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# THE UNHEARD VOICES IN PSALMS 90, 91, AND 92

## ABSTRACT

A close reading of Psalms 90, 91, and 92, along with an understanding of the “storyline” of the Psalter as a whole, reveals “voices” within the three psalms that go largely unnoticed in translations of the Masoretic Text. This article outlines the placement of Psalms 90, 91, and 92 in the overall “shape” of the book of Psalms, examines their interconnectedness, discusses in detail various key Hebrew words and phrases, and demonstrates that we may hear within the three psalms the often neglected voices of Israelite women who were key actors in the Exodus from Egypt, the Babylonian Exile, and the Postexilic community.

## 1. INTRODUCTORY WORDS: THE SHAPE AND SHAPING OF THE PSALTER

As a preface to this examination of the unheard voices in Psalms 90, 91, and 92, a few preliminary remarks are in order. I adhere to the school of biblical interpretation known as “canonical criticism”, which maintains that every biblical book has a particular shape, a particular storyline, that is the result of purposeful shaping by communities of faith. The Book of Psalms has, throughout the millennia, been viewed as something of a miscellaneous collection of the songs of ancient Israel.

Over the past thirty years, scholars have proposed that the book is not a haphazard collection of psalms, but a considered compilation, one that tells a story, just as do the Books of,

for instance, Genesis, Exodus, Kings, and so forth. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholars “hinted” at some kind of purposeful compiling of the book. In his book *Symbolae ad Psalmos illustrado isogogica*, Delitzsch (1846) paid attention to connections between consecutive psalms. He concluded that the arrangement of the Davidic psalms – reflective of the Davidic covenant – provided the key, the unifying motif, of the book.

Alexander (1865) devoted a major section of his introduction to the Psalms to a treatment of the coherence of the psalms within the book. Like Delitzsch, he determined that the Davidic covenant was a unifying theme of the book. He attributed the juxtaposition of various psalms, one with another, to

resemblance or identity of subject or historical occasion, or in some remarkable coincidence of general form or of particular expressions (Alexander 1865:ix).

In his work titled *Wisdom as a hermeneutical construct: A study in the sapientializing of the Old Testament*, Sheppard (1980:142) observed that Psalms 1 and 2 act as prefaces to the Psalter; that close lexical ties exist between the two psalms, and that David’s identification with Psalm 2 demonstrates his full embrace of the ideals of Psalm 1:

[T]he Psalter has gained, among its other functions, the use as a source for wisdom reflection and a model of prayers based on such pious interpretation of the Torah.

In his *Praise and lament in the Psalms*, Westermann (1981:250-258) observed a movement in the Psalter from lament (at its beginning) to praise (at its end), and identified royal psalms as an important aspect of the Psalter’s framework. In his 1982 *Psalms and the sons of Korah*, Goulder (1982:8) wrote:

[I]t is entirely proper to begin the study of the Psalter with the expectation that it will be an ordered and not an assorted collection; or, at the very least, that it will contain elements that were rationally ordered.

But the seminal work of Wilson (1985:v), published in *The editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, in the SBL Dissertation Series, provided new avenues for the study of the Book of Psalms. Wilson argues that the Psalter’s five books told a “story” to the ancient Israelite – a story about their past history, their present situation, and their hope for the future. He further maintains that the “shaping” of the book is set in the postexilic period as an encouragement to the people living under foreign rule (Persians,

Greeks, then Romans) to maintain their identity as the people of Yahweh in the new world of empires in which they found themselves.

In the opinion of those who adhere to “canonical criticism”, the “shape” or the “story” of the Psalter rehearses the history of Israel from the time of the reign of King David to the period of the divided kingdoms, to the destruction of both the Northern and Southern kingdoms, to the exile in Babylon, and finally to the postexilic period’s return of the people to Jerusalem – thus the whole sweep of Israel’s history from the Books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles to Ezra and Nehemiah.

Book I, Psalms 1-41, begins with words encouraging fidelity to the Torah (Ps. 1:2) and continues with words of warning to the nations and their rulers to recognise the God of Israel as king over all (Ps. 2:10-11). Readers thus enter the Psalter with two admonitions: diligently study and delight in the Torah (Ps. 1) and acknowledge God as sovereign (Ps. 2). It continues with the story of the reign of King David. Thirty-nine psalms “of David” make up Book I of the Psalter.<sup>1</sup> The overwhelming majority of them (59%) are laments and provide insight into every facet of David’s life – the king, the human being, the warrior, the parent, and the servant of the Lord.

Book II, Psalms 42-72, also contains many laments. But not all of them are attributed to David. The Korahites, who were, according to the Book of Chronicles, temple singers during the reigns of David and Solomon,<sup>2</sup> mix their voices with David in singing the laments of Book II. Thus, while David is still very much a presence, other voices are heard.

Psalms 72, the closing psalm of the Book, is one of only two psalms in the Psalter ascribed to Solomon.<sup>3</sup> Kraus (1993:76-77) describes it as a collection of wishes and prayers for the well-being of the king, likely used at an enthronement ceremony for a king in Jerusalem. Childs (1979:16) further suggests that the canonical placement of Psalm 72 indicates that the psalm “is ‘for’ Solomon, David’s son and successor, offered ‘by’ David”. Book II ends with the words: “The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended” (Ps. 72:20), indicating further the end of the reign of David and a new era in the life of Israel under the reign of David’s successor, Solomon.

Book III, Psalms 73-89, opens with “A psalm of Asaph” (Ps. 73). Like the sons of Korah, Asaph was, according to the Book of Chronicles, a temple

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1 While Psalm 10 does not have a superscription, it is closely tied to Psalm 9. Psalm 33, also without a superscription, is closely tied to Psalm 32. See Craigie & Tate (2004:113-128, 263-276).

2 See 1 Chronicles 6:31-37 and 9:19.

3 The other is one of the Songs of Ascents located in Book V, Psalm 127.

singer during the reigns of David and Solomon.<sup>4</sup> Fifteen of the seventeen psalms in Book III are attributed to Asaph and the sons of Korah. Only one psalm, Psalm 86, is attributed to David. The focus is now on David's descendants, who will determine the future of ancient Israel. We thus move to the period of Solomon's rule, the divided kingdoms of Israel in the north and Judah in the south, and to the ultimate demise of the northern kingdom at the hands of the Assyrians. Community laments and community hymns dominate Book III of the Psalter. The voice of David, the individual, gives way to the voice of the community of faith, which is attempting to make sense of all that is happening around them.

Psalm 89 closes Book III. It begins, in verses 1-37, with praise to God for the good provisions to David, the king of God's choosing. But the psalm takes a sudden turn in verse 38, asking God why he has now "spurned and rejected the chosen king", "renounced the covenant made with Israel", and "removed the scepter from the king's hands" (NRSV, vv. 38, 39, 44). At the end of the Psalm, we read: "LORD, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?" (NRSV).

Post-722 BCE, when the Assyrians destroyed Samaria and scattered the population of the northern kingdom of Israel, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and took a major portion of Judah's population into captivity in Babylon in 587 BCE. The nations of Israel and Judah were no more; Davidic kingship was ended, and the people were exiled from their homeland.

Book III 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?"

Book IV, Psalms 90-106, includes the three psalms that are the focus of this article. The opening psalm of the Book, Psalm 90, is titled "A prayer of Moses, the Man of God". It is the only psalm in the Psalter so designated. The person of Moses dominates not only in Psalm 90, but also in the entire Book IV. Besides Book IV, Moses is mentioned only once in Psalm 77:21; in Book IV, he is referred to seven times (elsewhere in the Psalter in 90:1; 99:6; 103:7; 105:26; 106:16, 23, 32).<sup>5</sup>

The community of Israelites in exile in Babylon cannot effect a return to the days of King David. They can only move forward. In Book IV, Moses, who long predated the time of Davidic kingship, leads the people in exile

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4 1 Chronicles 6:39 and 25:1, 2 and 2 Chronicles 5:12 state that Asaph was a descendant of Levi, part of one of the great families or guilds of musicians and singers in pre-exilic Israel. See Nasuti (1988).

5 Tate (1990:xxvi) describes Book IV as a "Moses Book".

in Babylon and points the way forward, just as he did during the time of the Wilderness Wanderings. At the center of Book IV lies an extended collection of Enthronement psalms, celebrating God as sovereign, as king, over the people rather than a king of the Davidic line. Just as the people during the Wilderness Wanderings had no human king to rule over and protect them and had to rely on God's rule and protection, so now in exile in Babylon, as subject peoples to a foreign rule, the people are called on to acknowledge God as sovereign – as ruler and protector – once again.

At the end of Book IV, both Psalms 105 and 106 recount the history of God's dealings with the Israelite people. Psalm 105, a hymn of praise, recalls for the people how God provided for, protected, and sustained them throughout their history. Psalm 106 is, however, a community lament, reminding the people of their unfaithfulness to the God who protected and sustained them throughout their history. The people in exile in Babylon are thus called to reflect on, and learn from their history as they move forward in the life situation in which they find themselves.

Book IV ends very differently from Book III. Recall that the closing psalm of Book III, Psalm 89, hurls questions to God about why ancient Israel is suffering in its present situation: "How long, O LORD? Where is your steadfast love of old, which you swore to David?" The end of Book IV offers a simple petition to God to "save us and gather us from among the nations that we may give thanks to your holy name" (v. 47).

In 539 BCE, the Persian army, under the leadership of Cyrus II, captured Babylon. In the following year, Cyrus issued a decree allowing captive peoples to return to their homelands, to rebuild, and to resume their religious practices. The repatriated peoples would, however, remain part of the vast Persian Empire and be subject to Persian law. Cyrus' decree meant that the Israelites could rebuild their temple and continue their religious practices, but they could not restore their nation-state under the leadership of a king of the line of David.

Book V, Psalms 107-150, concludes the book of the Psalms. It is set, according to the storyline of the Psalter, in the postexilic period. It opens with Psalm 107, a hymn celebrating God's graciousness in delivering various groups of people from perilous circumstances, almost certainly placed purposefully in answer to the people's petition at the end of Psalm 106. Verses 2 and 3 of Psalm 107 state:

Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,  
those he redeemed from trouble  
and gathered from the east and from the west,  
from the north and from the south. (NRSV)

Beginning with Psalm 108, David, whose voice has been virtually absent from the Psalter since his final words in Book Two (Ps. 72:20), appears once again. Psalms 108-110, 122; 124; 131, and 138-145 are “of David”. The last psalm of David in Book V, Psalm 145, celebrates the kingship of God over the Israelite community of faith and over all creation with these words in verses 11-13:

They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,  
and tell of your power,  
to make known to all people your mighty deeds,  
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.  
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
and your dominion endures throughout all generations. (NRSV)

The story of the shaping of the Psalter is the story of the shaping of survival. The Psalter was, along with the other texts that make up the Hebrew scriptures, a constitutive document of identity for postexilic Israel. Within that collection of texts, the postexilic community of faith found a new structure for existence and identity that transcended traditional concepts of nationhood – with king, court, and all the trappings. With God as sovereign, the Israelite people could survive as a separate and identifiable entity within the vast Persian, Greek, and Roman empires, of which they were a part.

## 2. PSALMS 90-92

We now turn to the topic of this article, “The unheard voices in Psalms 90-92”. Psalms 90-92 open Book IV, which, according to the Psalter’s storyline, is set in the exilic period of Israel’s history. While the exilic period is the “storyline” context for Book Four, it calls upon a postexilic audience, for whom the Psalter was “shaped”, to recall the Wilderness Wandering period of ancient Israel’s history. We must, therefore, hold in tension three key time periods in the life of ancient Israel as we examine these texts: a post-exilic audience, hearing a story set, according to the storyline of the Psalter, in the period of the Babylonian exile, and calling its hearers to remember the Wilderness Wanderings.

Scholars such as Howard (1993), Wallace (2007:18-31) and Creach (1996:93-96) have long recognised a connectedness between Psalms 90, 91, and 92, one that includes wisdom motifs, concern with the human condition, and finding security in Yahweh. In fact, Zenger (2000:167-168) considers Psalms 90-92 to be “*eine Komposition*” that is linked by keyword motifs, by questions in one psalm that are answered in a following psalm, and a Mosaic *inclusio*.

As stated earlier, Psalm 90 is the only psalm in the Psalter attributed to Moses and echoes many of the words uttered by Moses in the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. In Exodus 32:12, for example, in the aftermath of the Golden Calf incident, we read that Moses pleads with God to “turn” (שׁוּב) and “change your mind” (נַחֵם). We encounter the same Hebrew words in verse 13 of Psalm 90, “turn” (שׁוּב) and “change your mind” (נַחֵם). Freedman (1985:59) suggests that

the composer of Psalm 90 based it [the psalm] on the golden calf episode in Exodus 32 and imagined in poetic form how Moses may have spoken in the circumstances of Exodus 32.

In addition, the words of Psalm 90:1, “You have been our dwelling place in all generations” echo Moses’ words in Deuteronomy 32:7; and the words of Deuteronomy 32:18 are reiterated in Psalm 90:2:

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God (NRSV).

Whereas Freedman saw Psalm 90 as inspired by the golden calf incident in Exodus 32, Tate (1990:438) maintains that

the similarities of language between Ps 90 and the song of Moses in Deut 31 and 32 was probably the starting point for either the composition of Psalm 90 and/or its assignment to Moses.

Whatever the source of inspiration for Psalm 90, it is undeniably linked to the story of Moses and the Wilderness Wanderings of the Israelites.

On the surface, then, Psalm 90 seems to be very “nationalistic” and “male (that is, Moses)-oriented”, recalling the events that led to the formation of Israel during the Wilderness Wanderings and the hope of national survival during the Babylonian Exile – bearing in mind the three time frames for understanding Book IV of the Psalter – the postexilic audience, recalling the exilic period in Babylon, but called to remember the Wilderness Wandering period after escaping from Egypt.

In addition, and this is crucial to a balanced reading and appropriating of the text, we must bear in mind that both men and women endured the hardships of the exodus from Egypt and the exile in Babylon and carried the memories of them. Miriam the prophetess, sister of Moses and Aaron – though mentioned only sporadically in the biblical text<sup>6</sup> – was, I suggest, an ever-present reality among, especially, the women and children, during the escape from Egypt and the Wilderness Wanderings, as were other strong women. Those who travelled through the Wilderness undoubtedly included women heavy with pregnancy, enduring childbirth, nursing infants, tending to crying toddlers, and worrying about the source of the next meal. I maintain that we are permitted to hear women’s voices within the texts of Psalms 90-92 *and* to hear their words with women’s ears.

## 2.1 Psalm 90

The words of Psalm 90:2 are particularly evocative. The New Revised Standard Version translates the verse as “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world”, while the Common English Bible translates it as “Before the mountains were born, before you birthed the earth and the inhabited world”. The word translated as “formed” and “birthed” is from the Hebrew verbal root חוּל/חַיִּל.<sup>7</sup>

The translation history of the verb חַיִּל in Psalm 90 is an interesting study. The Septuagint, along with the translations of the Hebrew Bible rendered by Aquila, Symmachus, the Targums, and the Vulgate alter the active voice of חוּל/חַיִּל – translated as “you formed the earth and the world” – to a passive voice, translated as “the earth and world were formed”. Boring (2001:123) posits that an active translation of חוּל/חַיִּל by early translators might have been suggestive of Yahweh as what he terms “earth mother” may have “sounded too much like Canaanite or Greek fertility goddesses to the LXX [and other early] translators”.<sup>8</sup> And so, the translations altered the active voice of the verb to a passive one – “were formed” rather than “you formed” – less of an affront to those sensitive to the distinction between the God of Israel and the gods of surrounding nations.

The concerns of the Septuagint translators, however, were not the concerns of later translators. While many of the latter maintained the

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6 Exodus 2 and 15; Numbers 12 and 20.

7 Deuteronomy 32:18 contains similar language: “You forgot the God who gave you birth” (NRSV).

8 Boring quotes Lacocque (1998:iii), who writes: “To think that the history of a text comes to an end with the final redaction is like giving the obituary of a living person.” And he adds the words of Frye (1969:427), who maintains that every text is a “picnic to which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning”.



Masoretic Text's active verbal aspect – making the earth and the world the object of the verb rather than the subject, they failed to convey fully the rich meaning of חוּל/חַיִּל in Psalm 90. English translations, beginning with the Geneva Bible of 1560 and continuing with the Common English Bible of 2011 render the verb in the active voice, but variously as “you formed the earth and world (AV, NRSV)”, “you brought forth (NIV)”, “you gave birth to (NASB)”, and “you birthed (CEB)”.

While חוּל/חַיִּל has a wide range of meanings in the Hebrew Bible, all of its occurrences have to do with twirling, spinning, and writhing, either in childbirth,<sup>9</sup> pain, or dance.<sup>10</sup> In the poetic parallelism context of Psalm 90:2, חוּל/חַיִּל undoubtedly refers to the birthing process and depicts the creator God writhing in childbirth, bringing forth the world. Tate (1990:431) translates this portion of verse 2 as “You travailed (חַיִּל) with the earth and the world”, thereby coming as close as any translation this author has encountered to the true sentiment of the words of verse 2 of Psalm 90.

As discussed earlier, the object of the verb חַיִּל is אֶרֶץ וְתֵבֶל, translated in the Common English Bible as “the earth and the inhabited world”. The word “earth” (אֶרֶץ) is the word used in conjunction with “heavens” (שָׁמַיִם) in the creation story in Genesis 1 to describe the universal creation. The word “world” (תֵּבֶל), on the other hand, tends to connote the places on the earth of habitation – places of solidity and permanence, where plants, animals, and human beings reside together in relationship with one another (Fabry & Van Meeteren 2006:553-564).<sup>11</sup>

Verse 3's lament employs two terms to refer to humanity, namely אָנוּשׁ and בְּנֵי-אָדָם. Both terms are used in two other psalms musing over humanity's place in creation (Pss 8:5 and 144:3). While Psalms 8 and 144 wonder at God's concern for humanity, Psalm 90 muses over the fragility of life – Yahweh turns human beings “back to dust”.

In verses 4-6 of Psalm 90, the psalm singers acknowledge that God's concept of time is not their own; God sweeps the years of humanity away like grass that flourishes in the morning and that fades and withers in the evening. Further, in verses 9 and 10, the psalmists state that “our years come to an end like a sigh ... even then their span is only toil and trouble, they are soon gone” (NRSV).

9 See Deuteronomy 32:18; Isaiah 13:8; 23:4; 26:17, 18; 45:10; 51:2; 54:1; 66:7, 8; Jeremiah 4:31; Job 15:7; 39:1; Psalm 51:5 (7); Proverbs 8:24, 25; 25:23.

10 See Exodus 15:20; Deuteronomy 2:25; Isaiah 23:5; Jeremiah 4:19; 5:3, 22; 51:29; Joel 2:6.

11 See, for example, Job 18:18 and 37:12; Psalm 24:1 and 98:7; Isaiah 13:11 and 26:9; Nehemiah 1:5.

While all members of the Israelite community were concerned with the survival of the people, verses 3-10 of Psalm 90 highlight the vulnerability of the yet-to-be-born, the newborn, and young children and their mothers during difficult times such as the Wilderness Wanderings, the Babylonian exile, and postexilic Judah (Yehud) – the hidden voices, if you will, who were important keys to the survival of ongoing generations.

The central focus of Psalm 90, in the opinion of many scholars, is verses 11-12.<sup>12</sup> In this instance, the psalmist acknowledges the power (עֹז) of God's anger and requests of God, according to the New Revised Standard Version and the Common English Bible, to “teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart (לֵב בָּבִי חָכְמָה)”. The phrase “a wise heart” is unique to Psalm 90 in the Hebrew Bible, but, interestingly, the phrase “wise of heart” (חָכְמָה לֵב) is used four times in the Exodus narratives to describe the craftspeople – both men and women – who constructed the tabernacle and fashioned its furnishings: “All of the skilled (חָכְמָה לֵב) women spun cloth with their hands, and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and deep red yarns and fine linen” (NRSV) (Ex. 35:25).<sup>13</sup>

This author maintains that the words of Psalm 90:12 – “and we will approach what we do with a wise heart” – suggest that the people were being admonished to be content with whatever tasks and endeavors confronted them on a daily basis. Zenger (2005:423) writes: “If ‘wisdom’ means the art of living, then the ability here asked of God to say yes to life and to live that yes (in the midst of the many things that deserve a no) is Wisdom’s art of living par excellence.” The closing words of Psalm 90 appear to validate such an understanding of “a wise heart”. In verse 14, the people ask God to “satisfy us” (שָׂבַע) “so that we may rejoice” (רִנֵּנוּ). Then verse 17 requests that God, according to the New Revised Standard Version, “Prosper for us the work of our hands – O prosper the work of our hands!”. The word translated “prosper”, in this instance, is בָּנִן, which actually means “to establish, set up, fix in place”. The singers of Psalm 90 were thus not asking God for prosperity, but rather for a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment for the works of their hands, whatever those works might be for the women (and men) in the time of the Wilderness Wanderings, the exile in Babylon, and in postexilic Judah (Yehud).

## 2.2 Psalm 91

It appears that Psalm 91 offers an answer to the plea of the psalm singers to God in Psalm 90:14 to “satisfy (שָׂבַע) us in the morning”. The psalm

12 See, for instance, Hossfeld & Zenger (2005:422).

13 See also Exodus 28:3; 31:6, and 36:1, 2.

opens in verses 1-2 with the vivid imagery of a God who shelters, delivers, and provides refuge. Verse 1 states that the one who lives in the shelter of the Most High (עַלְיוֹן) will abide in the shadow of the Almighty (שׁדַּי). References to God as “Almighty” occur almost exclusively in the Genesis stories and in the Book of Job,<sup>14</sup> but occur only here and in Psalm 68:15 in the book of Psalms. What is the significance of the use of the term in Psalm 91? The root of the word is שׁדַּי, which can mean either “mountain” or “breast”. While some scholars suggest that the basic meaning of the word “Almighty – Shaddai” is “breast” (Lutzky 1998:15-36; Trible 1978:60-62), others maintain that “mountain” is the referent (Kraus 1993:52-53) – and thus understand “Shaddai” as “God of the mountains”.

If we examine the use of the word in its context in Psalms 90-92 by moving backward to Psalm 90 and then forward to Psalm 91, we may discover the significance of the use of “Shaddai” as an epithet for God in Psalm 91. Psalm 90:2 depicts God birthing (חָלַל/חָלַל) the earth and the world, and in verses 3, 12, and 14, the psalmists request that God give “human beings (אֲנוֹשׁ)” and “mortals (בְּנֵי-אָדָם)” a “wise heart” (לֵב בָּר חֲכָמָה) and that God “satisfy (שָׂבַע) humanity”.

Thus, we are permitted to understand the epithet “Shaddai” in Psalm 91:1 as a reference to the God who birthed the earth and world (Ps. 90:2) and now suckles it – satisfies it – as it learns to have a “wise heart” (Ps. 90:12). References that tie nurturing breasts to God and God’s goodness are numerous in the Hebrew Bible. Jacob’s deathbed blessing of Joseph in Genesis 49:25 connects the blessing of Shaddai with the breasts (שׁדַּיִם) and the womb (רֶחֶם). In Isaiah 66:11, Zion is a “consoling breast” (שׁדַּי). Naomi states in Ruth 1:20-21 that “Shaddai (שׁדַּי) has dealt bitterly with me and brought calamity upon me” – a reflection perhaps of her now “barren” state. In Psalm 22:9, the psalmist says to God: “You kept me safe on my mother’s breasts (שׁדַּי אִמִּי). On you I was cast from my birth (רֶחֶם).” Job 21:20 suggests that the children of the wicked will “drink the wrath” of “Shaddai” (שׁדַּי).

Verses 3 and 4 of Psalm 91 employ avian imagery to depict the dangers that especially threaten young birds – the fowler’s snare and the threat of predators – to provide assurance that God will shelter the psalmist with protective wings (כַּנְפֵּי־אֵל) and pinions and ensure safety and nurturing

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14 The word occurs in reference to Yahweh six times in Genesis (17:1; 28:3; 43:14) and twenty-three times in the book of Job (6:4; 11:7; 22:26). It is interesting to note that the only reference to God as Shaddai outside the biblical text is found in the Deir Allah inscriptions.

(Hossfeld & Zenger 2005:430).<sup>15</sup> While there are varying understandings of winged-god images in the ancient Near East (LeMon 2010), in the context of Psalms 90 and 91, Yahweh's winged protection in 91:4 is best understood as the protection a mother gives to the child whom she has borne, suckled, and taught to live with wisdom in a world where adversity presents itself on every side. The psalmist will not fear, in the words of verses 5 and 6 of Psalm 91, "the terror and pestilence of the night" or "the arrow and destruction of the day".

The words of Psalm 91:7-13 continue the promise of protection by the birthing, nurturing God. They state that the wicked will be punished (v. 8), but those who have taken refuge in God will have no evil come near their tent (v. 10), will not dash their foot against a stone (v. 12), and will tread on the lion and the adder (v. 13). McCann (1996:1047-1048) writes: "The psalmist affirms that no place, no time, no circumstance that befalls us is beyond God's ability to protect us". God's repeated promise to care for and protect the psalm singers leads to the declaration in Psalm 91:16 that God will finally "satisfy (שָׂבַע)" – the very request made by the psalmists in 90:14.

## 2.3 Psalm 92

Psalm 92 opens with the words: "It is good ... to sing praises to your name, O Most High (עֲלֵיּוֹן)." The epithet for God in this opening verse of Psalm 92, "O Most High (עֲלֵיּוֹן)", is the same used of God in the opening verse of Psalm 91: "You who live in the shelter of the Most High (עֲלֵיּוֹן)." The reference to God's "name" (שֵׁם) in 92:1 echoes Psalm 91's closing words: "I will protect those who know my name." (v. 14). In verse 2, the psalm singers celebrate Yahweh's steadfast love in the morning (בִּקְרֹן) and Yahweh's faithfulness by night (לַיְלֵוֹת), confirming Psalm 91:5's promise of protection from the terror of the night (לַיְלֵוֹת) and the arrow by day (יּוֹמָם).

Psalm 92:4 provides a tie to both Psalms 90 and 91, in which the psalm singers declare that they will "sing for joy, rejoice" (רִנְּנוּ). In Psalm 90:14, the psalmists ask God to "satisfy" (שָׂבַע) them so that they may "rejoice" (רִנְּנוּ). In the closing verse of Psalm 91, God promises to "satisfy" (שָׂבַע), thus enabling the singers of Psalm 92 to now "rejoice" (רִנְּנוּ).

An interesting occurrence of the verb "rejoice" (רִנְּנוּ) is found in the Book of Proverbs. In Proverbs 1:20 and 8:3, (Woman) Wisdom "cries out" (רִנְּנוּ), proclaiming her words of admonition to those who would listen. In addition, references to the "dullard" (בֵּעֵר), the "stupid" (בִּסִּיל), and the "wicked" (רָשָׁעִים) in Psalm 92:6 and 7 are terms used frequently in the

15 The image of God's sheltering wings occurs six times in the Psalter (Pss 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4). See also Matthew 23:37.

Book of Proverbs.<sup>16</sup> The singer of Psalm 92 may have used these words purposefully in order to tie the words of verse 4 not only to the pleas of the psalmists in Psalm 90, but also to the admonitions of (Woman) Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs. Psalm 90:12 requests of God “a wise heart”. Wisdom provides that path, but the dullard, the fool, and the wicked cannot know.

Psalm 92:7 continues by stating that the wicked sprout like “grass” (עֵשֶׂב) and “evildoers” (פְּעֹלֵי אֹרֶךְ) “flourish” (צָוִיחַ), recalling the words of Psalm 90:5 and 6 that the years of the psalmist are like “grass” (דְּחַיִּיר) that “flourishes” (צָוִיחַ) in the morning, but fades and withers in the evening. But following the path of (Woman) Wisdom and achieving a “wise heart” results in a very different fate.

The words in Psalm 92, verse 12 and following are particularly intriguing from a gender standpoint. In this instance, the “righteous” (צַדִּיק), in contrast to the “dullard” (בְּעֵר), the “stupid” (בְּכֹסֵל), the “wicked” (רָשָׁעִים), and the “evildoers” (פְּעֹלֵי אֹרֶךְ) (92:6-7), are likened to the palm tree and the cedar of Lebanon. The palm tree and the cedar of Lebanon are common images of strength and longevity in the ancient Near East, set alongside one another in Psalm 92:12 in poetic parallelism.

The palm tree (תַּמָּר) is most likely the date palm (Patterson 2009:275), a long-lived tree that provided many staple items of the ancient Near Eastern diets of both human beings and animals as well as wood for various household projects. In the biblical text, the palm tree is a symbol of life-giving water. We read in Exodus 15:27 that just after crossing the Red Sea, the wandering Israelites came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees.<sup>17</sup> Tamar is also the name of three female biblical characters: the daughter-in law of Judah in Genesis 38; the daughter of David in 2 Samuel 13, and the daughter of Absalom in 2 Samuel 14.<sup>18</sup> The word is used in Song of Songs 7:7-8 as a metaphor for a desirable woman: “You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters ...” Judges 4:5 states that Deborah sat under a palm tree as she judged Israel.<sup>19</sup> The palm tree was often associated with the feminine and fertility (Shäfer 2002).

16 “Dullard” occurs in Proverbs 12:1 and 30:2; “fool” is found some fifty times in the book (see, for instance, 1:22; 9:13; 12:23; 17:21; 26:1; 29:11), and the very common “wicked” occurs over seventy times (see, for example, 3:33; 10:6; 12:5; 15:6; 21:4; 29:7).

17 See Exodus 15:27 and Numbers 33:9. See also Deuteronomy 34:3 (Jericho); Judges 1:16; 3:13.

18 See Genesis 38:6; 2 Samuel 13:1, and 2 Samuel 14:27.

19 As examples of judgements upon the people of Israel, see Isaiah 9:14 and Joel 1:12.

The cedars (ִרְאִ) of Lebanon convey a more masculine imagery. They were connected with longevity, majesty, and strength, and were symbols of royal power. King Hiram of Tyre sent wood from the cedars of Lebanon to build David's palace (2 Sam. 5:11; 7:2,7) and to Solomon for the construction of the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 5:6-10). The singer of Psalm 29 states: "The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon." (v. 5). In Song of Songs, the protagonist describes her lover's appearance as "like Lebanon, choice as the cedars" (5:15).<sup>20</sup> The palm tree and the cedar of Lebanon were two powerful images of the strength and resilience of the people of God – one feminine; the other masculine.

Psalm 92 continues, in verse 13, with an assurance that the righteous will be planted in the "house" of Yahweh and that they will thrive in its courtyards. Verse 14 promises that "in old age they will still produce fruit" and will be "always green and full of sap". The promised fertility of the righteous in Psalm 92 renders null and void Psalm 90's lament in verses 5 and 6 about the transience of human life.<sup>21</sup>

This writer suggests that those especially concerned with the vulnerability of the young, the newborn and the yet-to-be-born, that is, the survival of the exilic and postexilic communities, heard in the words of Psalm 92 assurance that the next generation would indeed survive, *if* the people embraced the "wise heart" requested by the singer of Psalm 90.

### 3. CONCLUDING WORDS

The Book of Psalms is a rich resource for discovering the so-often unheard feminine voice in the Hebrew Bible – an abundant well waiting to be drawn from. The book is made up of the heartfelt cries of the sorrow, joy, hope, and questions of humanity – all humanity – regardless of gender, socio-economic status, or ethnicity. The psalms are heartfelt songs to God from all peoples. We must thus tune our ears to hear the cries and celebrations of all peoples in the Book of Psalms.

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20 See also Judges 9:15; 2 Kings 19:23; Job 40:17; Psalms 104:16; 148:9; Isaiah 2:13; 14:8; 37:24.

21 See also Psalm 92:8.

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