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*Social Identity in Crisis: Toward a Theology of the Psalms of Asaph*

**Abstract:**

The twelve psalms attributed to Asaph reflect both elements of theological unity and diversity. Both their unified elements and divergent emphases have been explained in various ways. This paper argues that the Asaph psalms grew out of two contexts of crisis: the Assyrian invasion and Babylonian exile. With these contexts in mind, this paper utilizes a Social Identity Approach to analyze the function of the Asaphite psalms in shaping group identity in light of traumatic events.



**Keywords:** Asaph, Psalms 50, 73–83, Social Identity Theory, lament, exile

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Scholars have long observed some common characteristics of the twelve psalms with the authorship designation<sup>1</sup> אֲשָפֵר. First, these psalms display a remarkable resemblance to one another. There are many themes and emphases that tie the psalms together. Most of these were noted by previous generations of scholars. Franz Delitzsch provides a helpful list of these common characteristics in his 1890 commentary (1890: 123–124): (1) all are in the so-called Elohistic Psalter (Pss 42–83); (2) they have a judicial and prophetic character in the sense that God frequently addresses the nation directly and appears as a judge (Pss 50; 75; 82); (3) there is an emphasis on recounting history (Pss 74:13–15; 77; 78; 80:9–12; 81:5–8; 83:10–12); (4) there is a focus on Joseph over Judah, meaning the psalms highlight northern tribes over southern (Pss 77:16; 87:9, 67; 81:6; 80). And finally, these psalms frequently employ the metaphor of the people of Israel as a flock and God as a shepherd. All these observations have been grounded more thoroughly and linguistically by several subsequent studies (Nasuti 1983; Goulder 1995; Hossfeld and Zenger 2005).

This combination of elements has led most scholars to discern a sense of unity to the collection. However, there are several features of the psalms that push against their unity. First, they are clearly not written by the same person.<sup>2</sup> While there are a few individuals named “Asaph” in the Hebrew Bible, the likely referent intended by the psalms titles is the Asaph named in 1 Chr 6:39. The Chronicler indicates that he was appointed during David’s reign to oversee liturgical singers (1 Chr 15:16–18). Yet, some of the Asaphite psalms address the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and subsequent exile.<sup>3</sup> Second, the emphasis on Joseph and the northern tribes has led most scholars to assume that a portion of these psalms originated in the Northern Kingdom.<sup>4</sup> This northern provenance contrasts sharply with the clear emphasis on Zion, the temple, and the Davidic dynasty (73:17; 74:1–13; 76:2; 78:65–72; 79:1–4). Third, there are two contrasting ways in which the Asaphite psalms relate to the temple in Jerusalem. On the one hand they describe the temple as the locus of God’s presence and his revelation (e.g., 73:17). On the other hand, they lament its destruction by the Babylonians (74:1–3; 79:1–4).<sup>5</sup>

The history of scholarship on the Asaphite psalms can be summarized as a quest to find a way to explain both the unity and diversity displayed in these poems. Tradition-history approaches represented by Martin Buss have argued that their unity comes from the fact that they were written by “clergy or professional psalmists” (1963: 392). Their diversity is

explained by their compositional history. In Buss' view, the earlier Asaphite psalms were authored by "pre-exilic, largely North-Israelite Levites" (1963: 386). While the later Asaphite psalms were written after the fall of Samaria when "protodeuteronomic Levitical traditions continued in the south" (Buss 1963: 386). The shift to the south necessarily required some theological adjustment.

Canonical approaches to the psalms have provided another way in which to seek unity in this collection (McCann 1993; Mitchell 1997; Wilson 2005; Jones 2009; Robertson 2015). These studies have grown more methodologically sophisticated and have provided valuable insights into the message of the collection. In particular, there are two insightful conclusions offered by canonical approaches. First, there is not a clear and discernable narrative progression to the Asaphite psalms. Second, the exile is their most appropriate interpretive horizon. That is, as a collection, the Asaphite psalms seek to address the trauma of the destruction of the temple and the Babylonian exile. Christine Brown Jones' summary reflects both of these conclusion well, "the psalms of the collection move in ebb and flow of waves of despair over the reality that the wicked are still present and threatening and waves of remembrance that God delivered before and can/will deliver again...[these psalms are] an honest reflection of the confusion encountered after the destruction of the temple and the exile" (2009: 184).

While both conclusions are credible, they do not go far enough to explain the features of the Asaphite psalms as we have them. The exile is not the only interpretive horizon in view in these poems. Additionally, this perspective does not explain the northern focus of several of the psalms. Consequently, this article will argue that two critical social contexts provide insight into the shape and function of the Asaphite psalms: the fall of Samaria with the subsequent influx of refugees from the northern kingdom into Judah and the destruction of the temple and Babylonian exile. Both events created contexts in which first northern Israelites and then the Judeans had to negotiate their identity in light of traumatic events. A Social Identity Approach (SIA) provides several cognitive tools to help understand some important dynamics in this collection.

### **SIA as a Lens to Understand the Function of the Asaphite Psalms**

Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a scholarly construct was launched in a work edited by social psychologist Henri Tajfel (1978). Put simply, it argues that categorization as a member of a particular group leads to

social comparison and the desire for the positive distinctiveness of one's own group (King 2021: 12; Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2011: 50). SIT, therefore, analyses the ways in which social comparison is linked to social identity. Groups exist in the context of other groups, "[the] characteristics of one's group as a whole...achieve most of their significance in relation to perceived differences from other groups and the value connotation of these differences" (Tajfel 1978: 61–76, esp. 66).

One weakness of SIT was that it did not describe how groups are formed. This task was taken up by Tajfel's student John Turner, who developed Social Categorization Theory (SCT) (Turner 1982, 15–40). This theory defines what a group is and the socio-cognitive processes that support their creation and continued existence.

Together, these two theories have become known as a Social Identity Approach,<sup>6</sup> which has been subsequently adapted and applied to the study of ancient texts and widely used in New Testament studies (Baker 2012; Tucker and Baker 2016). While not as widely used as an interpretive tool in Old Testament studies, several helpful works have been published in the last decade (e.g., Bosman 2008; Hon Wan Lau 2011; Jonker 2016; Stargel 2018; King 2021). While space prohibits a full exposition of SIA, it will be utilized throughout this study.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Settings of the Asaphite Psalms**

There are two important historical dynamics to consider when reading the Asaphite psalms. The first is to recognize the massive social change engineered by the Assyrian incursions into Israel and Judah in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Richter 2014: 337–349; Rainey and Notley 2014: 225–245). The fall of Samaria created a string of refugees who fled to the South, which led to a population growth in Judah (Miller and Hayes 2006: 252, 390; Broshi 1974: 21–26). This immigration created a context in which the northern refugees would have to reassess their group identity. It is likely that these refugees would have viewed themselves as an outsider group in Judah. A brief review of the relevant history provides relevant context for this perspective: at the assembly of Shechem during the Rehoboam and Jeroboam split, deep regional differences surfaced between the northern and southern tribes (1 Kgs 12). This split was more than just political. The Israelites (NK) rejected the Davidic and Zion theologies (Miller and Hayes 2006: 268). Their cry of rebellion was, "What is our portion in David? And we *have* no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, Israel! Look to

your own house, David” (1 Kgs 12:16). Rapidly, Jeroboam set up new cultic shrines, religious festivals, priesthood, and began operating on a different calendar (1 Kgs 12:25-33) (Talmon 1958: 58–74).

The NK rapidly overshadowed the kingdom of Judah militarily, economically, and politically. It is probable that during the Omride era, Judah served as a vassal state to Israel (Miller and Hayes 2006: 286). Israel was placed geographically at the crossroads of important trade routes and had more international contact. There were many skirmishes between Judah and Israel, but three incidences are emblematic of the tension between the two kingdoms.

- Amaziah’s defeat at the hands of Joash (1 Kgs 14:2–21). After this significant Judean defeat, Joash assaulted Jerusalem and tore down a section of its wall. He also looted the temple and took political hostages with him back to Israel.
- The brief reign of Athaliah. She was related to the Omride royal line, likely the granddaughter of Omri and daughter of Ahab (2 Kgs. 8:18, 26; 2 Chr 21:6; 22:2) (Cogan and Tadmor 1988: 98). Educated under Jezebel, she was married to Jehoram of Judah. Upon the death of her son, she attempted to eradicate the Davidic line and exercise the kingship (2 Kgs. 11:1). This would be seen by Judah as another NK attempt to wrest royal control from the Davidic line.
- The Syro-Ephramite War.<sup>8</sup> This attack against Jerusalem by Rezin and Pekah illustrates well the political and cultural differences between the two kingdoms and is well represented in the biblical witness (2 Kgs. 15:29–30; 16:5–9; Isa 6:1–12:6; 2 Chr 28:5–21).

From this survey, it’s clear that while Israel and Judah had common ancestors and a shared history, in the generations following the split between the northern and southern tribes, clear divisions between the groups emerged.<sup>9</sup> If social identity is constructed through expressions of difference, then critical differences are displayed between Israel and Judah (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 4). In particular, the NK rejected the Davidic and Zion theologies that unified the kingdom during the Davidic/

Solomonic Era, the NK created a new cultic apparatus, the NK instituted a new liturgical calendar, there is a history of antagonism between the kingdoms, and (5) each kingdom having a sense of superiority to the other.

The second important setting to consider when reading the Asaphite psalms does not need as much exposition. It is the destruction of Jerusalem, the temple, and the fall of the Davidic line followed by Babylonian domination.<sup>10</sup> Both of these contexts provided several triggers for potential identity change as outlined by Social Identity theorists, including immigration, organization changes, social/political changes, and life transitions (Amiot, de la Sablonniere, Smith, and Smith 2015, 176). This does not mean that a change in social identity will or must take place. Only that these contexts provide a typical opportunity to do so. With the fall of the NK and subsequent immigration to Judah, several identity issues would be highlighted. How could these refugees be assimilated into Judean society? How would their sense of identity and the community they belong to need to change? Based on identity forming strategies present in the psalms, many Asaphite psalms appear to address this context (Pss 50, 73, 75, 76, 77, 78, 80, 81). Similarly, would the fall of Judah and the Babylonian exile necessitate a change in social identity? A different set of identity forming strategies are adopted for these psalms (Pss 74, 79, 82, 83).

### **Identity Forming Strategies in the Context of Responding to Assyrian Displacement**

There are three primary ways in which these Asaphite psalms help to form identity. The northern refugees fleeing to Judah during the Assyrian crisis would likely have viewed themselves as outsiders. There would be a motivation on the part of both displaced Israelites and Judeans to assimilate them into Judean life. SIT has found that when two sub-groups create a new common ingroup, conflict and bias are reduced (Gaertner, Mann, Murrell, and Dovidio 1989: 239–249). The creation of a new ingroup does not mean that the subgroups involved need to abandon their previous group identity. Instead, the new ingroup would include aspects of both subgroup identities (Esler 2016: 29). In other words, members of the new ingroup could then conceive of themselves as two subgroups within a larger entity. However, the more dominant subgroup “may project their subgroup identities onto the superordinate category” (Esler 2016: 31).

One way of creating a new ingroup is through the use of a norms and prototypes. Norms are types of behaviors and practices that

“characterize a social group and differentiate it from other social groups” (Hogg and Reid 2006: 7). Prototypes are representatives of the new ingroup that serve as exemplars to emulate (Esler 2016: 33). Applied to the Asaph Psalms, the creation of a new ingroup and the use of norms and prototypes are utilized in the first identity formation strategy. That is, the creation of a new ingroup that includes members of both subgroups. This strategy both allows the outsider sub-group to assimilate into the new context while at the same time challenging the dominant sub-group to live up to the group norms and prototypes for inclusion in the new ingroup. Psalms 50 and 73 demonstrate this strategy.

### *Psalm 50*

Psalm 50 is cast in the form of a covenant lawsuit. God appears in a theophany to judge his people. Within the world of the psalm, God’s speech provides a clear description of ingroup and outgroup characterizations. God calls “his people” to him (עַמּוֹ; v. 4). This group is also described as his “godly ones” (הַקְּדוֹשִׁים; v. 5). That is, people who had covenanted with him. Yet, this group is not the ingroup itself.<sup>11</sup> The speech is addressed to a mixed group that is comprised of ingroup and outgroup members. The challenge is that the group might not know or might misunderstand where the boundaries are to be drawn. Who is in the ingroup? Firstly, attention to ritual sacrifice is not enough on the part of the ingroup (vv. 8–13). Rather, if one assumes that God is receiving a benefit from sacrifice one has misunderstood its purpose. God clarifies that he does not need food or drink. Instead, God encourages Israel to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving (תְּהִלָּה) and to fulfill one’s vows (v. 14). That is, the purpose of sacrifice should come from gratitude at what God has done, not be an attempt to curry favor with him. This links to God’s call for Israel in v. 15 to “call me on the day of trouble, I will deliver you and you will honor me.” The ingroup, therefore, is one characterized as those whose response to trouble is to call upon God and then honor him after the event. Implied in this is also the fact that the ingroup identifies with Yhwh who resides in Zion (v. 1).

The outgroup is described in vv. 16–21. They are called the wicked (רָשָׁעִים). They do not reject the covenant. In fact, they have it on the tip of their tongue. They can even recite it. Yet in a memorable image, they cast the words of the covenant behind them (v. 17). These verses focus on their rejection of three of the ten words. Their rejection of these covenant

stipulations is subtle. They do not actually steal, but they befriend thieves (v. 18). They do not themselves commit adultery but keep company with those who do (v. 18). Most significantly, they believe they can get away with it. They think that God has the same limitations that humans have (v. 21). The psalm closes with God affirming the ingroup values he has described. He is looking for those who honor him publicly with thanksgiving sacrifices and who order their lives according to the covenant (v. 23).

In summary, this psalm seeks to characterize an ingroup that is not simply all Judah or all Israel, but those who call upon Yhwh during times of trouble, fulfill their vows to him, and affirms that Yhwh resides in Zion.

### *Psalm 73*

Psalm 73 inhabits the space between a wisdom poem, a lament, and a thanksgiving (Tate 1998: 231), and the opening verse is critical to its interpretation. The psalm begins with an affirmation, “Surely, God is good to Israel; to those pure of heart” (v. 1).<sup>12</sup> This is an example of synonymous-specification parallelism (Alter 2011: 32), for the second line sharpens the identity of Israel as “those pure of heart.” In turn, however, this creates an ambiguity. Are all people in Israel pure of heart? Or is God good to a subgroup within Israel—the pure of heart? As the psalm unfolds, it becomes clear that the latter option is what the psalmist has in mind. The psalm presents clear ingroup and outgroup characterizations. The “I” of the psalmist is intended to function as a prototypical ingroup member (King 2021, 59). This person is contrasted with the “wicked” (vv. 3, 12) on every level.

The most obvious difference between the prototypical psalmist and the wicked is at the level of their interior life. The psalm narrates the change in the psalmist from uncomprehending despair and frustration to someone who has a new, hard-won perspective on reality. The Psalmist is deeply self-reflective with a sensitive conscience. He understands that he had almost abandoned the God of Israel because of his envy of the wicked (vv. 2–3, 21–22). Yet even in his despair, he was careful not to demean God before those entrusted to his care (v. 15). He is depicted as someone who considers carefully (v. 16). He was rewarded with new insight obtained at the sanctuary (v. 17). This view is expressed most clearly in the four uses of לֵב associated with the Psalmist. He is “pure of heart” (v. 1), cleansed of heart (v. 13), formerly embittered of heart (v. 21), but now has God as the

“rock” of his heart (v. 26). This integrity in the interior life of the psalmist is not matched by outward prosperity.<sup>13</sup> Despite his care to remain pure in every sense of the word, he is physically stricken and deeply disoriented by his experience in life until his encounter at the sanctuary (v. 17).

In contrast, the wicked are at peace. Their physical bodies are described as pain-free and robust (v. 4).<sup>14</sup> They do not have the same cares in life as the “little guy” (v. 5; Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 227). Their state of peace and prosperity does not cause them to reflect on God’s grace and faithfulness. They use their position to engage in violence and oppression (v. 5). In a powerful image, they wear pride as a necklace and violence as their garment (v. 6). Their speech is fulsomely described as prideful, blasphemous, and destructive (vv. 8–9). Most troubling is their disposition toward God, “And they say, ‘How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?’” (v. 11).

The ingroup and outgroup characterizations in this psalm do not draw a line between Israel and the nations or Israel and Judah. Instead, both groups are part of the same religio-ethnic community. This psalm is depicting a group within a group. Or, to put it another way, it is redefining true Israel as the “pure in heart” as opposed to a Judean or Israelite identity. However, why would someone want to be a part of this ingroup? One of the key insights of SIT is that one desires to be a part of a group because of the positive distinctiveness that comes from being a group member. In this psalm, this distinctiveness comes from the changed perspective experienced by the psalmist at the sanctuary (vv. 17–20; 23–27).<sup>15</sup> The ingroup is one who identifies the locus of God’s presence at the temple.

Also significant is the changed perspective related to time. The term אֶתְרִית in this context does not refer to chronology, but to outcome (Seebass 1977: 210). And in addressing the ultimate outcome of the wicked, the term takes on an eschatological meaning (Kraus 1993, 89). The psalmist recognized that he should change his horizon for evaluation. He should look not only to the past and present but should include the future. The outcome of the wicked is certain.

The positive distinctiveness of the ingroup comes from two factors. First, God is present with them (v. 23). He guides them by the hand and with his counsel (vv. 23–24). More significantly, and secondly, the eschatological fate of the righteous is assured. Whatever the present circumstances may indicate, the outcome of the wicked is destruction and for the psalmist it is vindication (v. 26–27).

A second strategy these psalms use to form Israel's identity in the context of the Assyrian crisis is the use of historical recital. Social identity has a temporal element. "With a narrative that invokes a common past, the engineers of history can construct group boundaries and norms in historical terms. They are able to define for the group who they are and, just as importantly, who they are not" (King 2021: 67). This strategy will be illustrated through Psalm 78.

### *Psalm 78*

This psalm is not only the central psalm in the Asaphite collection, it is the central psalm in the Psalter according to the Masoretic notation found on Ps 78:36. It is also highlighted in this collection by its length. In it many important themes in the Asaphite collection come together.

The psalm is a didactic poem. It provides a perspective on Israel's history to shape belief and identity in its present. In the opening lines, the author asserts that he will recount a "parable" (מִשְׁלָּה) and "riddles" (חִידוֹת) (v. 2). These riddles will not be hidden any longer but will be recounted from generation to generation (v. 4). This mystery is the meaning of Israel's history from the time of the exodus to the election of David and Zion with implications for the present.

The psalm has a clear orientation toward the northern tribes. This is obvious with the references to Ephraim and Joseph (vv. 9, 67) and has been further grounded linguistically in several studies (Buss 1963; Nasuti 1983; Goulder 1995). In terms of ingroup and outgroup characterization, right from the beginning of the psalm the poem states the goal it is trying to achieve. The poet reminds Israel of the *Torah* to which it is committed (v. 5). The ingroup would be Israelites who recount the obligations of the *Torah* to their children (v. 5), who place their confidence in God (v. 7), who do not forget his wonderful deeds (v. 7), and who are explicitly not like their ancestors who did none of these things (v. 8). At the end of the poem, the ingroup is also characterized as those who embrace God's election of David and his choice of Jerusalem (vv. 67-72). God will shepherd these people through his servant, David (v. 71).

Most of the psalm is comprised of narrating this history of Israel's ancestors who are characterized negatively as the outgroup—the type of person to be avoided. Before we look at the characterization of the outgroup directly, it is worth reflecting on the portions of Israel's history

that are recounted. The first historical reference is enigmatic, “The sons of Ephraim, armed with those who shoot the bow, have turned back on the day of battle” (v. 9).<sup>16</sup> Of the many suggestions that have been made regarding what this line refers to, the most compelling is to the defeat and capture of the ark in 1 Sam 4-6. This not only fits an Ephraimite defeat, but this event is also referenced again near the end of the psalm and so serves as a kind of *inclusio* (vv. 56–66). From there the psalm goes back in time to recount the exodus and wilderness wanderings with an emphasis on the people’s disobedience and rebellion (vv. 12–40). The psalm then rehearses the exodus event again, but this time includes a listing of the plagues against Egypt (vv. 41–52). This section skips over the wilderness wanderings and focuses instead on the conquest of the land (vv. 53–55). This second narration climaxes with a lengthy description of the Philistine defeat of Israel and the capture of the ark (1 Sam 4–6).

Throughout this historical recital, the people of Israel are characterized in consistent ways. First, terms used for Israel are either ones that can refer to the northern kingdom or exclusively do so (Ephraim, vv. 9, 67; Jacob, vv. 21; Israel, vv. 21, 31, 59; Joseph, v. 67). Second, the people did not keep the covenant (vv. 10, 56). Third, they did not believe or trust in God (vv. 22, 32, 27). Fourth, they forgot God (vv. 11, 42). Fifth, they tested and provoked God (vv. 18, 41, 56). Sixth, they rebelled against God (vv. 17, 40, 56). Seventh, they sinned (vv. 17, 32). When God punished them for their actions, the people *seemed* to repent and remember God, but they were deceptive (vv. 34–37). Their hearts were not in it (v. 37). Finally, they engaged in idolatry with graven images (vv. 57–58).

It is worth reflecting on why the recitation of Israel’s history may end with 1 Samuel 6. Since the ark resided in Ephraimite territory before this event and eventually in Zion after it, it served as a way to indicate that God’s presence has been identified with Jerusalem since that time. It undermines the whole history of the Northern Kingdom, including their worship centers at Bethel and Dan, as not being in the main storyline of God’s people. For refugees flooding into Judah after the Assyrian invasion, the message of this psalm would be clear—they are a part of God’s people and share in the covenant history, but they must embrace the Davidic line and the Jerusalem temple.

This last point provides a helpful segue to the final identity forming strategy in these psalms, the emphasis on Zion and the Davidic king (Pss

50:2; 73:17; 76:2; 78:67–72; 80:18). This emphasis would be an example of the dominate subgroup instilling its values on the new common ingroup (Esler 2016, 31). A brief examination of Psalm 76 will illustrate this strategy.

### *Psalm 76*

Psalm 76 highlights that God is known in both Israel and Judah (v. 2). At times Judah is used in parallel with “Zion” as a synonym (e.g., 48:12; 78:68; 97:8). In other places in the Psalms it is used in explicit contrast to northern tribes (e.g., 60:9; 68:28; 108:9). The only use of Judah and Israel being used synonymously is in Ps 114:2 in a context that reflects on the exodus from Egypt, which highlights the unity of the twelve tribes. In this context, it is best to see verse 2 highlighting the fact that God is known and revered in both the southern and northern tribes of Israel. Lest there be any confusion, the psalmist quickly reminds Israel that God’s abode is in Salem/Zion (v. 3). So, potentially the ingroup could include anyone from Israel or Judah that affirm God’s abode in Zion.

The ingroup is further identified as the “all the poor of the land” (כָּל־עֲנִי־אֶרֶץ) whom God will save (v. 10). This group is the frequent object of Yhwh’s pity and compassion (e.g., Isa 11:4; 29:19; 61:1; Zeph 2:3). The term refers both to the economically poor as well as those humble and contrite of spirit (*NIDOTTE*, 3:458–463). The latter meaning is reflected in the LXX translation of the phrase as the “all the poor of heart” (πάντας τοὺς πρᾶεῖς τῆ καρδῶ).<sup>17</sup> This designation of Judah/Israel also emphasizes a group within a group. The ingroup cuts across northern and southern national lines to indicate a group based on their disposition toward God combined with a commitment to Zion theology. This ingroup is faithful to both make vows to Yhwh and fulfill them (v. 12).

The outgroup are the enemy warriors who have attacked Zion. Historically they may reflect the Assyrian invasion and the defeat of Sennacherib at Jerusalem in 701 BC. This understanding is reflected in the LXX title as a psalm “concerning the Assyrian” (πρὸς τὸν Ἀσσύριον). Additionally, the Lion imagery associated with God in vv. 3, 5, and 7 contrast with Neo-Assyrian propaganda in which lion images were used of the Assyrian kings (Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 263). If that is the case, God is portrayed here as far greater than the Assyrian army. There is no real battle depicted between God and the enemy army. They are simply destroyed at God’s rebuke. The military technology and power of the horse and rider does not stand a chance against God’s judgment (v. 7).

## Identity Forming Strategies in the Context of Responding to Babylonian Exile

Only Psalms 74 and 79 clearly address the context of the Babylonian exile. These are both communal laments which utilize different identity forming strategies.

### *Psalm 74*

Psalm 74 is a communal lament grieving the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. This is particularly jarring in the context of the Asaphite psalms. Psalm 73 just celebrated the temple as the locus of God's revelation. It was from the temple that the psalmist had his perspective on the present and the future changed. In Psalm 74, the situation of the temple has radically changed and new questions have been raised. This psalm almost certainly dates to the aftermath of the 586 BC destruction of the temple by the Babylonians.<sup>18</sup>

There are three parties involved in this lament: God, Israel, and foreign invaders. The name "Israel" is not used directly in this psalm. The ingroup is described using the following terms: the flock of your pasture (v. 1); your congregation [עֲדָתְךָ] (v. 2); the tribe of your inheritance [שֵׁבֶט נַחֲלֹתֶיךָ] (v. 2); your turtle dove [תּוֹרְדֵיךָ] (v. 19); your poor [עֲנִיֵיךָ] (v. 19); the oppressed [דָּר] (v. 21); and "poor and needy" [עֲנִי וְאֶבְיֹוֹן] (v. 21). Noticeable in this list is the fact that almost every term is coupled with the second person singular pronoun. The psalmist clearly wants to make the point that despite appearances, these people still belong to Yhwh. The destruction of the temple does not mean that Yhwh has rejected them or should reject them.

The outgroup is described in stereotypical ways. They are not named (e.g., the Babylonians). They are the "enemy" [אֹיֵב] (vv. 3, 18); "your foes" [צָרֶיךָ] (v. 4, 23); the "adversary" [צָר] (v. 10); "foolish people" [רְעִים נְבָלִים] (v. 18, similarly v. 22); and "those who rise up against you" [קֹמְיָד] (v. 23). They are vividly described as lumberjacks hacking down pillars in the sanctuary (vv. 5–6), or roaring lions in its midst (v. 4). They act out of arrogance to oppress and taunt God's people and destroy God's meeting place.<sup>19</sup>

God is the character most fully described in this psalm. Indeed, the psalm is a long accusation against God. Reflecting on the God as shepherd imagery so common in the Asaphite psalms, Zenger comments that here, "instead of caring for them like a concerned, protective shepherd with his flock and driving away the enemies who threaten them, YHWH has

not only left his flock in peril, but has even sent the ‘smoke of his anger’ against them.”<sup>20</sup> The psalmist points out an inconsistency in God’s character. Echoing exodus imagery, he highlights that God had redeemed (גאל) and acquired (קנה) Israel. God had made his dwelling on Mt. Zion (v. 2). But now God has allowed it to all go up in smoke. God has not sent any signs (אֹת) or prophets to help Israel understand the situation (v. 9). God is not only hostile, but he is also silent. Alluding once again to exodus language, the psalmist asks, “Why do you hold back your hand; and with your right hand from the midst of your bosom, destroy!” (v. 11).<sup>21</sup> The Psalmist understands well that God had the power to be able to stop this destruction. Utilizing mythic imagery, he affirms God’s power as seen in the exodus event and in creation (vv. 13–17). The rhetorical force of the psalm comes in the final strophe. The psalmist asks God to “remember” (זכר) the insults of the enemy. He begs God to remember his covenantal promises and be faithful to them (v. 20).

In this psalm, the destruction of the temple and the suffering of the those who have an in-group identity does not mean that they are now in an out-group. This psalm affirms that God still has a responsibility to his people despite his displeasure with them.

### *Psalm 79*

The tone of Psalm 79 differs dramatically and creates an interesting dialog with Psalm 78. Psalm 78 ended with God’s choice of Zion. Psalm 79 opens with foreign peoples laying waste to the temple and Jerusalem. In this communal lament the ingroup and outgroup are clearly defined. The psalm is a plea for God to vindicate and have compassion on his people. The ingroup is defined by the repeated use of the 2ms pronoun suffix. They are “your servants” and “your faithful ones” (v. 2). Their identity is dependent upon their relationship with God. Normally one desires to be a part of a group because of the positive distinctiveness that group membership provides. Israel however has become mocked and derided by those around them (v. 4). They have been the victim of violent invasion (v. 7). Their positive distinctiveness can only be found in their connection to Yhwh. In attacking Jerusalem, the nations not only attack Israel but Yhwh himself. It is after all his holy temple (v. 1).

The psalmist recognizes that Israel is not entirely innocent. Yhwh’s has a right to be angry. The question is, how long will this anger last (v. 5)? The psalmist admits that their ancestors have sinned, and they have

followed in their footsteps (vv. 8–9). This becomes the basis for a plea for forgiveness and deliverance (v. 9). The ingroup is lastly characterized as the flock which God shepherds. They are people who give thanks to God for his deliverance (v. 13).

The outgroup is also clearly defined as the nations (גוֹיִם; vv. 1, 6, 10). The nations are characterized as brutal, cruel, and violent. They have no regard for the flesh and blood of God's people (vv. 2–3). They do not acknowledge God. The people of Israel and God are put together in one group while the nations are in another. They are the "other." They do not get to speak in the psalm. The psalmist prays for a sevenfold judgment on them for their arrogance and derision (v. 12). This judgment will not only deliver Israel, but it will also protect God's reputation. What is interesting in this psalm is that the destruction of the temple does not lead to a questioning of the Zion or Davidic theologies, but to a demand that Yhwh deliver on the basis of his covenant faithfulness.

In both Psalm 74 and 79 ethnic difference becomes more salient in determining the ingroup and outgroup. The outgroup are foreign invading armies. The psalmist also emphasizes God's ownership of Israel, often using the second person singular possessive pronoun.<sup>22</sup> This is done to link Israel's fate with God's reputation. God should be invested in their renewal. Both psalms provided Israel with a model—a prototypical example—of how to maintain an identity rooted in Yhwh in spite of the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem. The lament form itself indicates that the destruction is not ultimate, but there is hope for restoration. This leads to an eschatological hope for God to restore what was lost.

### Summary

This article has argued that two interpretive horizons are important to grapple with the unity and diversity in the Asaphite collection. The first horizon is the aftermath of the Assyrian invasion and demise of the NK. One of the functions of the Asaphite psalms was to help assimilate northern refugees into Judean life and faith. This was possible because of their shared deep history but still a challenge because of their recent history and divergent beliefs. This dynamic helps to explain two common features in the Asaphite psalms: the emphases on historical recital and the temple, Zion, and the Davidic king. The historical recitals, which are so common in this collection, focus on the exodus, wilderness, conquest, and judges traditions, eras in which Israel and Judah had a shared history. Noticeably

absent in this collection is the history of the NK. Regarding the emphasis on the temple, Zion and the Davidic king, these were the points most at conflict with northern Israelites. Consequently, bringing them in line with this aspect of Judean belief and practice required a fair amount of sensitivity. Psalm 78 is a particularly important example in this regard. In addition, the rhetorical trope of a group within a group found in the collection (Pss 50, 73, 76, 77, 78). This device is particularly useful because it defines the ingroup not ethnically or geographically but based on their commitment to Yhwh. The ingroup is one who believes in, trusts, and is faithful to Yhwh. One who obeys the Torah and its regulations in right worship. This not only allows northern Israelites to assimilate into Judean life, it also encourages Judeans to reflect on their own standing with Yhwh.

The second interpretive horizon is the exile. In the psalms that highlight this context most clearly, the ingroup/outgroup description also changes (Pss 74, 75, 79, 83). More ethnic language is used to contrast Israel with the nations. However, these psalms do not picture the ingroup/outgroup simply as Israel vs. the nations. The language for Israel still utilizes the group within a group language quite often. Words like “your faithful ones” (עֲבָדֶיךָ), “your servants” (עֲבָדֶיךָ), and “your poor” (עֲנֵוֹתֶיךָ) are mixed in with clear ethnic designations. Similarly, the foreign nations are not often named specifically (the exception being Psalm 83). Rather, they are defined by their role or stance in opposition to Yhwh. They are the “enemy” (אֹיֵב), “your adversaries” (צָרֶיךָ), or the boastful (הוֹלְלִים). Again, the ingroup/outgroup is not simply ethnically defined, but ethnicity still matters. The psalmists remind God of his covenant with Israel as a people. They have a shared history with one another and God and marks them out from the nations. That identity still matters even after the crisis of the destruction of the temple.

The Asaphite psalms are unified in that they all seek to address the context of a crisis and the attempt to maintain or shape identity through it. In coming to terms with the unity and diversity of collection within the Psalter, it is helpful not only to look at their canonical placement but also some of the potential social contexts which they addressed. A Social Identity Approach provides one helpful set of tools to engage in this study.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> For recent scholarship on the Asaphite Psalms, see, Smith 2019: 19–48; Jones 2009: 7–61.

<sup>2</sup> While Delitzsch argued that some of the Asaphite psalms were written by Asaph himself (Ps 50, 73, 78?, 82?), many of them could not have been (1890: 123–24).

<sup>3</sup> It is more appropriate to think in terms of an Asaphite guild of singers that operated over an extended period of time, the “sons of Asaph” (1 Chr. 25:1–2).

<sup>4</sup> A rare exception to this understanding is Illman 1976: 50–51.

<sup>5</sup> These two perspectives on the temple are juxtaposed in adjacent psalms: 73 to 74 and 78 to 79.

<sup>6</sup> Helpful overviews of SIA are Esler 2016: 13–39; Andrew King 2021: 8–30.

<sup>7</sup> There are a host of different methodological tools from various disciplines social identity theorists use to analyze group identity and group dynamics, including, ingroup and outgroup characterizations, norms and prototypes for ingroup behavior, beliefs and values, memory studies, and ritual studies to name just a view. For a good overview of this eclectic mix, see Part 1 of *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament* (Tucker and Baker 2016).

<sup>8</sup> For a survey of historical issues involved in this event, see, Irvine 1990.

<sup>9</sup> On the role of shared ancestors as a marker of an ethnic boundary, see Hall 1997: 25.

<sup>10</sup> For helpful overviews of this era, see, Moore and Kelle 2011: 334–95; Fulton 2018: 230–35.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Terrien has argued that the term תְּסִיחַ implies that this group is faithful to the covenant (2003: 397). However, the context suggests that this term is being used in a general way to describe all Israel, some of whom are not faithful. See, Goldingay 2007: 113.

<sup>12</sup> The BHS apparatus suggests that the text here may have originally been לִישָׁר אֵל. This reading maintains the same consonantal text and makes good sense in the context (it would be parallel with “to the pure in heart”). However, there is no actual textual evidence that this is the original reading and considering that “To Israel” makes sense in the context as well, one would be wise to maintain the reading of the Masoretic Text.

<sup>13</sup> His is a plague-filled life. Note the use of נָגַע here in the sense of being afflicted or plagued (v. 14; cf. Gen 12:17).

<sup>14</sup> On the meaning of בְּרִיא, see, Stone 2009: 651–52.

<sup>15</sup> There is a significant exegetical debate related to the meaning of the pivotal v. 17. Are the “sanctuaries of God” (מִקְדָּשֵׁי אֱלֹהִים) literal or metaphorical? The term “sanctuaries of God” has been understood as metaphorical by Diethelm and recently supported by Zenger (Diethelm 1987: 646; Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 231). The primary argument is that it is difficult to imagine such a radical change in perspective occurring through a concrete worship experience in the temple. Instead, the term seems to be used in a way similar to the use of “mysteries of God” in Wisdom of Solomon 2:22. However, the term “sanctuaries” in the plural is only used in a concrete way in the rest of the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Ps 68:36; Lev 21:23; 26:31; Ezek 7:24). In this context the phrase is preceded by the verb “I entered” (אָבִוּא), which support a concrete understanding as well.

<sup>16</sup> For a list of possible historical references, see, Tate 1998: 289.

<sup>17</sup> LXX Codex Vaticanus.

<sup>18</sup> See the argument in Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 243.

<sup>19</sup> The precise referent of כָּל־מוֹעֲדֵי־אֱלֹהִים is difficult to determine (v. 8). The use of מוֹעֵד for a place instead of an appointed time is unusual (Lam 2:6). The plural could reference the whole cultic complex in Jerusalem. But the prepositional phrase בְּאֶרֶץ following seems to indicate otherwise.

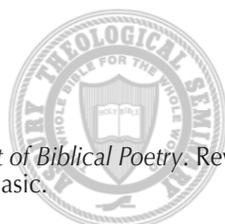
<sup>20</sup> Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 244.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Exod 15:6, 12.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., in Psalm 74, the ingroup is described using the following terms: the flock of your pasture (v. 1); your congregation [עֲדֻתְךָ] (v. 2); the tribe of your inheritance [שֵׁבֶט יְהוּדָה] (v. 2); your turtle dove [תּוֹרְךָ] (v. 19); your poor [עֲנִיֶיךָ] (v. 19); the oppressed [דָּר] (v. 21); and “poor and needy” [אֲדָמִיּוֹן] (v. 21). The psalmist emphasizes that despite appearances, these people still belong to Yhwh. The destruction of the temple does not mean that Yhwh has rejected them, or should reject them.

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