenantal faithfulness to the line of David (note for instance 89:24; MT 89:25). Mays (1989: 286) helps us observe a close connection here in Psalm 89 between the kingship of God (verses 5-18, MT 6-19) and the kingship of David (verses 19-37, MT 20-38), when he notes that 'this carefully drawn parallel' between God's and David's kingship 'actualizes in the world what is reality in heaven.'

Psalm 73:15-28 and Psalm 89:38-52 (MT 89:39-47; see points III in chart 2) represent the next set of contrasting passages. The unit in Psalm 73 moves to an *aligned perspective* regarding the reliable tradition in this psalm (namely, that God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart), while the related unit in Psalm 89 starkly moves to express an *experiential disconnection* with the reliable tradition initially proposed in this psalm (namely, that God is worthy to be praised since he has made an eternal covenant with his servant David, for all generations). Indeed, Psalm 73:15-28 makes it clear that the psalmist's prayerful reflection on the reorienting presence of God has renewed his appreciation of the enduring truth that God will in fact, despite any present circumstances, justly judge the wicked. Psalm 73:17 is key to this reorientation: 'until I went *into the sanctuary of God* (*el miqdeshe el*), then I discerned their end (*le'akharitam*).'¹ As Estes (2019: 36) notes here, 'drawing near to God ... clarifies [the psalmist's] vision of his perplexing and disturbing situation.' In comparison, the related unit in Psalm 89:38-52 (MT 89:39-47) is introduced with a strongly disjunctive phrase, 'but now (*ve'attah*) you have cast off and rejected, you are full of wrath against your anointed.' This unit intensifies the struggle found in the language of Psalm 73:2-14, where we observe a general struggle with the apparent success of the wicked. Here, in Psalm 89:38-52 (MT 89:39-47), we note an intensified inner struggle on the part of the Levitical psalmist, where Yahweh seems to have *exalted* the wicked ones, the enemies of the Davidic servant, where the Davidic crown is reduced to de-filement in the dust (89:39; MT 89:40).

As a final element of contrast (see points IV in chart 2), we note that both psalms conclude with statements about final justice and the themes of perceived divine proximity and distance. In Psalm 73:27-28, the psalmist is able to conclude with a reoriented statement of confidence: he is able to state that the unrepentant wicked will,

in the end, be far removed from the presence of God (Psalm 73:27), while his refuge in God, his proximity to the presence of God, is affirmed (Psalm 73:28). In contrast, in Psalm 89:46-52 (MT 89:47-53), the Levitical psalmist there concludes, in lament, with pointed *doubt* when it comes to his own understanding of the final justice of the righteous being in close and blessed proximity to God, on the one hand, and of the wicked being able to continue in their challenge to God's promises made to the Davidic servant, on the other hand. At the end of Psalm 89, the theme of God as a firm refuge (present in Psalm 73:28) is replaced by a psalmist perceiving God as hidden (Psalm 89:46a, MT 89:47a), by a psalmist doubting the lovingkindness of God promised to David (Psalm 89:49, MT 89:50). As Limburg (2000: 304-305) notes here, despite the final, brief word of praise in Psalm 89:52, MT 89:53), Book III ends with a question that perceives 'God as distant, [that asks] where is the love that we used to be able to count on?'

Secondly, with regards to Psalms 73 and 89, I briefly note that, in the main, all three of the supportive sub-themes I noted above are present (chart 1). Sub-theme 1 has to do with perceiving God as distant, and even absent, through language of human disorientation. In Psalm 73, that is the major emphasis of the first section of the psalm (Psalm 73:2-14), before the turning point in verses 15-17. And in Psalm 89, this theme is prominent after the turning point of verse 38 (MT 39). Sub-theme 2 has to do with perceiving God as proximal, as near, especially with regards to a clear understanding of God's sovereign rule over all of creation. Psalm 73:16-28 represents the reorientation that the Psalmist arrives at, with a quasi-eschatological perception of God's rule in creation, to include judgement of all evil (see Clayton 2006). And in Psalm 89, this is the essential theme of verses 5-37 (MT 6-38), wherein God is praised for his presence and work in creation generally, and with the Davidic servant, more specifically. Sub-theme 3 has to do with perceiving God as proximal through the language of temple and holy space, and the language of Zion. In Psalm 73, we remember that it is presence in the sanctuary (Psalm 73:17) that enables the Levitical psalmist to renew his perception of the proximity in blessing for those have made God their refuge, in 73:28. In Psalm 89, I think this third sub-theme theme is likely only indirectly present. That is, if we allow for a link between the Davidic theme in Psalm 89 (as well as the Levitical title of this psalm) and the broader Old Testament canonical theme of David as the founder of the Jerusalem temple worship and music system (as seen in 1 Chronicles 15-16, 22-29) then we might observe a general, background presence of this sub-theme especially in the first section of Psalm 89.

Perceptions of Distance from God: Levitical Lament Psalms of Book III

We now turn our attention to the Levitical psalms of lament within Book III. As Jacobson and Jacobson (2013: 40) remark, the most common type of psalm in the Psalter is, in fact, the ‘prayer for help,’ or the ‘psalm of lament.’ They write, ‘we prefer to call them ‘prayers for help’ because the center of gravity in these poems is not the complaint, but rather the request: the psalmists ask for God’s help, in the belief that God can help if God chooses to.’ Brueggemann (1984: 51) has observed that these lament psalms of ‘disorientation’ reflect the ‘disequilibrium, incoherence, and unrelieved asymmetry’ of lived human experience. This is in contrast to (praise) psalms of ‘orientation’ that reflect ‘well-oriented faith in a mood of equilibrium’ (Brueggemann 1984: 25; see further Futato 2007: 150-158). In turn, such psalms of disorientation may be further categorized as either psalms of personal lament or psalms of communal lament (Brueggemann 1984: 58-77). As is usually noted, we assume here that Psalms 74, 77, 79, 80, 83, and 85 are communal laments, and that Psalm 88 is a personal lament.

Overall, we have noted thus far that at the bookends of Book III (with Psalms 73 and 89), we find (1) expressions of intensifying paradoxical perceptions of God, and (2) at least a mix of the supporting sub-themes that I have identified (chart 1). When it comes to the Levitical psalms within Book III, then, my point is that these contribute mainly to sub-theme 1: perceptions of *distance* from God. This is particularly true for Psalms 74 and 88, which, of course, are adjacent to Psalms 73 and 89 respectively.

Next to Psalm 73 in Book III, Psalm 74 stands as a communal lament that begins with an intense complaint related to the destruction of the temple. It is possible that at least originally this poem is reflecting on the Babylonian destruction of the Jerusalem temple that led to the exile of God’s Old Testament people in the early 6th century BC. Kidner (1973: 265), for instance, titled his discussion of Psalm 74 straightforwardly with the one word ‘Havoc,’ and argued ‘that this tormented psalm has the marks of a national disaster that produced Psalms 79 and 137 and the book of Lamentations: the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 BC.’

What ought to stand out to readers is the stark paradox between key themes in Psalms 73 and 74. In Psalm 73, it is the memory of being in God’s sanctuary (the *miqdeshe el* in 73:17) that enables the Asaphite psalmist to renew his perspective on the blessing of God’s proximity. In Psalm 74, though, that very meeting place (*moed* in 74:4) is full of God’s enemies, that sanctuary (*miqdash* in 74:7) is burning. So, the call is now for God to *remember* Zion, where he has dwelt (74:2). Thus, the perception of God’s empowering presence at Zion, at the center of Psalm 73:15-28, is quickly reversed in Psalm 74.

The tone of Psalm 74 as a community lament, where God's proximity is questioned, is plain from verse 1: 'O God, why do you cast us off forever?' Here, the community is stating its lament to God in the opening section of verses 1-3. The reasons for this lament are then given in verses 4-8: the meeting place, the sanctuary, has been destroyed by the enemy. This leads to further questioning in the rest of the psalm, which includes the disoriented perception of God as silent in verses 9-11; this also includes reflecting on God's past faithfulness as seen through his wondrous works in creation, in verses 12-19—a counterpoint to the challenge of a destroyed temple. Finally, the plea for divine help includes a direct appeal for covenant faithfulness in verses 20-23. As such, even as the Levitical psalmist's experience of the presence of God in the sanctuary context in Psalm 73 enabled the reorientation there, the *destruction* of that sanctuary in Psalm 74 leads the Asaphite psalmist to, paradoxically, voice an anguished lament, one struggling with perceiving a God who has been faithful in the past, but who seems utterly distant in the present.

In turn, Korahite Psalm 88 can be seen as intensifying the disoriented lament of Psalm 74, as well as the remaining laments psalms in Book III, more generally. Psalm 88 is the one clearly *individual* Levitical lament in Book III, and its place right before the concluding psalm of Book III, Psalm 89, should be noted. Tanner captures the deeply disoriented tone of the conclusion of Book III when she writes that 'Psalms 88 and 89 stand together at the end of Book Three as the darkest place in the whole of the psalms. Both are prayers for help, and both end without resolution. Psalm 88 is the cry of an individual who sees her problem as God.... The psalm's message is shocking to modern readers who are unaccustomed to the frankness of these ancient prayers for help' (deClaissé-Walford et al. 2014: 668). Thus, Psalm 88 adapts the standard lament with an emphasis on the worshiper's *complaint* (Estes 2019: 152).

The individual nature of the lament in Psalm 88 is apparent from the outset: 'O Lord, God of my salvation, *I* cry out day and night before you.' The psalmist then proceeds from this crying out to God in verses 1-9 (MT 2-10), to outright questioning of God in verses 10-12 (MT 11-13). We note, for example, the particularly dark tone of verse 10 (MT 11): 'Do you work wonders for the dead (*metim*), do the departed (*rephaim*) rise up to praise you?' Psalm 88 concludes with accusations against God in verses 13-18 (MT 14-19), such as verse 18: 'You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me, my companions have become darkness (*makhesakh*).' This concluding section includes language communicating the perception of divine rejection and hiddenness, especially in verse 14 (MT 15): 'O LORD, why do you cast (*tiznakh*) my soul away? Why do you hide (*tastir*) your face from me?' Thus, as Kraus (1993: 195) notes, this Old Testament psalm concludes as an 'extreme lament' that 'remains without answer.' We must wait for the canonical perspective of the New Testament,

which ‘proclaims that Jesus Christ has come into this worst forsakenness by God and all human beings.’

Also, it is worth noting that the only Davidic psalm in Book III, Psalm 86, stands as the only other *individual* lament in Book III (in proximity, then, to Psalm 88). In Psalm 86, the Davidic psalmist appeals to God for renewal (verses 1-8), affirms that Yahweh is the one true God, to whom eventually the nations will come in worship (verses 8-13), and concludes with a call for God’s deliverance from those opposing God’s way (verses 14-17). Thus, in a literary sense, the voice of David himself is conflicted and disoriented in Book III and can be linked with the final Levitical lament in Book III about God’s apparent abandonment of His Davidic covenant promises (Psalm 89:38-52; MT 89:39-53).

Overall, based on our analysis, we might define Psalms 74 and 88 as the ‘inner lamenting poles’ of Book III, while Psalms 73 and 89 represent the outer, paradoxical, bookends. The remaining Levitical psalms of lament within Book III (Psalms 77, 79, 80, 83, 85) more broadly develop this theme of an intensifying paradoxical perception of God’s presence. That is, in these communal lament psalms, the themes of God’s absence and of appeals to God from within that reality—what I have defined overall as sub-theme 1 (chart 1)—are present. In Psalm 77, in verses 1-10, the Asaphite psalmist gives voice to the community’s complaints about a God whose steadfast love (*khesed*) seems to have ceased (verse 8), before moving to a more direct plea for divine help in the rest of the psalm. In this psalm’s opening section (verses 1-3; MT 2-4), the apparent hiddenness of God is lamented, in particular; remembering God only leads to moaning and fainting (verse 3; MT 4). This leads to a troubled complaint in the next section (verses 4-9; MT 5-10); if God is perceived at all, it is only his anger and lack of compassion that are experienced (verse 7; MT 8). As Estes (2019: 67) notes of the language of this section (and specifically the use of ‘Most High/*elyon*’ in verse 10, MT 11), it ‘may possibly imply a sense of distance from the Lord rather than familiarity with him.’ In the end (in verses 10-20; MT 11-21), it is the memory of God’s presence in blessing, in the past, that moves the psalmist to an appeal to God’s faithfulness.

Furthermore, Psalm 79 contains echoes to Psalm 74, as a community lament for the destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem. The first section of the poem (verses 1-4) reveals that the nations have brought God’s ‘holy temple’ in Jerusalem to ruins. If the temple is destroyed, can the people of God still experience the presence of God? The Levitical psalmist responds to this type of questioning with doubt in the next section of Psalm 79 (verses 5-12). The wrath of God (verse 5) is at the source of this judgement, because of the sins of God’s people (verse 8). Despite the intense sense of distance from God that pervades this psalm, what Kraus (1993: 195) defines as ‘the

defamation and desecration of the place of the presence of God; this text still manages to conclude, paradoxically, in verse 13 with a thankful confidence in the enduring shepherding presence of God with his people.

Asaphite Psalm 80, another community lament, extends the shepherding theme with its opening imperative in verse 1 (MT 2): ‘Give ear, O Shepherd (*roeh*) of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.’ Psalm 80 is then structured around further imperatives: ‘stir up’ (verse 2, MT 3), ‘restore us’ (verse 3, MT 4), ‘restore us’ (verse 7, MT 8), ‘turn again’ (verse 14a, MT 15a), ‘look down’ (verse 14b, MT 15b), ‘have regard’ (verse 14c, MT 15c), ‘restore us’ (verse 19, MT 20). These appeals are for God to make his presence known, since, from the perspective of the lamenting Levitical psalmist, God is now perceived as removed, as distanced, as hidden. Rhetorically, then, as it concludes with an enduring appeal for God’s restoration (verse 19, MT 20), Psalm 80 maintains the disoriented tone of lament vis-à-vis the worshiper’s perception of God’s presence. As Limburg (2000: 274) notes, ‘[c]ertain questions are asked of God in [Psalm 80], but they are not answered. The people have been faithful in worship, asking for God’s help, but God has not responded.’

Within Book III, the remaining Levitical psalms of lament are found in Asaphite Psalm 83 and Korahite Psalm 85. With both of these community laments, the psalmists continue in their appeals from the disorientated perspective of God being perceived as distant. In Psalm 83, we note that God is reckoned as *not* being involved in the protection of His people, who are facing an onslaught from an enemy coalition. This poem is rooted in the call for God to break His silence (83:1, MT 83:2): ‘O God, do not keep silence (*’elohim ’al dami lakh*), do not hold your peace or be still, O God!’ The first section of the psalm, in verses 1-8 (MT 2-9), expands on the reality of the impending threat of these enemies, while in the second section, in verses 9-18 (MT 10-19), the psalmist calls on God to destroy this enemy, in affirmation of the supremacy of Yahweh, as ‘Most High’ (*’eleyon*; verse 18, MT 19). In his reading of Psalm 83, Weiser (1962: 562-563) highlighted the presence of an overarching call for God to justly rule, in a way that would invest any foregrounded political or historical events with ‘an ultimate—an eschatological—meaning.’

Thematically, Psalm 85 has some broad links to Psalm 80, as both texts emphasize calls for divine restoration, from the basis of the community having sinned against God. For instance, both poems contain imperatives of the root *shuv*: ‘restore us’ in 80: 3, 7, 19 (*hashivenu*, MT 80: 4, 8, 20) and ‘restore us’ in 83:4 (*shuvenu*, MT 85:5). In Psalm 80, the psalmist is aware of a past experience of God’s favorable and forgiving presence in the land (verses 1-3, MT 2-4); on the other hand, the experience of God’s judgement leads to an appeal for a renewal of God’s restoring presence (verses 4-7, MT 5-7). In the final section (verses 8-13, MT 9-14), the text moves to a growing

confidence in the possibility of God giving ‘what is good’ (verse 12, MT 13), in experiencing the fullness of *shalom* (‘peace’ in verse 8, MT 9). As Tanner notes of the shift from imperatives and questions, in the first part of the psalm, to the opening *cohortative* form in verse 8 (‘let me hear,’ *eshmenah*, MT 9), ‘this signals a change from pleas to hope for the future, based on the past’ (deClaissé-Walford et al. 2014: 658). Notably, this section highlights how the renewal of the fear of God will lead to a renewal of ‘glory’ (*khavod*) dwelling (the root *shakhan* is used here) in the land (verse 9; MT 10). This image links to the theme of God’s indwelling presence via his *shekinah* glory, both in the Old Testament (for instance, Exodus 40: 34-38) and in the New (for instance, John 1:14).

Perceptions of a Proximate God: Levitical Praise Psalms in Book III

Analysis of the Levitical psalms of Book III reveals that four are commonly defined as praise hymns: Psalms 75, 76, 84, and 87. These four texts may, indeed, be classified under the board category of ‘psalms of orientation,’ which ‘express a confident, serene settlement of faith issues,’ and where, in the psalmist’s perception, God ‘is known to be reliable and trustworthy;’ here, in contrast to the psalms of lament, we encounter a ‘well-oriented faith in a mood of equilibrium’ (Brueggemann 1984: 25; see also Futato 2007: 146-150). Also, we note that these psalms of oriented worship represent a *minority* literary voice in Book III (only 4 out of the 17 psalms of Book III). Further, if we return to Jacobson and Jacobson’s discussion of psalm types, they observe (2013: 46) that the main purpose of a psalm of praise is ‘to tell who God is by telling what God has done. Praise therefore is testimony or witness: it is a form of song in which the gathered community bears witness in song to who God is.’ In this sense, these four Levitical songs of praise in Book III can be seen as constructively bearing witness to God’s identity from the foundation of perceiving God as *near* the psalmist’s lived reality. Thus, even as they occupy a smaller space in the overall theological landscape of Book III, these four hymns of praise at least serve to punctuate a prevailing sense of perceiving God as distant in lament (my sub-theme 1 on chart 1), with the counterbalanced theme of perceiving God as proximal, especially through the expressed clarity of God’s sovereign rule over all of creation, which ultimately includes Israel and the nations (my sub-theme 2 on chart 1). In these praise hymns of Book III, the presence of God is also perceived as proximal by means of the liturgical language of holy space and Zion (my sub-theme 3 on chart 1).

Psalms 75 opens with an affirmation of the proximity of God’s name, in verse 1 (MT 2): ‘We give thanks to you, God, we give thanks for your name is near’ (*qarov*). Especially following the disoriented lament of Psalm 74, this expression of divine proximity in Psalm 75 enables the psalmist to further renew an understanding of God’s sovereign rule over creation: God is a judge within creation (verses 2-5, MT

3-6); God is in ultimate control of affirming the just and judging the wicked (verses 6-8, MT 7-9); thus, God is worthy of eternal praise (verses 9-10, MT 10-11). As Mays (1994: 249) has noted of the renewed appreciation of God's justice found in Psalm 75, 'this reordering of the human situation is the equity of God's judgment. This corrective interference in society and history is God's way of bringing affairs in line with his policy of opposing the arrogant and favoring the lowly righteous.'

Asaphite Psalm 76, the second Levitical hymn of praise in Book III, continues to develop the idea of perceiving God's presence as proximal. Here, the theme of God's presence in Zion, which is my sub-theme 3 (chart 1), comes to the fore. In fact, the opening of Psalm 76, in verses 1-2 (MT 2-30), affirms that God can be known (the root *yada* is used in verse 1, MT 2), that his abode (*sukho* in verse 2a, MT 3a) and his dwelling place (*meonato* in verse 2b, MT 3b) are in fact in Salem, in Zion. Proclaiming the ability to know the name of God could be viewed as the positive side of a 'perception paradox,' and here, the proximity of God's indwelling presence is communicated through the language of Zion. This perspective allows the psalmist, in the remainder of Psalm 76, to affirm God's protection over the enemy (verses 3-9, MT 4-10) and to conclude with a call to praise (verses 10-12, MT 11-13). From an Old Testament perspective, the theme of God dwelling in Zion is a reminder that Yahweh chose to condescend in grace, so as to ultimately (and paradoxically—see Solomon's Jerusalem temple prayer dedication in 1 Kings 8:27-30) dwell in the Solomonic temple and to make his 'home' there. Anderson (1983: 143) has commented on Psalm 76's opening with the theme of knowing God's name, by noting that it 'signifies the Holy God who turns personally to the people, whose self (or identity) is disclosed in the people's historical experience. ... Indeed, the faith of the psalmists cannot be understood apart from the belief that the identity (the 'whole-ness') of God has been disclosed in the shared identity of Israel and that the people may address God personally, by name.'

Later in Book III, two final Levitical hymns of praise, with their paradoxical reminders of God's presence, provide a least some counterbalance to the more dominating emphasis on God's distance, as noted above. Asaphite Psalm 84 is often viewed as a pilgrimage psalm for those who would have traveled to Jerusalem for liturgical occasions (instance deClaissé-Walford 2014: 650-654). In this poem, the blessing of being in God's presence, as mediated through temple and Zion language, is a key theme. An affirmation to the goodness of the dwelling place (*mishkhan*) of Yahweh, opens the poem in verse 1 (MT 2). Interestingly, Terrien (2003: 599, emphasis added) argued that the Levitical psalmist's yearning for the experience of God's presence at the temple, in verses 1-5 (MT 2-5), means that he was probably *not* there at the temple complex, that 'he may have been ambivalent on the validity of sacred space,' and

that ‘in any case, [the Levitical psalmist] *associates habitation on the temple mount with the proximity of the living God*.’ Overall, we see that the poet’s affirmation of the blessing of being in God’s presence concludes this text in verses 10-12 (MT 11-13). And finally, in Korahite Psalm 87, we note briefly that the blessing of God’s presence in Zion, for the ultimate blessing of the nations, is affirmed in oriented praise. Yahweh is perceived as fully present, and accessible, in Zion (87: 1-3). Zion is established as God’s city for all peoples (87:4-7). Zion will be a source of refreshment and renewal ‘for all who belong to Zion ... [as] belonging to Zion is really belonging to the Lord’ (Estes 2019: 150).

Historical and Prophetic Levitical Psalms in Book III

There are three remaining Levitical psalms in Book III and they do not fit neatly into the major categories of lament or praise: Psalms 78, 81, and 82. As a historical poem, Psalm 78 looks back on God’s past faithfulness with Israel (for example, verse 5: ‘[the LORD] established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children’), and its consistent sin and rebellion through divine testing (for example, verse 32: ‘in spite of all this, they still sinned, despite his wonders, they did not believe’). This lengthy psalm concludes in verses 67-72 with an emphasis on God’s sovereign choice of Judah/Zion over Ephraim to establish *David* as the shepherd of God’s people (see verses 67a, 68a, 70a, and 71b: ‘[the LORD] rejected the tent of Joseph,’ ‘but [the LORD] chose the tribe of Judah,’ ‘[the LORD] chose David his servant,’ ‘to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance’). As such, the outcome of Psalm 78 is oriented towards the proximity of God’s presence in Zion and, ultimately, towards the theme of the royal Davidic covenant promise. In this sense, Psalm 78 further accentuates the intensified paradox of the rhetorical movement that we noted for Psalm 89 (the apparent rejection of Yahweh’s rejection of his promises made to king David), at the close of Book III. In fact, Tucker and Grant (2018: 161, emphasis added) also highlight the paradox that seems to be at play in Psalm 78, when it comes to this Davidic theme, as they note that if Book III were added to the Psalter when there was *no* Davidic king reigning in Jerusalem, still ‘the psalmist is fully aware that Yahweh’s promise to David *still* holds true.’

Asaphite Psalms 81 and 82 remain somehow distinct in Book III in that they both carry prophetic overtones—in the *forthtelling* sense of Old Testament prophecy, as the people of God are challenged to pursue covenant faithfulness. Estes (2019: 108, 115) notes that Psalm 81 ‘is a descriptive praise psalm that unusually features a strong tone of warning,’ and that Psalm 82 ‘is unusual both in its substance and its structure,’ with its combination of both praise and lament elements.

Psalm 81 is rooted in a call to praise in verses 1-3 (MT 2-4); it then moves to a section emphasizing God’s past salvific work, especially through his liberation of Israel

from Egypt (verses 4-7, MT 5-8); the poem continues with strong language of God Himself (in verses 8-10, MT 9-11) calling the community to covenant fidelity. This is followed by the sobering reality (in verses 11-16 [MT 12-17], also initially communicated grammatically in the divine first person) of God's judgment of sin, coupled with the reminder that covenant faithfulness would lead to the renewing presence of God. In this way, the divine judgment that is highlighted, beginning in Psalm 81:11 (MT 81:12) is a reminder that judgment from God can entail the reality of distance from God (at least as far as human perception goes) when God's people follow their own counsels, as in verse 12: 'So I [the LORD] gave them over to their own stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.'

Finally, Psalm 82 shows us that Yahweh is the sole and final judge over any and all powers in creation, as in verse 1a: 'God has taken his place in the divine council'. When it comes to my theme of the perception of the divine presence, there is a mix in this poem: on the one hand, the psalmist expresses with clarity that Yahweh is in fact the one who is able to judge all wickedness—so it is necessary to be in spiritual proximity to God to perceive this reality. On the other hand, the psalmist concludes in 82:8 with a direct appeal for God to judge the earth as whole: 'Arise, O God, judge (*shoftah*) the earth; for you shall inherit the nations!' This could imply that God's fully experienced presence remains a future hope.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have suggested that at least three interwoven sub-themes help develop a larger, paradoxical thematic thread in the Levitical psalms of Book III. The first sub-theme that I have developed is that the presence of God is perceived as *distant*, and even *absent*, through the general language of human disorientation. The second sub-theme that I have analyzed is that the presence of God is perceived as *proximal*, especially through the clarity of God's *sovereign rule* over *all* of creation, which ultimately includes Israel *and* the nations. The third sub-theme that I have reflected on is that the presence of God is perceived as *proximal*, especially by means of the language of *holy space* and *Zion*. To these ends, we have reflected on four sets of Levitical psalms in Book III: the book end psalms, the lament psalms, the praise psalms, and the more prophetic and historical psalms.

Overall, the purpose of this essay has been to suggest some broad ways in which the Levitical psalms of Book III contribute to intensifying paradoxical perceptions of God's presence. In this way, these Levitical psalms may ultimately help us as readers and interpreters process a polaric and unified truth of Scripture: that God dwells with his people and remains present and faithful even through judgment. These truths appears to be communicated antinomically through two apparently opposing claims: the Levitical perception of God being both present and absent.

As noted in the introduction, a broader goal with this analysis of the Levitical psalms of Book III is to contribute to readings of the macro themes of the Psalter that include royal, messianic overtones. In this sense, the paradoxical perception of God evinced in the Levitical psalms of Book III (and of Book II) show the weakness and frailty of a merely *human* Davidic royal agent. Thus, as Drijvers has noted (1958: 19-20, my translation), our reading of the Levitical psalms in Book III reminds us that ‘all of the Old Testament helps envisage a progress towards the New Testament.... The world of the Old Testament, which is fully alive in the Psalms, is not a completed world. It is a world that is fully oriented and extended towards the completion of Christian revelation.... It is through Jesus, and His Church, that the themes of the Psalter will receive their fullest meaning, or rather, a much richer meaning, because the fullness of their significance will only be obtained through the light of the glorious return of Christ.’

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