

At the Edge of the Precipice: Psalm 89 as Liturgical Memory

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In his book *At the Edge of the Precipice* Robert Remini describes a watershed moment in the history of the United States of America as distinguished Senator Henry Clay proposed what came to be known as *The Compromise of 1850*.¹ During this period Remini says "...the Union of American states... came close to being irreparably smashed."² Events of such magnitude for many nations throughout history have perhaps been rare but, when they occur, have offered opportunities for both individuals and communities to pause in reflection. Careful and thoughtful reflection can in turn create a space in which some sense can be made of the experience. But why and how might this be so? Essentially it seems to be because such world-shaping opportunities inherently possess the raw material which enables the possibility of imagining a different world. This imagining occurs through embracing the past and present, both of which have contributed to forming the individual and community in the first place.

While ancient Israel, as portrayed in Psalm 89, is an historical world away from Henry Clay and events in the United States of America in his time, the image of precipice unites them.³ Both groups at particular points in their history, and in their own unique ways, found themselves at the edge of a precipice. Here they were faced with the prospect of plunging into oblivion or, alternatively, being compelled to embrace their past, make sense of their present and re-imagine their future. In simple terms, the life and times of Henry Clay and the life and times of the psalmist in Psalm 89

¹ Robert Remini, *At the Edge of the Precipice*, (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

² Remini, *At the Edge*, xi.

³ Robert Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 761–762. Although, in comparing the two histories, it must be acknowledged that the ultimate outcomes were quite distinct, with the United States eventually plunging into civil war in 1861. In Henry Clay's biography, also by Remini, it is noted that Senator Henry S. Foote said "Had there been one such man in the Congress of the United States as Henry Clay in 1860–'61 there would, I feel sure, have been no civil war."

represented a precipice, paradoxically embodying voices of despair and of hope. The image of precipice is helpful in reminding us that it is often only these kinds of momentous, and often traumatic, events in our personal or communal histories which offer a space for significant meaning-making to take place. It also reminds us that a passive response to these opportunities is inadequate. They need to be grasped if their full meaning-making potential is to be realized.

In Psalm 89, kingship personifies ancient Israel's precipice, or, more precisely, the crisis of kingship culminating in their exilic experience.⁴ In fact Broyles classifies the psalm as a 'royal prayer' underlining the focus on kingship.⁵ Historically kingship in its emergence, consolidation and subsequent self-destruction had led ancient Israel through both the best and the worst of times. However, in a more supra-historical sense, the notion of kingship, and how it is characterized within Psalm 89, draws attention to the existential and theological questions raised by such an institution in a polycentric manner.⁶ Psalm 89 addresses these questions by acknowledging existential angst in particular ways and yet, rather paradoxically, offers a sense of hope for the people's future. Both YHWH's, and the people's, uneasy relationship with kings and kingship is voiced in this psalm. Through its inclusion in the Psalter, the psalm not only gives vent to feelings associated with kingship in a form of literature but also, by definition, embeds it as part of the people's liturgical practice and memory.⁷ This suggests that their lived exilic experience, as a nation, is transcended by the broader ramifications and understanding of the role of kingship for them as covenant partners with YHWH in the brave new world of post-exilic experience.

In exploring this psalm I propose that, as an act of liturgical memory, Psalm 89 articulates a convergence of four interrelated and equally critical aspects of human reflection: mythic, parabolic, mimetic and parenetic qualities. When appropriately acknowledged

⁴ David Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 342.

⁵ Craig Broyles, *Psalms*, (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2012), 355.

⁶ By the term polycentric I am suggesting that each phase of Israel's history — pre-, peri- and post-kingship (human) — is represented in different ways throughout Psalm 89, creating several perspectives on the institution.

⁷ It is beyond our scope to explore the specific, historical use of this particular psalm in Israel's liturgical tradition. However, it is entirely reasonable to assume that this psalm, along with the others were used at least periodically if not frequently by both communities of faith and individuals as an expression of worship.

and brought together by using a psalm such as this one in liturgy, these four nested qualities constituted a dynamic space for community reflection on their identity, as a people in covenant with YHWH.⁸ It also enabled reflection on how the relationship between themselves and YHWH might be shaped afresh in the face of potentially identity-destroying circumstances.⁹ As these mythic, parabolic, mimetic and parenetic qualities engage in dialogue with each other in Psalm 89, a conducive space for meaning-making results at the edge of the precipice. The dialogical process, which is a key to emergent meaning-making, provides ballast for the community to survive the storm. This, in turn, contributes to their resilience in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Embracing and yet concurrently transcending the community's circumstances, the four qualities elicit a boldly hopeful stance as they face an uncertain future where life will continue but where life will never be the same. In large part this exploration will focus on defining the four qualities identified above, offering examples of each from Psalm 89. In concluding I will offer some reflections on what these individual qualities and the pattern of their dialogical interaction in Psalm 89 might offer us as individuals and communities of faith in the twenty-first century.

Background Issues

Before considering the four qualities introduced above, it will be helpful to outline some of the critical issues related to Psalm 89 as a backdrop for our current focus. Of particular significance for this exploration is the historical setting of the text, its liturgical usage and the psalm's literary structure.¹⁰ Each provides a lens through which the content and function of the psalm becomes more clearly focused. Much has been postulated around these three issues and

⁸ 'Space' as used here can be viewed in three ways. First, it can refer to literary space (in this case, as represented in the text of Psalm 89). Second, it can signify a physical space where the psalm is utilized as an expression of the liturgy. Finally, it can be viewed as an intrapsychic space for an individual and/or community. Each 'space' described here can engender a mindfulness in response to presenting circumstances.

⁹ The 'dynamic space' envisaged here becomes even more critical when considering Psalm 89 as representative of exilic reflection. At this point in the people's history they had been removed from their 'place'. What's more, their 'place' (the land) had become either a distant memory (for those who survived the deportations) or, a part of the narrative history of a prior generation (for those who were born and/or died in exile).

¹⁰ Of course there are myriad issues which could be addressed here including placement of Psalm 89 at the close of Book III of the Psalter, questions about the rhetorical nature of the psalm, etc. Some of these will be captured in the discussion following.

the following provides only a brief survey of the views pertinent to the discussion here.

Some might argue that the *Sitz im Leben* of any psalm is a moot point and that the issue should thus be dismissed as something which remains unclear and is, therefore, irrelevant. But against such a view it is helpful to remember that, in fact, there *was* an initial historical context for each psalm.¹¹ This also recognizes that all psalms *do* arise from particular historical circumstances and are descriptive of thoughts, feelings and experiences associated with these contexts, even if the precipitating events cannot be clearly identified.¹² In light of this it seems reasonable to suggest at least viewing “psalms against a larger narrative, that of the history of Israel...”¹³ Such a view reminds us that the psalms themselves, and the liturgy in which they reside, arise from ‘below’. That is, they are both grounded in and emerge from the complexity and ambiguity of lived history even if the underlying events cannot be accurately adduced.

With the above pre-understanding it is helpful to view Psalm 89 as theology in action *within* history and *through* history.¹⁴ In other words the psalm preserves the lived realities of a people at a particular time, which otherwise risked being relegated to the dusty pages of history. The inclusion of psalms such as this one in the Psalter creates a living liturgical space for following generations to reflect on their own unique thoughts, feelings and experiences.¹⁵ Gerald Wilson alludes to connecting thoughts, feelings and experiences in Psalm 89 when he notes that

At the conclusion of the third book... the impression left is one of a covenant remembered, but a covenant *failed*. The Davidic covenant introduced in Ps 2 has come to nothing and the combination of the

¹¹ Of course, along with the initial context of a psalm, it is important to acknowledge subsequent redacted forms of a psalm and associated new historical contexts.

¹² For example, Psalm 44 alludes to the events of the Exodus while Psalm 137 is clearly an example of reflection on the Exile.

¹³ Harry P. Nasuti, “The Interpretive Significance of Sequence and Selection in the Book of Psalms,” in *The Book of Psalms* (eds. Peter W Flint, Patrick D Miller, Aaron Brunell, and Ryan Roberts; (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2005), 317. Here Nasuti is particularly addressing the conjectural issue of Davidic authorship (which is not relevant in a study of Psalm 89) but his point still stands in regard to the historical *Sitz im Leben* of psalms generally.

¹⁴ Here I am taking both a diachronic and a synchronic view of the text.

¹⁵ Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms. Part 2, and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), 154.

three books concludes with the anguished cry of the Davidic descendants.¹⁶

As highlighted by Wilson this nexus is not an unfocused, generalized historical overview but, rather, one grounded in ancient Israel's lived experience couched in a theology of covenant. This theology of covenant is not presented as an abstract, ahistorical concept but, rather, a *de facto* principle which has underpinned the identity and mission of this ancient group of people for centuries. Psalm 89, through poetic narrative,¹⁷ recounts history as what could be called *Geschichte* rather than *Historie*.¹⁸ It does this in its own way and for its own purposes echoing the concerns of a particular people in their own particular historical context with one eye on the past and one on the present. Beyond this, Wilson's observations also alert us to the literary/theological function of the psalm in the overall structure of the Psalter.¹⁹ In doing so he reminds us of the far-reaching potential of this psalm for subsequent generations using it as part of their liturgical practice and reflecting on its content.

Liturgical usage is a second important consideration. But can the liturgical usage of Psalm 89 be determined with any confidence? Despite much discussion among scholars around the liturgical usage of most psalms it is important to consider some broad possibilities for Psalm 89. Typically any discussion of liturgical setting can quickly elicit polarized views. As a result the matter can be oversimplified by identifying and adhering to one particular setting *vis à vis* another. Alternatively, the acknowledgement of a multiplicity of settings can result in a lack of any meaningful insight at all. James Ward, in his remarkably perceptive discussion of Psalm 89 and its liturgical usage, helpfully bridges the gap between

¹⁶ Gerald Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1985), 213.

¹⁷ David J. Cohen, *Why O Lord?* (Carlisle, United Kingdom: Paternoster Press: 2013), 25. The phrase 'poetic narrative' is coined as a way of describing a phenomenon often present in various psalms where clearly a story is being recounted but using typical Hebrew poetic language rather than prose.

¹⁸ Here I am using the term *Geschichte* as describing history as event as opposed to *Historie* which is more related to history as record. In doing this I am following the distinction, albeit rather blurred at times, found in the philosophical works of Heidegger *et al*. For a more detailed discussion on the distinction between *Geschichte* and *Historie* see Alejandro Vallega, "'Beyng-Historical Thinking' in Heidegger's Contribution to Philosophy" in *Companion to Heidegger's Contributions to Philosophy* (ed. Alejandro Vallega *et al*; (Bloomington, USA: Indiana University Press, 2001), 48–65.

¹⁹ Despite the fascinating discussion around these issues it is beyond our scope here to delve too deeply.

these two extremes suggesting that the psalm can have been used as “an exilic lament over the fall of the Judean monarchy...” However, he then continues to note that the psalm “was employed in the regular repeated, national ritual in the pre-exilic period.”²⁰ Ward’s observation recognizes the existence of historical *settings* and, in doing so, also acknowledges the over-simplification of limiting the psalm’s usage to one setting or another. What he fails to include in his analysis is the obvious incorporation of the psalm into the final form of the Psalter which subsequently became the Hymnbook of the Second Temple. This inclusion established its continuing usage in a post-exilic world. An awareness of this reminds us that usage of psalms emerged from and yet transcended a specific historical instance. In this way they could be viewed as significant at different points in history for different reasons - the idea of polycentrism identified earlier.²¹

The literary issues that Psalm 89 presents are significant, particularly the dramatic shift from the hymnic/oracle sections to what most identify as a royal lament from verse 38 onwards.²² In examining the broad literary structure of Psalm 89, Gerstenberger notices this dramatic shift. He then briefly ponders its liturgical function and implications saying “we *have to imagine* how the fundamental break in perspective could be accommodated in one and the same psalm and worship service”.²³ His observation is both noteworthy and thought-provoking. With the psalm in its current form we *do* have to imagine how these sentiments can in fact co-exist in both literary and liturgical contexts. This in turn causes us to consider what existential effects such a co-existence between hymn/oracle and lament might precipitate for those experiencing the literature as liturgy.

Of course the juxtaposition of hymn/oracle and lament is just one of the myriad literary issues confronting the reader in Psalm 89. There is no doubt that the issue of the unity of the psalm is

²⁰ James Ward, “Literary Form and Liturgical Background of Psalm 89,” *Vetus Testamentum* 11/3 (1961), 327. Ward also discussed the concept of psalms like this being used as a regular ‘ritual humiliation’ although there is no evidence of such activity in the Hebrew Bible itself.

²¹ cf. n.6.

²² This kind of disparity is not without precedent in the Psalter. For example, Psalm 22 begins with a dramatic individual lament only to move abruptly into an ecstatic hymn of praise in the second half.

²³ Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms. Part 2, and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), 153 (emphasis mine).

contentious.²⁴ However, Kraus, while arguing that some of the psalm was northern in origin, affirms that “the whole has been welded together in a way that passes understanding...”²⁵ Whatever the psalm’s redactional history, it is important to deal with the text that now exists and ask “Is Psalm 89 simply ‘welded together?’” In answer to this, and by considering linguistic connections interspersed throughout the whole psalm, Ward concludes:

Here we have no accidental juxtaposition of disparate poems but an intelligible unity. The psalm as it stands presents a dramatic movement of ideas, poetically integrated, that proceeds to the logical climax in the poignant plea of the last six lines.²⁶

Rather than a ‘welding together’ which suggests a limited horizon formed by joining disconnected ideas into an ambiguous piece of poetry, Ward views Psalm 89 as a coherent whole, albeit one containing internal paradoxes. The historical and theological scope of Psalm 89, as a piece of literature, is expansive.

When observations about historical setting, liturgical usage and literary structure are considered collectively they suggest that there is something mysterious and yet monumental about Psalm 89. With its placement at the close of Book III of the Psalter and its inclusion in Israel’s liturgy despite its seemingly disparate literary units, this psalm reveals an exquisitely crafted piece with a purpose. It is a psalm that recognizes despair, with hopes having been dashed in the crucible of history. But it also embraces glimpses of a nascent imagination of the future for YHWH’s covenant people, all emanating from this same reflective liturgical space. This liminal space is where meaning-making can occur. So with these considerations in mind we will now examine the four qualities of Psalm 89, introduced earlier, in some detail to see how they shape this liminal space.

²⁴ M.D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Sons of Korah* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), 212. See here for further discussion of associated issues.

²⁵ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 202.

²⁶ James Ward, “Literary Form and Liturgical Background of Psalm 89,” *Vetus Testamentum* 11/3 (1961) 323. In this article Ward presents compelling evidence for a linguistic unity to the disparate sections of the psalm. Clifford affirms the earlier work done by Ward saying “vocabulary links throughout the whole poem, and poetic structure all argue that the psalm was a single poem...” (Richard J. Clifford, “Psalm 89: A Lament over the Davidic Ruler’s Continued Failure,” *Harvard Theological Review* 73/1–2 (1980) 35–36.

The Mythic

Psalm 89 possesses a mythic quality. This term can be employed to describe narratives where life is viewed as being good and where ambiguities and tensions are successfully reconciled and even resolved; the proverbial ‘happy ending’.²⁷ Evidence of this kind of poetic narrative is prevalent in the first section of Psalm 89 from verses 1–37. Familiar themes such as divine faithfulness, love and covenant are all present. Goulder recognizes the mythic qualities here in relation to the broader canonical context of the psalm and its possible significance. He notes:

The psalm opens on a high note of confidence and gratitude. The hideous doubts of Yahweh’s wonders and faithfulness and covenant-mercy being lost in death are gone with the darkness of yesterday.²⁸

The gloominess of the ‘darkness of yesterday’, alluding to the preceding psalm, provides an antiphonal backdrop to Psalm 89 and is important to bear in mind. Given this backdrop, the beginning of Psalm 89 could perhaps be viewed as a dramatic counter-response to the disruption of Psalm 88. The juxtaposition of Psalms 88 and 89 appears to be representative of the cognitive and emotional dissonance for covenant people standing at the edge of a precipice. It is here that their identity has been challenged and their resolve is being tested by exile.

However, before pursuing these ideas of challenge and testing it is important to consider the finer features of the mythic quality evident in Psalm 89. Verses 1–14 possess two images which converge to reinforce a mythic view of reality: covenant and creation, together forming an amalgam which encourages hope. It is clear, even at a superficial level, that both the language and imagery used here recalls the Davidic covenant, and even possibly beyond this with allusions to the Mosaic covenant. McCann has noted the repeated use of the covenantal terms *hesed* and *’ēmûnâ*,²⁹ both of which could be described as mythic in what they envisage as the expected divine response to a people in covenant with YHWH.³⁰ As

²⁷ I have addressed the concept of mythic narrative in relation to psalms extensively in David J. Cohen, *Why O Lord?* (Carlisle, United Kingdom: Paternoster Press: 2013).

²⁸ M.D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Sons of Korah* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), 220.

²⁹ Neither of these terms are easy to translate but can be understood as ‘steadfast love’ and ‘faithfulness’ respectively (cf. NRSV).

³⁰ J. Clinton McCann, “The Book of Psalms,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Vol IV* (ed. Leander E. Keck et al; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 1034.

well as this, and reinforcing hope in steadfast love and faithfulness, verse 3 makes explicit mention of *bērit* (covenant) and clearly connects the term to the revered Davidic covenant as its antecedent. The use of *bērit* is noteworthy as it forms a catchall term for the mythic view expressed in the opening to Psalm 89. Use of this term also connects the poetic narrative here to the broader Hebrew Bible narrative which establishes the people's identity based on an inextricable relationship with YHWH through a covenant.

The creation imagery and language, found in verses 5–14, forms a dyad with covenant. The linguistic connection between covenant and creation is the covenantal term *'ēmûnâ* (faithfulness). In other words, the faithfulness of YHWH is what undergirds a confidence in divine protection and deliverance for Israel. Coupled with this is the repeated imagery of divine power voiced here as YHWH's consummate power over all creation, both animate and inanimate.³¹ In other words, if YHWH is faithful to creation, then YHWH will be faithful to Israel. The dyad of covenant and creation present here is mythic in that it stresses two favourable theological and existential hopes for Israel which together augur well for their continuing preservation. Whether this psalm is viewed as foreshadowing an imminent exilic experience, reflecting on it as a past event, or perhaps both, creation and covenant, together, form a powerful foundation for disambiguating the people's situation.

As if to reinforce this mythic confidence in YHWH's capacity to protect and deliver, the first section of Psalm 89 then proceeds to employ military imagery in verses 15–18. This is followed by a swift transition back to the Davidic covenant in verses 19–37. The culmination of the first section of the psalm reinforces the idea of a God who is in control of the situation. Taken as a whole then, the purview of the psalmist is one which appreciates the potency of YHWH's covenant as reinforced in YHWH's creative action. The kind of potency viewed here is salvific for the people against the backdrop of exile.³²

³¹ This kind of language and imagery is of course found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. For example, Job 38, Proverbs 8, Psalm 97, *et al.*

³² I have used the term 'salvific' here understood in terms of the Exodus narrative as a saving *from* oppression *to* a position of liberation. This contrasting of oppression/liberation is particularly relevant in light of the ideal of human kingship championed by YHWH (well summarized in Psa. 72, for example) and the reality of the monarchy, particularly as portrayed in the books of Samuel and Kings.

In regard to kingship, the return to the Davidic covenant at the close of the first section and how the *form* of kingship is described prompts Clifford to note that

the dominion achieved by Yahweh through his creation victory (vv. 6–19) is shared point by point with the chosen David and his descendants in vv. 20–38... Thus the regent of Yahweh, at least *in potentia*, is the most powerful king on earth.³³

This also connects with his earlier observations that

The inclusion of the *’ölām / ’lědōr wādōr* (forever/for generation to generation) of v. 2 in v. 5 and the chiasm of **bnh / kwn* (build/establish) in vv. 3 and 5 formally underline the hymnic affirmation that God’s choice of David is eternal, like the order established in creation.³⁴

Clifford’s remarks are clearly supported by the text itself and when covenant and creation are viewed together they constitute a mythic perspective on Israel’s history which dominates the first part of Psalm 89.

The Parabolic

Despite the emphatic nature of the mythic perspective in the opening half of Psalm 89, expressing an assured confidence in YHWH as creator and covenant keeper, an underlying dis-ease is present resulting in an antiphony to the dyad of creation and covenant. This underlying antiphony is anticipated by Psalm 88, already highlighted, before the parabolic quality rises to the surface, particularly in the second part of Psalm 89 (vv. 38ff.). So it emerges slowly in the first part of the psalm and then, with shattering abrasiveness, confronts the assertions of the established mythic aura. However, before examining the evidence for the parabolic in more depth it will be helpful to define the term in this context. Anderson contrasts mythic and parabolic narratives observing that “Myth may give stability to our story, but parables are agents of change and sometimes disruption.”³⁵ Parabolic narrative facilitates an articulation of the struggles all human beings have *in* life and

³³ Richard Clifford, “Psalm 89: a Lament over the Davidic Ruler’s Continued Failure,” *Harvard Theological Review* 73/1–2 (1980), 44–45. These sentiments are echoes of Psa. 2:6–9 and Psa. 110.

³⁴ Clifford, “Psalm 89,” 41.

³⁵ Herbert Anderson, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 14.

with life at one point or another. Courageously, parabolic narrative is prepared to engage with the uncertainties and ambiguities. This does not necessarily suggest finding resolution but, nevertheless, asking questions which may or may not be answered yet demand to be asked. In Psalm 89 it is not only the presence of these mythic and parabolic qualities that is significant but more importantly their coexistence which forms the basis for a dialogic between the two.

The parabolic potential of Psalm 89 is clear when images of God *over* creation and God *over* covenant are viewed in sharp relief to the historical reality of Israel's exile.³⁶ The exilic experience itself could be characterized as a parabolic experience, disrupting the people and potentially functioning as an agent of change. So where, and in what way, is the parabolic quality of Psalm 89 evident? Perhaps surprisingly it initially appears in the first half of the psalm despite the overwhelmingly mythic emphasis of verses 1–37 already outlined. The section has a sting in its tail, so to speak.

Although ensconced in a description of the Davidic king, verses 30–32 extend covenantal responsibility beyond the monarch to explicitly include the king's progeny. The languaging of this call is expressed in Deuteronomistic terminology and echoes the conditional framework of the Mosaic covenant. It also quite possibly reminds the people of the prayer for an ideal king found in Psalm 72, a king who would act in right and just ways towards the people. With these words and images a sobering picture and a stark contrast between the ideal (what YHWH wanted) and the real (what the kings were mostly like) begins to emerge.

Foreboding dark clouds have formed on the horizon for YHWH'S people creating an unresolved dilemma for this people. In fact Wallace surmises that, whatever the reasons for its demise,

Psalm 89 reminds the reader, the Davidic monarchy is gone, and what honor can the patron reserve when YHWH seems to be a liar. How can the everlasting house of David no longer exist? Everlasting things should be everlasting.³⁷

³⁶ This holds significance whether the reflections here are in anticipation of, or in light of, the experience. I am also suggesting, by using the term 'over' in connection with concepts of covenant and creation, the presence of a paradox between belief in the inherent power of their God and yet perceived divine inaction in the face of the people's exile.

³⁷ Robert Wallace, *The Narrative Effect of Book IV of the Hebrew Psalter* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 17. Also note that he is assuming here the end of the monarchy has already occurred contra others who view the psalm as pre-exilic.

Of course Psalm 89 does not end at this point. However, despite going on to re-affirm the longevity of the Davidic covenant in verses 33–37, the second half of the psalm abruptly and abrasively thrusts us fully into a parabolic disruption. Despite questions around the historical setting of the psalm, Gerstenberger makes an astute observation describing the progression of the psalm as “Leaping from hymnic to plaintive and petitionary elements... in worship, experienc[ing] a kind of cataclysm.”³⁸ It seems that this may well be the point of the psalm being structured like it is. Initially setting the parabolic *among* the mythic provides a primer for the full force of the storm to come, beginning in verse 38.³⁹ The closing section of the psalm, from verse 38 onwards, sounds typically lament-like in its accusative stance towards YHWH intertwined with questions while, interestingly, also containing echoes of the covenant language used in verses 1–37. The Davidic figure is explicitly recalled with a despairing grasp for some sign of YHWH’s *hesed* (steadfast love) and *’emûnâ* (faithfulness), coupled as they were earlier in verse 2.

While much discussion may be generated in attempting to identify the literary function of the lament form here, particularly in juxtaposition with the first half of the psalm, its presence has implications beyond literary concerns. The lament, as a contrast to the hymn, helps to construct a liminal space as a forum for expressing the parabolic nature of the community’s lived experience. This expression self-evidently occurs at particular junctures in history but then, as with lament psalms, becomes embedded in the liturgy as a continual reminder of the visceral nature of life. Beyond this, both the mythic and the parabolic coexist dialogically within the psalm to create a mimetic quality which also transcends the history of a particular people at a particular time.

³⁸ Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms. Part 2 and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), 176.

³⁹ I use the term ‘primer’ here in the sense of it being a preparation. Although the disruption has begun, as Gerstenberger points out, the person or community utilizing the psalm are not confronted enough to be completely repelled. Rather, they are being gently alerted to the issues at stake for the people. (This kind of ‘priming’ is not completely dissimilar to the story Nathan tells King David in 2 Sam. 12 following the incident with Bathsheba.)

The Mimetic

Marshall McLuhan said, “We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future.”⁴⁰ McLuhan’s approach to our past could be considered to be anamnestic, that is, recalling or remembering the past in order to make sense of the present and, as a result, move into the future. In this sense Psalm 89 could be viewed as an anamnestic piece of literature. It certainly recalls the past and does seem to be an attempt to make sense of the people’s presenting circumstances. However a psalm such as Psalm 89, while embracing the importance of remembering, also transcends being remembrance alone as it becomes a part of liturgy. Once this embedding took place the psalm gained a mimetic quality which, by definition, sees it intentionally repeated generation after generation. In this way its use becomes more than a remembrance. It also becomes, in a sense, a re-enactment which mimics their history, ‘as if looking in the rear-view mirror.’⁴¹ The dialogue between mythic and parabolic qualities forms a foundation for this mimesis.

Perhaps a clue to this mimetic quality is found initially in the title of Psalm 89. Despite uncertainty surrounding the date and purpose of including titles for certain psalms, Gerstenberger makes an interesting observation in this case noticing that

Both Ethan and Heman (Ps. 88:1) are listed as famous wise men of the Ezrahite clan. If the final redactors who added this superscription meant to emphasize the monarchic dimensions of the ‘corner-stone’, they most successfully hid their intention.⁴²

While Gerstenberger makes an interesting point about the ‘monarchic dimensions’ of Psalm 89 he fails to see something else of significance in the attribution: its identification as a *maskil*. While not an easy term to define, in this context its use perhaps offers some clues to the mimetic quality of the psalm. A *maskil* could be characterized as an “instructive or skilful song”, a “memory passage” or even a “wisdom song performed to music”.⁴³ All these

⁴⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Message* (New York: Random House, 1967), 75.

⁴¹ An example of this can be seen in the *Pesach Seder* celebrated as a remembrance of the Exodus story. Traditionally the story is told by the father in the family using the first person *present* tense. In this way the story is mimetic; both remembered and re-enacted.

⁴² Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms. Part 2, and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), 147.

⁴³ Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 147. The term *maskil* derives from *śākal*, with its cognate definitions of ‘insight’ and ‘understanding’.

suggested ways of understanding the term reinforce the idea of the psalm providing both recall (anamnesis) and re-enactment (mimesis).

The mimetic quality of Psalm 89 forms a repeated affirmation underlining the importance of holding together both mythic and parabolic views. This ‘holding together’, in turn, enables intentional mimetic reflection on life experience. Nasuti again reminds us of the broad historical substance of this mimesis and its function stating that this psalm sits within an

historical sequence that includes the origins of the Davidic covenant, its passing on to Solomon (Psalm 72), and its demise at the time of the exile (Psalm 89:39–52). By taking note of the sequence, the reader is led to reflect on the larger narrative of Israel’s history and the role of the Davidic covenant within that history.⁴⁴

The ‘historical sequence’ self-evidently incorporates both the mythic and the parabolic. The true value of one is not found in the dismissal of the other. Rather, it is when the two qualities can coexist (through a process of mimesis) that fertile ground for meaning-making begins to be tilled. The uniqueness of this psalm is where it sits in both the historical sequence of Israel and the literary sequence of the Psalter. Both positions alert us to the edge of the precipice where the people were pondering their identity and continuity as YHWH’s covenant people.

A further dimension to the mimetic action here could be described as a re-traditioning of their history by later generations as the psalm was redacted and as they continued to use Psalm 89 in liturgy. This ongoing use of the psalm eventually became a reflection on past events rather than an anticipation of imminent events or processing of current events. Through this shift the psalm embraced both remembering and re-enacting the past. As the community considered their tradition afresh they attempted to make sense of their own experience and those of past generations. All this takes place as the mythic and the parabolic are brought into dialogue with each other through a mimetic act of liturgy.

⁴⁴ Harry P. Nasuti, “The Interpretive Significance of Sequence and Selection in the Book of Psalms,” in *The Book of Psalms* (eds. Peter W Flint, Patrick D Miller, Aaron Brunell, and Ryan Roberts; Leiden, NL: Brill, 2005), 317.

The Parenetic

Psalm 89 possesses one final and important quality which complements the others. It offers the possibility of a future which holds something greater for a community that looks back in order to look forward. The parenetic quality of Psalm 89 is perhaps not explicit but it is, nonetheless, present as the psalm is engaged with through liturgy. It presents implicit exhortation for the future as much as it presents counsel from the past. If mythic, parabolic and mimetic qualities begin to open a space for liturgical meaning-making then the parenetic quality suggests something which can be carried away from the space into the future. How has the opportunity eventuated? Gerald Wilson, in describing the movement in Book III as a whole, perhaps offers an answer to the question when he notes

These bookends [Pss. 73 and 89] set a tone of agonized reflection and questioning because of the collapse of the Davidic monarchy and the resulting experience of exile. How could God let this happen? And when will he respond in faithful fulfilment of his covenant responsibilities to re-establish the dynasty of David?⁴⁵

The parenetic quality of Psalm 89 emerges from the ‘agonized reflection’ and from questions such as those posed by Wilson. However, this reflection does not lead to resignation. Rather, it prompts the possibility of a hopeful imagination for a people doubting the very core of their identity and the integrity of their God. Tellingly, this nascent hope is articulated in the form of a question in verse 49 which ponders again the two key concepts of *hesed* (steadfast love) and *’emûnâ* (faithfulness) encountered earlier in, and threaded through, the psalm. The question is critical as it opens up a new vista in the covenantal relationship, a way forward which can doubt YHWH yet also express trust in YHWH for the future. Psalm 89 does not present a picture of the protesting voice being silenced but, rather, one of it being given space for expression. In doing this the parenetic quality of this psalm pushes beyond protest to hope.

The climax to Psalm 89, and Book III, is remarkable in both its simplicity and its profundity. The call for YHWH to remember is

⁴⁵ Gerald Wilson, “The Structure of the Psalter,” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 238–9. The ‘bookends’ referred to here are Psalm 89 and Psalm 73, which opens Book III of the Psalter. In contrast to Psalm 89, Psalm 73 contains none of the parabolic ambiguity. Rather, it presents a picture of confidence in God as one who is good to Israel and the ultimate protector of the people.

clearly covenantal in its overtones and represents a community asking their God to do the same for them as they have sought to do for themselves in recalling and re-enacting their history.⁴⁶ The psalm represents an attempt on the community's part to do what they can to reflect, seek counsel and find encouragement from their history but also to move beyond their lament for lost kingship. Now the clarion call is to YHWH to bring the community's hopes to fruition.

How does Psalm 89 achieve this? Rather than abandoning Davidic kingship as a failed ideal it presses the community to imagine it as something more than that which they had previously envisaged or experienced. Mays sheds light on what an expanded notion of kingship might look like, noting

The point of this carefully drawn parallel between kingship and God and that of David claims that the latter is integral to the former. The Messiah's rule actualizes in the world what is reality in the heavens and cosmos.⁴⁷

If Mays is correct then the picture painted here is something which transcends not only the exilic experience but also the people themselves. This speaks to YHWH's cosmic purposes and, in regard to kingship, takes the people themselves full circle back to the institution of the office.⁴⁸ It forms a dual reminder that even though YHWH's kingship was rejected by the people of Samuel's time there remains a close covenantal relationship between YHWH and the anointed king. The closeness between YHWH and the king is pictured in familial terms here in Psalm 89.⁴⁹ These two reminders raise an important question which forms the foundation of any hopeful imagination for the future. The dissonance between the demise of human kingship, self-evident in Israel's history, and the promised permanency of the Davidic covenant alongside the fundamental concept of YHWH as king stretches the horizons of possibility for a lamenting people. It prompts a question of what

⁴⁶ It is also a reminder that the call to remember is based on YHWH's action in the past (e.g. Exod. 3:7ff).

⁴⁷ James Mays, *The Lord Reigns* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 105.

⁴⁸ Cf. 1 Sam. 8.

⁴⁹ Cf. vv. 26–27; Psa. 2:7. Broyles notes that the descriptor 'firstborn' is used here of the Davidic king, implying one who transcends the typical limits of human kingship in both power and longevity. Cf. Craig Broyles, *Psalms* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Michigan), 357.

kingship might look like for the people now and for future generations.

In perhaps an unexpected twist, Psalm 89 closes with a brief, yet triumphant, doxology. Of course a doxology in itself is not unusual in the Psalter, with similar endings present at the close of Books I, III and IV plus similar echoes at the end of Psalm 150.⁵⁰ However, in this case, at the close of Book III, it uniquely draws together the ambivalence and ambiguity of Psalm 89 with a re-affirmation of hope in YHWH. Although the doxology's presence is described by Broyles as not being a 'constituent part' of the psalm, it nonetheless contributes to the rhetorical force of the final literary form.⁵¹ Perhaps the doxology holds an implicit question which asks, 'Where to now?' Psalm 89 thrusts both the Psalter and those who prayed and sang it into a brave new world. Here, irrespective of the existence of a human king, it seems more than coincidental that the following book of the Psalter (Book IV) begins with a purported psalm of Moses. This psalm strongly affirms trust in YHWH and is followed by "psalms after Psalm 90 [which] express proper sentiments of trust in, and praise of, God as the one true king."⁵²

Reflections

In a profound way Psalm 89 brings the four qualities described above together in a dialogical process. However, this process was not encountered by chance. It was precipitated by the demise of kingship as Israel had known it and resulted in the Exile. This brought them to a precipice which challenged both their identity and survival. Perhaps, in the previously used words of Robert Remini, Israel came "close to being irreparably smashed" as a people.⁵³ However, they were not smashed and their covenant relationship with YHWH did not cease to exist. Psalm 89 is, in part, a testimony to this fact. Rather than ignoring the reality of their 'precipice' and potential demise, the questions they had about themselves, God and the relationship between the two were given voice through a psalm which was subsequently embedded in liturgy.

⁵⁰ Cf. Psa. 41:13; 72:19 and 106:48.

⁵¹ Craig Broyles, *Psalms* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2012), 357.

⁵² Harry P. Nasuti "The Interpretive Significance of Sequence and Selection in the Book of Psalms," in *The Book of Psalms* (eds. Peter W Flint, Patrick D Miller, Aaron Brunell, and Ryan Roberts; Leiden, NL: Brill, 2005), 318.

⁵³ Robert Remini, *At the Edge of the Precipice*, (New York: Basic Books, 2010), xi.

Being a poetic song used in liturgy, containing mythic, parabolic, mimetic and parenetic qualities, Psalm 89 should be viewed as far more than a literary masterpiece, lest its inherent power is ignored or lost. The psalm, as a liturgical act, offered an invitation and a pathway for the community to enter into the dialogue. This dialogue, in turn, created a liminal space providing the impetus for making sense out of a world-changing situation in an intentional and enduring way.

The fact that the psalm was embedded in liturgy and included in the final form of the Psalter suggests, of course, that the invitation is open-ended in that it is extended to those beyond the initial audiences. This psalm, as with all psalms, invites us as it speaks beyond its immediate historical context holding a rhetorical force which cannot be understated. Implicit in the text is an encouragement for all to enter a dialogical process in light of their own unique situation of struggle to make sense out of their circumstances. In this way the psalm continues to speak beyond its time in both its content and the model of engagement. It offers people of faith today a model of prayer which opens up the world, providing a vehicle to speak with “shattering evocative speech that breaks through fixed conclusions and presses us always toward new, dangerous and imaginative possibilities”⁵⁴ at the edge of the precipice.

⁵⁴ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 6.