

PSALMS

Volume 2

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EXPOSITION

BOOK 3

At the end of Book 2, “The prayers of David the son of Jesse are completed” (Ps 72:20). Psalm 72’s superscription “Of Solomon,” and the fact that after Book 2 only one psalm contains historical information in its superscription (Ps 142, whereas twelve psalms in Books 1 and 2 had these), join together to suggest that when we move into Book 3 we move past David’s life into the reign of those who descended from him. This impression is strengthened by the move away from psalms ascribed to David. Whereas fifty-five of Psalms 1–72 are “Of David,” only one Psalm in Book 3 (Ps 86) and two in Book 4 are ascribed to him (Pss 101 and 103). And then there is the content of the psalms of Book 3: Psalms 74 and 79 describe attacks on the temple, and Ps 89 seems to respond to its destruction when Babylon conquered the city and dethroned the Davidic king.

We have seen how psalms at the seams of the books have engaged Pss 1 and 2, and Ps 89 interacts in particular with Ps 2. Just as Ps 2 rehearsed the 2 Sam 7 promises to David, so Ps 89 deals with the covenant Yahweh made with David as narrated in that passage. Psalm 2 recounts Yahweh’s declaration, “My son are you, I, today, have begotten you,” before rehearsing Yahweh’s promise that his son would inherit and possess the ends of the earth (2:7–8). Similarly, Ps 89 has the son crying out “My father are you” (89:26 [MT 89:27]), with Yahweh promising to “give him as the firstborn, the most high of the kings of earth” (89:27 [MT 89:28]).

In addition to engaging the beginning of the Psalter (the links with Ps 2), Psalm 89 also recalls the end of Book 3 by means of its interaction with themes from Ps 72. The prayer in Ps 72 entails oppressors being

crushed (דכא, 72:4), and Ps 89:23 has Yahweh promising to crush his foes (כתת). The prayer in 72:8 is for the son to reign “from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth,” and in 89:25 (MT 89:26) Yahweh promises, “I will put his hand on the sea, and on the river his right hand.” Both Pss 72 and 89 indicate that the king from David’s line will reign as long as the moon continues to shine (72:5; 89:37 [MT 89:38]). Standing at the end of books, 72 and 89 both conclude with doxologies (72:18–19; 89:52 [MT 89:53]).

For the literary structure of Books 2 and 3, see “The Literary Structure and Meaning of the Psalter” in the introduction. For the flow of thought in Pss 73–89, see the “Context” section on each psalm in this unit.

Psalm 73

OVERVIEW AND STRUCTURE OF PSALM 73

The movements in thought in Ps 73 seem to be marked out by the psalm’s three instances of the particle ךָא , which I have rendered “surely” at 73:1, 13, and 18 (CSB renders “indeed” at 73:1 and 18 but leaves the instance at 73:13 untranslated; ESV is similar with “truly” at 73:1 and 18 but ךָא untranslated at 73:13).¹ Cole argues persuasively that Ps 73 is linked by key words (see below) with Ps 72 and responds to the absence of what is prayed for there.²

The psalm opens with an affirmation of God’s goodness to Israel (73:1), but the psalmist explains how he almost stumbled over the prosperity of the wicked (73:2–12). His explanation of how he almost stumbled in 73:2 opens with וואני , “But as for me.” The psalm then closes with an affirmation of God’s goodness to the psalmist personally, a phrase that also begins with וואני , “But as for me” (73:28).

In Ps 73:1–12 the psalmist reflects on how he was tempted when he beheld the shalom of the wicked. He then relates in 73:13–17 how he was tempted to betray God’s people by envying the wicked, until he entered God’s holy places and perceived the end that awaits the enemies of God. Psalm 73 concludes in 73:18–28 with a resolution of the problem that

¹ Robert L. Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III (Psalms 73–89)*, JSOTSup 307 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 17; Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

² Cole, *Shape and Message of Book III*, 15–27.

tempted the psalmist in the opening section, describing the destruction of the wicked and the goodness of God's presence.³

73:1–12, The Problem: The Shalom of the Wicked

73:13–17, The Psalmist's Struggle

73:18–28, The Solution: Judgment and Salvation

SCRIPTURE

CSB

A psalm of Asaph.

¹ God is indeed good to Israel,
to the pure in heart.

² But as for me, my feet almost slipped;
my steps nearly went astray.

³ For I envied the arrogant;
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

⁴ They have an easy time until they die,
and their bodies are well fed.

⁵ They are not in trouble like others;
they are not afflicted like most people.

⁶ Therefore, pride is their necklace,
and violence covers them like a
garment.

⁷ Their eyes bulge out from fatness;
the imaginations of their hearts run
wild.

⁸ They mock, and they speak
maliciously;
they arrogantly threaten oppression.

⁹ They set their mouths against
heaven,
and their tongues strut across the
earth.

¹⁰ Therefore his people turn to them
and drink in their overflowing words.

¹¹ The wicked say, "How can God
know?
Does the Most High know everything?"

¹² Look at them—the wicked!

Author's translation

¹ A Psalm of Asaph.

Surely God is good to Israel, to the
pure of heart.

² But as for me, my feet almost rolled;
like nothing my steps were poured
out,

³ for I envied the boastful. I saw the
shalom of the wicked:

⁴ for there are no bonds to their
death, and fat is their belly.

⁵ In the trouble of man they have no
part, and with man they are not
plagued.

⁶ Therefore his necklace is majesty; a
garment of violence covers them.

⁷ Their eye goes out from fatness; the
imaginings of the heart cross
over.

⁸ They mock and speak in evil.
Oppression from on high they
speak.

⁹ They have set their mouth against
the heavens, and their tongue
walks the earth.

¹⁰ Therefore his people return here,
and the full waters are drained out
for them.

¹¹ And they said, "How does God
know? And is there knowledge with
the Most High?"

¹² Behold, these are the wicked, and
the ones at ease of the age:

³ For the use of Ps 73 in Job, see Will Kynes, *My Psalm Has Turned into Weeping: Job's Dialogue with the Psalms*, BZAW 437 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 161–79.

They are always at ease,
and they increase their wealth.

¹³ Did I purify my heart
and wash my hands in innocence for
nothing?

¹⁴ For I am afflicted all day long
and punished every morning.

¹⁵ If I had decided to say these things
aloud,

I would have betrayed your people.

¹⁶ When I tried to understand all this,
it seemed hopeless

¹⁷ until I entered God's sanctuary.

Then I understood their destiny.

¹⁸ Indeed, you put them in slippery
places;

you make them fall into ruin.

¹⁹ How suddenly they become a
desolation!

They come to an end, swept away by
terrors.

²⁰ Like one waking from a dream,
Lord, when arising, you will despise
their image.

²¹ When I became embittered
and my innermost being was
wounded,

²² I was stupid and didn't understand;
I was an unthinking animal toward
you.

²³ Yet I am always with you;
you hold my right hand.

²⁴ You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me up in
glory.

²⁵ Who do I have in heaven but you?
And I desire nothing on earth but you.

²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart,
my portion forever.

²⁷ Those far from you will certainly
perish;

they have increased wealth.

¹³ Surely in vain I cleansed my
heart and washed my hands in
innocence.

¹⁴ And I was plagued all the day, and
my reprimands every morning.

¹⁵ If I said, I will recount it like this,
behold, I would have betrayed the
generation of your sons.

¹⁶ And when I considered to know
this, it was trouble in my eyes,

¹⁷ until I went to the holy places of
God.

I understood their end.

¹⁸ Surely you put them in slippery
places. You cause them to fall in
deceptions.

¹⁹ How they have suddenly become
desolations! They come to an end,
finished by terrors.

²⁰ Like a dream on waking, my Lord,
on rising their image you despise.

²¹ When my heart was embittered, and
in my kidneys I was pierced,

²² then I was brutish and did not
know: like beasts I was with you.

²³ Yet I am continually with you. You
have taken hold of my right hand.

²⁴ In your counsel lead me, and
afterward in glory receive me.

²⁵ Who is for me in the heavens? And
with you, I have no desire on the
earth.

²⁶ Spent are my flesh and my heart.
The rock of my heart and my portion
to the age is God.

²⁷ For behold, those who leave you
will perish.

You annihilate all who play the whore
from you.

²⁸ But as for me, the nearness of God is
my good.

you destroy all who are unfaithful to
you.

²⁸But as for me, God's presence is my
good.

I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,
so I can tell about all you do.

I have set my refuge in my Lord
Yahweh, to recount all his works.

CONTEXT: VERBAL AND THEMATIC LINKS WITH SURROUNDING PSALMS

As noted above, Ps 73 responds to the prayer of Ps 72. The ideal situation prayed for in Ps 72 meets wicked reality in Ps 73, causing the psalmist no little consternation. The reuse of Ps 72 terminology in Ps 73 brings out this dynamic. Whereas Ps 72:3 and 7 contain prayers for the shalom of God's people, Ps 73:3 objects to the shalom of the wicked. In 72:14 the future king redeems his people from "violence," but in 73:6 the wicked have covered themselves with a garment of "violence." In 72:4 David prays that the king will crush the "oppressor," while in 73:8 the proud speak "oppression." The reuse of key terms from Ps 72 indicates that the psalmist's perplexity in Ps 73 (note his confessed lack of understanding in 73:16, 22) arises from the dissonance between what was prayed for in Ps 72 and his perception of the way things are in Ps 73.⁴

Psalm 73 is the first of a series of psalms of Asaph (Pss 73–83; Ps 50 is also attributed to him). See the opening comments in the exposition of Ps 50 for what the OT says elsewhere about Asaph. Second Chronicles 29:30 describes the Levites praising Yahweh with the words of David and Asaph, which seems to indicate that the psalms with "Of David" and "Of Asaph" in their superscriptions were understood to have been written by David and Asaph (see further "The Superscriptions of the Psalms" in the introduction). The placement of these Asaph psalms (Pss 73–83) after the prayers of David have ended (72:20) strengthens the impression that the reign of David has come to an end, and, in the Psalter's impressionistic narrative, the story shifts to the period of Israel's history between David and exile in Ps 89. The placement of these psalms after the end of David's prayers may also indicate that Asaph's ministry continued into the reign of Solomon.

⁴ Cole, *Shape and Message of Book III*, 15–16.