

Singing Steadfast Love and Faithfulness: The Messianic Significance of Ps 89

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ABSTRACT

Psalm 89 is a study in complexity. Debate ensues concerning its unity, structure, genre and historical setting. Its literary setting causes disagreement, which is not helped by the pivotal role it plays in understanding the shape of the Psalter. Most disorientating, however, is the contradictory emotions—exultant praise gives way to deep lament. The questions raised by these contradictory emotions remain unanswered. In this article, it is suggested that Ps 89 is best understood as having messianic significance. The case is made by noting that the psalm employs theological themes which culminate in the messiah, is heavily based on 2 Sam 7, fails to resolve, holds an important position in the Psalter’s shape and clearly contributes to the development of messianic hope in its early interpretation. The messianic significance of Ps 89, I contend, is found in its singing the steadfast love and faithfulness of YHWH despite the bleak circumstances to which it alludes.

A INTRODUCTION

Psalm 89 occupies a defining role in studies of the Psalter’s shape and particularly those concerned with Davidic hope. The psalm begins by singing YHWH’s steadfast love and faithfulness (v. 2) but ends by calling that same steadfast love and faithfulness into question (v. 50).¹ Many scholars claim that given the apparent rejection of the Davidic king in this psalm (89:39–46) and its positioning at the end of Book Three, Books Four and Five must point the reader away from Davidic kingship in order to foster hope and trust in divine kingship alone.² Alternatively, others argue that such dire circumstances make the reader

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¹ This article employs Hebrew versification throughout.

² See, for example, Gregory Goswell, “The Non-Messianic Psalter of Gerald H. Wilson,” *VT* 66/4 (2016): 524–541. <https://www.doi.org/10.1163/15685330-12341251>; David M. Howard Jr, “The Case for Kingship in the Old Testament Narrative Books and the Psalms,” *TJ* 9/1 (1988): 34; David M. Howard Jr., *The Structure of Psalms 93–100* (Biblical and Judaic Studies 5; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns,

ripe to receive the seed of messianic hope being planted and developed. If one adopts the latter view, as this article does, then Ps 89 undoubtedly possesses messianic significance. As others have noted, the presence of Davidic/royal psalms in the Psalter raises questions about YHWH's promises to the Davidic dynasty and provides fuel for exilic hope.³

Before probing the messianic significance of Ps 89, it should be asserted that the psalm is a significant and impressive composition. Given its length, content and placement in the Psalter, Ward's conclusion that "Ps. lxxxix is in many ways the most interesting and important of the royal psalms"⁴ is justified. Indeed, it is such a substantial psalm that a full exploration of all its complexities and oddities is beyond the scope of this article. Space denies a full exegesis of Ps 89.⁵ Before proceeding, however, some attention ought to be given to Ps 89's content. The psalm opens with a hymn of praise (vv. 1–19) that catalogues the aspects of YHWH that set him apart—character (v. 2), power (v. 6), creative work (v. 12) and kingship (v. 19). It then transitions to an oracle (vv. 20–38) in which YHWH's personal relationship and commitment to the Davidic king is positively outlined. Yet, it concludes in lament for the apparent abrogation of this special relationship (vv. 39–52)—which is devastatingly frank and accusatory—before the closing doxology for Book Three of the Psalter (v. 53). Klein aptly summarises:

[God's] faithfulness is bound up inextricably with God's matchless power. Such fidelity with power enabled God at the beginning to create the world and defeat the powers of chaos, and now this mixture of faithfulness and power gives credibility to his promise to destroy

1997); Gerald H. Wilson, "The Use of Royal Psalms at the 'Seams' of the Hebrew Psalter," *JSOT* 11/35 (1986): 92.

³ See, for example, Rolf A. Jacobson, "Imagining the Future of Psalms Studies," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Book of Psalms: The Current State of Scholarship* (ed. Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford; SBLAIL 20; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 235; Wilson, "Royal Psalms at the 'Seams,'" 91.

⁴ James M. Ward, "Literary Form and Liturgical Background of Psalm 89," *VT* 11/3 (1961): 321.

⁵ See William C. Pohl, "A Messianic Reading of Psalm 89: A Canonical and Intertextual Study," *JETS* 58/3 (2015): 507–525. His lengthier article engages in a closer exegetical examination of the text of Ps 89 and arrives at a similar conclusion. Despite arriving at a similar conclusion, the present article is both complementary and distinct from Pohl's in at least three ways. First, the present article employs a different methodology, surveying Ps 89 topically as rather than exegetically. Second, although more succinct on Ps 89's placement in the canonical shape of the Psalter, the present article fleshes out a few details that are absent in Pohl's article. Third, Pohl notes allusions to Ps 89 in the Prophetic Books whereas the present article observes allusions in the New Testament. In short, a student of Ps 89 who reads both articles is better placed to comprehend reading Ps 89 messianically than a student who has read only one or the other.

Israel’s enemies. The same divine fidelity surrounds Israel’s king and enables him to preside over a wide empire. Fidelity means God’s pledging to stick with the king through thick and thin, punishing the royal descendants when they err, to be sure, but never violating God’s everlasting obligation to the line of David. But by the end of the Psalm an honest look at contemporary history forces the psalmist to call God’s fidelity into question. . . he concludes that God has now clearly become furious with his anointed king, defiled his crown in the dust, cut short his days, and wrapped him in shame. How do these present realities square with the notion that God swore to David to be faithful?⁶

The evident gap between biblical promises to David and contemporary realities concerning the king clearly causes the psalmist distress. The tension between what is and what should be could either crush Israel’s hope or excite heightened expectations. Given what unfolds in the rest of the Psalter and in Scripture more broadly, the latter appears to be the case.⁷ Indeed, it could be argued that it is the psalm’s frank honesty and lack of resolution which reveals that:

This is a psalm that informs us indirectly as to how deeply the Messianic hope was embedded in the thinking of at least the faithful in Israel. For in a time of affliction it is keenly felt how sadly Israel’s desolate state is at odds with the glorious hopes that God had kindled in the heart of the nation by the promises of future greatness of the nation and its great king.⁸

In other words, the lament of Ps 89 is not the final word—an answer is yet to be given. There is, however, messianic significance in this unanswered lament.

By messianic significance I mean that the psalm maintains hope that YHWH will remain steadfast in his love and faithful to his promises of the Davidic dynasty. Psalm 89 does not extinguish anticipation that YHWH would work to fulfil all that was rightly expected of the Davidic king. While justifiably mourning the desperate circumstances created by the exile, the psalm refuses to abandon the tremendous expectations connected to King David and his line. This messianic significance will be evidenced by 1) asserting that Ps 89 is a discrete unit that functions as a royal lament, 2) there is a cumulative effect as a variety of facets of the psalm coalesce to point towards a future hope and 3) New

⁶ Ralph W. Klein, “Let Me not Sing the Story of Your Love off Key,” *CurTM* 27/4 (2000): 254.

⁷ Cf. S. D. Ellison, “Hope for a Davidic King in the Psalter’s Utopian Vision” (PhD diss., Queen’s University, Belfast, 2021); S. D. Ellison, “Old Testament Hope: Psalm 2, the Psalter, and the Anointed One,” *Them* 46/3 (2021): 534–545. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelos/article/old-testament-hope-psalm-2/>

⁸ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 632.

Testament allusions appear to affirm the general trajectory of messianic significance.

Therefore, in what follows, some matters of contention will first be addressed and clarified. Second, a fivefold argument for recognising the messianic significance of the psalm will be proffered. Finally, a number of New Testament allusions to Ps 89 will be identified that will further support the observance of messianic significance in the psalm.

B MATTERS OF CONTENTION

There are four interrelated matters of contention that require attention, namely unity, structure, genre and setting/date.

First, the unity of Ps 89, which McCann warns is a 'major interpretive issue,'⁹ must be addressed. One of Gunkel's legacies to biblical studies is Form Criticism, expounded most effectively in the posthumously published *An Introduction to the Psalms*. He argues:

The division that we attempt, should not be arbitrarily instituted. Rather, it should derive from *the character of the material itself*. The researcher should strive to overhear the innate, natural division of this type of poetry.¹⁰

Although the genres first delineated by Gunkel have experienced a degree of revision and augmentation, the literary categories he first outlined continue to dominate both scholarly and popular approaches to the Psalms.¹¹ Subsequently, deciding a psalm's genre is almost always the first step in exegetical work. Given to the variety of moods present in Ps 89¹² and evident in the divergent literary genres, some suggest the psalm is composed of separate poems.¹³ This

⁹ J. Clinton McCann Jr., *The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections* (NIB, vol. IV; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 1033.

¹⁰ Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *An Introduction to the Psalms* (trans. James D. Nogalski; MLBS; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 6–7, emphasis original.

¹¹ Cf. David J. A. Clines, "Psalms Research since 1955: I. The Psalms and the Cult," *TynBul* 18 (1967): 104. <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30682>; David J. A. Clines, "Psalms Research Since 1955: II. The Literary Genres," *TynBul* 20 (1969): 125. <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30676>.

¹² Bernon P. Lee, "Psalm 89: A Community Lament," in *Interpreting the Psalms for Preaching and Teaching* (ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV and D. Brent Sandy; St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2010), 107–118, describes the psalm as a roller coaster. My appreciation to Dr James McKeown for drawing my attention to this essay.

¹³ Charles A. Briggs, *Psalms* (ICC 2; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 250, simply terms it 'composite'. Cf. Craig C. Broyles, "The Psalms and Cult Symbolism: The Case of the Cherubim-Ark," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (ed. Philip S. Johnson and David G. Firth; Leicester: Apollos, 2005), 151; Gunkel and Begrich,

propensity has been adequately challenged by convincing evidence of the psalm's unity which need not be repeated at length here.¹⁴ It is sufficient to state that several features suggest its unity. First, the purposeful repetition of the **חסד** and **אמונה**.¹⁵ Steadfast love and faithfulness are key themes throughout the psalm (vv. 1, 2, 5, 8, 14, 24, 28, 33, 49).¹⁶ Second, the description of YHWH's reign in the first half of the psalm (vv. 1–18) is mirrored in the portrayal of the Davidic king's reign in the second half (vv. 19–37).¹⁷ Third, there is the persistent use of the connecting poetic device of the pronoun *you* throughout which further ties the apparently disparate parts together.¹⁸ These points may be summarised as thematic and poetic unifying features. McCann thus concludes: "This effect is not accidental, and it demonstrates the unity of Psalm 89."¹⁹ To agree with McCann is not to ignore the poignant questions that are raised in the psalm. Indeed, it is to do the opposite: "to read it as anything other than a whole poetic piece would destroy its unique message."²⁰

The second contention relates to the structure of Ps 89 (which naturally contributes to the debate about its unity). Happily, this issue is more easily clarified than that of the unity, despite its bearing on that discussion. Briggs, for example, proposes a complex and intricate structure: a) Praise for YHWH's faithfulness (vv. 2–3, 6–17), b) Lament for the Davidic Covenant in four parts (vv. 4–5, 18–22; 23–30; 31–38; 39–46) and c) An appended impatient interposition (vv. 47–52).²¹ Others simply divide the psalm into two: vv. 1–37 and 38–51.²² Increasingly, however, interpreters identify a distinct three part structure followed by the doxology marking the end of Book Three (v. 53): a hymn of praise (vv. 1–19), an oracle (vv. 20–38) and a lament (vv. 39–52).²³

Introduction to Psalms, 95; Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), 41.

¹⁴ Ward, "Psalm 89," 321–27; Richard J. Clifford, "Psalm 89: A Lament over the Davidic Ruler's Continued Failure," *HTR* 73/1–2 (1980): 36; Matthew W. Mitchell, "Genre Disputes and Communal Accusatory Laments: Reflections on the Genre of Psalm Lxxxix," *VT* 55/4 (2005): 515.

¹⁵ For more lexical links between the discrete sections, see Pohl, "A Messianic Reading of Psalm 89," 509.

¹⁶ Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth L. Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 674; McCann Jr, "Psalms," 1034.

¹⁷ Cf. McCann Jr, "Psalms," 1034.

¹⁸ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 675.

¹⁹ McCann Jr, "Psalms," 1034.

²⁰ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 674.

²¹ Briggs, *Psalms*, 250.

²² E.g. Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 166.

²³ Arnold A. Anderson, *Psalms* (NCB 2; London: Oliphants, 1972), 630; Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms* (NIBCOT; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 355; John Day, *Psalms* (OTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 95; Knut M. Heim, "The (God-

This structure is most appealing, accounting for the variety of moods in the psalm and, as noted above, the evident unity.

The third issue is the psalm’s genre. Whybray avers: “This psalm is complex and cannot be fitted into a single *Gattung*.”²⁴ Bellinger argues that the psalm should be designated a royal lament.²⁵ Mitchell labels it an “angry lament.”²⁶ Demonstrating greater ingenuity, both Floyd and Holladay argue that Ps 89 is best understood as a prophetic complaint.²⁷ In order to progress, the following must be asserted. First, the psalm is unmistakably a lament.²⁸ Although it does not follow the usual progression of a lament—reversing the praise and complaint—the key components are present. Second, it is evidently a royal psalm. Bullock observes that both Pss 89 and 18 are the only two psalms to explicitly mention the king, the anointed and David by name.²⁹ Moreover, the clear allusion to Nathan’s oracle in 2 Sam 7 confirms the royal nature of this

)Forsaken King of Psalm 89: A Historical and Intertextual Enquiry,” in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. John Day; JSOTSup 270; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 296–97; Pohl, “A Messianic Reading of Psalm 89,” 210–216; Willem A. VanGemenen, “Psalms,” in *EBC* (ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland; Revised, vol. 5; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 667; Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (trans. Herbert Hartwell; OTL; London: SCM Press, 1962), 590.

²⁴ Norman Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book* (JSOTSup 222; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 92. Cf. Anderson, *Psalms*, 2:631.

²⁵ William H. Bellinger Jr, *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990), 113.

²⁶ Mitchell, “Genre Disputes and Communal Accusatory Laments,” 526.

²⁷ Michael H. Floyd, “Psalm LXXXIX: A Prophetic Complaint about the Fulfillment of an Oracle,” *VT* 42/4 (1992): 445; William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 38.

²⁸ C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 52; Steven J. L. Croft, *The Identity of the Individual in the Psalms* (JSOTSup 44; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 119; Day, *Psalms*, 91; James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 16; W. D. Tucker Jr., “Psalms 1: Book of” (DOTWPW; ed. T. Longman III and P. Enns; Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 581–582; Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 21.

²⁹ Bullock, *Encountering the Psalms*, 179. Cf. Stephen Breck Reid, “David and the Political Theology of the Psalter,” in *The Psalter as Witness: Theology, Poetry, and Genre* (ed. W. Dennis Tucker Jr. and William H. Bellinger Jr.; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017), 49, who notes that the royal nature of Ps 89 is evidenced by “substantial references to David,” including Ps 132 in the same category. John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 56, writes: “This is explicitly royal . . . and is generally in the grandest royal style.”

psalm.³⁰ Therefore, despite Gunkel's conclusion that it is only partially royal,³¹ the majority of commentators classify it as royal in addition to any other genre features displayed.³² The psalm is preoccupied with Davidic kingship and YHWH's dynastic promises. Bellinger is therefore justified in concluding: "thus the text functions as a royal lament."³³

The fourth and final matter of contention is that of Ps 89's setting/date. The psalms are generally and intentionally divorced from any specific historical setting. Nevertheless, there are enough details in Ps 89 to tempt commentators to suggest a date or setting for the psalm.³⁴ The tantalising clues offer no consensus, however. Some place it as pre-exile,³⁵ while others argue for a post-exilic composition.³⁶ None of the suggestions is satisfactorily convincing. Dahood wisely warns that "Though the psalm contains much archaic material attempts at precise dating become rather precarious."³⁷ Ultimately, the date/setting of Ps 89 remains elusive.³⁸ Moreover, its function is primarily by way of its literary setting as opposed to its perceived historical setting.

C CONTRIBUTION OF PSALM 89 TO MESSIANIC HOPE

Given the controversy that accompanies Ps 89 on various fronts, it is somewhat surprising to find a lack of debate on the three-fold appearance of the root מִשָּׁח and the theme of messianic hope. Neither proponents nor opponents, it seems, regularly appeal to this psalm in support of their argument.³⁹ This is curious. The remainder of this article outlines five ways in which Ps 89 contributes to the messianic hope of the Psalter, the Old Testament more broadly and the Christian canon in general. It concludes by highlighting some ways in which the NT

³⁰ Indeed, the presence of prophetic material may also further strengthen the claim that Ps 89 has messianic significance. See John W. Hilber, *Cultic Prophecy in the Psalms* (BZAW 352; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 115–126.

³¹ Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms*, 99ff.

³² Bellinger Jr, *Psalms*, 113; Broyles, *Psalms*, 355; Croft, *Identity of the Individual*, 76; Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II 51–100* (AB 2; New York: Doubleday, 1973), 311; Day, *Psalms*, 91; John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 56; John Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89* (BCOTWP vol. 2; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 664; VanGemeren, "Psalms," 666; Ward, "Psalm 89," 321.

³³ Bellinger Jr, *Psalms*, 113.

³⁴ Cf. Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship: Two Volumes in One*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 219; Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 58.

³⁵ Anderson, *Psalms*, 2:631; Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms*, 321.

³⁶ Briggs, *Psalms*, 2:253; Bullock, *Encountering the Psalms*, 45.

³⁷ Dahood, *Psalms*, 2:311.

³⁸ McCann Jr, "Psalms," 1034.

³⁹ Pohl, "A Messianic Reading of Psalm 89," is a happy exception to this generalisation.

encourages such a reading. In this way, Ps 89 sings of steadfast love and faithfulness.

First, Ps 89 contributes to messianic hope both theologically and thematically. Although it is true that lexically the psalm references only the last reigning king of the Davidic line,⁴⁰ it contributes to the theme of messianic hope in its theology and themes. Theologically, the situation reflected in Ps 89 proves a catalyst for messianic hope given the chasm between Nathan's oracle concerning the Davidic line (2 Sam 7) and the obvious absence of a Davidic king on the throne as depicted in Ps 89 (vv. 39–40).⁴¹ If YHWH is faithful to his promises, then the exile cannot be the end of the Davidic line. Psalm 89 "holds God accountable for God's promises."⁴² It does so by praising YHWH for his steadfast love and faithfulness (vv. 2, 3, 6, 9, 15, 25, 29, 34), expressing confidence that YHWH (and by implication his anointed king) will be victorious against enemies (vv. 11, 23–24, 52), and appealing to the covenant made between YHWH and David (vv. 4–5, 19, 20–22, 29, 34–36). Thematically, Ps 89 gives prominence to concepts such as servanthood (vv. 4, 21, 40, 51) and sonship (vv. 27–28), both of which are developed messianically elsewhere in the Christian canon (e.g. Ezek 34:23–31; 37:21–28).⁴³ Moreover, the Davidic king and YHWH are described in parallel qualities, which binds them together in an indissoluble manner. They are both exalted rulers (vv. 7–9, 28), who are victorious (vv. 11, 14, 22–24), over or near bodies of water (vv. 10, 26).⁴⁴ Thus, the seeds from which messianic hope might grow are present in Ps 89; it teaches its reader to "continue the conversation, even when the questions are unspeakably painful and God seems to have disappeared."⁴⁵ In this way, "Psalm 89 is a very important psalm theologically."⁴⁶ The conviction about YHWH's steadfast love and faithfulness is what gives rise to the pain in Ps 89 and yet the very same psalm theologically and thematically assures its reader that neither is actually absent.

Second, Ps 89 contributes to messianic hope through intertextuality. A portion of the psalm (vv. 20–38) clearly draws heavily from 2 Sam 7, which has

⁴⁰ See Day, *Psalms*, 98.

⁴¹ Knut M. Heim, "The Perfect King of Psalm 72: An "Intertextual" Inquiry," in *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* (ed. Philip E. Johnson, Richard S. Hess, and Gordon J. Wenham; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), 224.

⁴² deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 683.

⁴³ Daniel I. Block, "My Servant David: Ancient Israel's Vision of the Messiah," in *Israel's Messiah in the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carroll R.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 48; Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, 146–150.

⁴⁴ Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (WBC 20; Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 423.

⁴⁵ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 684.

⁴⁶ Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, 166.

been labelled “the Magna Charta of messianic interpretation.”⁴⁷ Kidner remarks: “The foundation to this psalm is the great prophecy of 2 Samuel 7:4–17, at the heart of which is the promise of a throne for David’s dynasty for ever, and of the unique honours for its occupant.”⁴⁸ This conclusion is universally accepted.⁴⁹ Indeed, Heim suggests that the conclusion is “inescapable.”⁵⁰ It is important, however, to observe that Nathan’s oracle is not merely repeated verbatim. Instead, the psalmist poetically expands and ultimately escalates the promise—thus underscoring YHWH’s steadfast love and faithfulness to his promises and his people. There is a development from my son (2 Sam 7:14) to my firstborn (Ps 89:28); from a great name (2 Sam 7:9) to being most exalted (Ps 89:28); from rest from enemies (2 Sam 7:10–11) to an empire (Ps 89:26) and from a single successor (2 Sam 7:12–15) to a dynasty (Ps 89:31–33).⁵¹ Indeed, the promises, as expressed in Ps 89, “go beyond 2 Samuel 7 or any other covenant promise in the whole of the biblical text.”⁵² Hence, the psalm goes beyond its source text, exaggerating and idealising the promises and language found there—from verse 20 onwards YHWH himself is the speaker, offering a virtually unmediated promise.⁵³ Schnittjer observes that Ps 89’s

prophetic inserts represent reworking of Nathan’s oracle housed in 2 Sam 7 . . . The psalmist repeatedly emphasizes the enduring character of the Davidic promise by attaching language of permanence to “covenant” (89:3, 28, 24, 39[4, 29, 35, 40]) and “oath” (89:3, 35, 49[4, 36, 50]).⁵⁴

Psalm 89 may well reflect the exile but it in no way communicates the cessation of the Davidic line—quite the opposite—its developed rehearsal of 2 Sam 7 reminds its readers of the promises YHWH has made concerning the Davidic dynasty. A new Davidic king will be a concrete expression of YHWH’s steadfast love and faithfulness.

Third, Ps 89 contributes to messianic hope by failing to resolve. The end of Ps 89 is rather abrupt. Thus, it is open-ended. Remarkably, as noted above, “Instead of omitting statements of faith, it emphasizes them in order to let them

⁴⁷ Philip J. King, quoted in VanGemenen, “Psalms,” 682.

⁴⁸ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150* (Reprint; TOTC 16; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press Academic, 2008), 351.

⁴⁹ Anderson, *Psalms*, 2:639; Day, *Psalms*, 95; Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms* (THOTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 156, 354; Heim, “The (God-)Forsaken King,” 299–306; Leupold, *Psalms*, 637; McCann Jr, “Psalms,” 1035; VanGemenen, “Psalms,” 672, 682; Whybray, *Reading the Psalms*, 93.

⁵⁰ Heim, “The (God-)Forsaken King,” 299.

⁵¹ See Broyles, *Psalms*, 357.

⁵² deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 682.

⁵³ Heim, “The (God-)Forsaken King,” 301, 314–315; Ward, “Psalm 89,” 329.

⁵⁴ Gary E. Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 498–499.

have their full scandalous effect.”⁵⁵ This scandalous effect is achieved by the psalm failing to resolve; it simply stops.⁵⁶ The tentative proposal here is that this failure to resolve encourages the reader to consider where resolution can be found, thus, prompting the option of messianic hope. Psalm 89 is not the final word on covenantal promises. Rather, it insinuates more is to come. In favour of reading Ps 89 as prompting messianic hope with its open-ended conclusion is the fact that it ends (before the doxology) with the root מִשָּׁח (v. 52). Given the context of Ps 89, it could be argued further that “the lament holds out hope by pronouncing the Davidic covenant as inviolable (Ps 89:33–37).”⁵⁷ Moreover, the prophets would likewise suggest that Ps 89 is not the final word (cf. Isa 9:6–7; 11:2; 55:3–5; Jer 23:5–6; Mic 5:2–5).⁵⁸ As Heim notes, “the psalm is *open-ended*, looking forward to the Lord’s action in the defiant hope that the divine promise as expressed in Nathan’s oracle is still valid.”⁵⁹ In other words, because the questions raised in Ps 89 remain unanswered within the psalm, there remains the opportunity for them to be answered positively beyond the psalm. Given that a failure to resolve is not normally how lament works—except for the immediately preceding Ps 88—there is added impetus to seek an answer elsewhere. Thus,

These questions linger in the Psalter. In certain respects they get answered by psalms that assert ‘Yahweh rules/is king’ (93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1) and in other respects by Pss 110 and 132. But in reality these questions continue to linger, awaiting an answer from Nazareth.⁶⁰

It is to the possible answers within the Psalter we must turn next.

⁵⁵ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:664.

⁵⁶ Goldingay, 2:690; Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 20:430.

⁵⁷ Sampson S. Ndonga, “Revisiting the Theocratic Agenda of Book 4 of the Psalter for Interpretive Premise,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Book of Psalms: The Current State of Scholarship* (ed. Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford; SBLAIL 20; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 150.

⁵⁸ For a worked example of bringing Ps 89 into conversation with prophetic texts see Otto Eissfeldt, “The Promises of Grace to David in Isaiah 55:1–5,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honour of James Muilenburg* (The Preacher’s Library; London: SCM Press, 1962), 196–207. Thanks again to Dr James McKeown for bringing this reference to my attention.

⁵⁹ Heim, “The (God-)Forsaken King,” 303. Emphasis original. Cf. McCann Jr, “Psalms,” 1037.

⁶⁰ Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use*, 500. Pohl, “A Messianic Reading of Psalm 89,” 522–225, suggests that prophetic texts begin to answer these open questions. For more on this, see below.

Fourth, Ps 89 contributes to messianic hope when its literary setting within the Psalter is considered. It must be acknowledged that the Psalter does indeed have a shape. Wilson asserts:

Let us begin with the fact that the Psalter does have a shape. The one hundred fifty canonical psalms have come down to us in a particular arrangement that is traditional, if nothing else. This arrangement can be found in the versions (e.g. Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Aramaic) and, with the exception of some of the Qumran psalms manuscripts, dominates the Hebrew tradition as well. So, the question that confronts the student of the psalter is not whether it has a shape but what the indicators of shape are. Further, one must ask what the significance of this shape is.⁶¹

Indeed, I have attempted to delineate the shape of the Psalter and its significance.⁶² I argue that the narrative impulse of the Psalter reveals itself in the movements of the five books: Book One introduces the Davidic king who trusts in YHWH; Book Two depicts the kingdom being established with both Levitical (Ps 68) and royal (Ps 72) zeniths; Book Three laments the fall of Jerusalem and subsequent exile; Book Four assures readers that YHWH still reigns, while hinting at a new David (Ps 101); Book Five promises the defeat of enemies and portrays a utopian future in the establishing of Zion and Davidic kingship.⁶³ This is the Psalter's storyline and the literary setting within which Ps 89 is placed. The psalm closes Book Three, which reflects on the exile, and thus it proves a pivotal psalm in the Psalter's narrative impulse.⁶⁴ Psalm 89 is the high point of tension in the storyline, forcing Books Four and Five to offer resolution. Perhaps the most striking answer to the questions of Ps 89 is that found in Ps 132.⁶⁵ The divine voice is recorded as reaffirming YHWH's election of both Zion and the Davidic dynasty. In this "the macro psalter context points not to the (immediate) son of Jesse, but to a *coming* Davidic figure."⁶⁶ Thus, Ps 89

⁶¹ Gerald H. Wilson, "The Shape of the Book of Psalms," *Int* 46/2 (1992): 129.

⁶² Ellison, "Hope for a Davidic King," especially chapter 3. Cf. Ellison, "Old Testament Hope," 541–542.

⁶³ Michael Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope: Is the Hebrew Bible Really Messianic?* (NACSBT 9; Nashville: B&H, 2010), 77, observes: "By recognizing the Psalms as a coherent collection of the postexilic period, the message of the entire book, not just individual songs, should be read as referring to the future king, namely, the Messiah." For a popular 1,500-word expansion of this see, S. D. Ellison, "Seeing Christ in the Shape of the Psalms," *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/seeing-christ-shape-psalms/>.

⁶⁴ Ndogo, "Revisiting the Theocratic Agenda of Book 4 of the Psalter for Interpretive Premise," 150.

⁶⁵ Grogan, *Psalms*, 208–209; James Hely Hutchinson, "The Psalter as a Book," in *Stirred by a Noble Theme: The Book of Psalms in the Life of the Church* (ed. Andrew G. Shead; Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), 40.

⁶⁶ Hutchinson, "The Psalter as a Book," 34. Emphasis original.

contributes to messianic hope by its literary placement in the Psalter, with its painful questions heightening the appearance of Davidic hope in Books Four and Five (such as Pss 110; 132).⁶⁷ Again, this messianic hope causes the psalm to sing steadfast love and faithfulness.

Fifth, Ps 89 contributes to messianic hope in early interpretation. Mitchell argues that "Its implicit messianic interpretation in the Psalter is confirmed by later interpreters."⁶⁸ The Targum reads Ps 89 messianically.⁶⁹ The Targum's reading is further supported by 4QPs^x which contains sections of Ps 89 and has been labelled a *libretto of messianic testimonia*.⁷⁰ Unsurprisingly, the early Christian community is also found to interpret this psalm in the same vein.⁷¹ As a summary of all the above points as well as this fifth point, Heim's conclusion is apt: "The result of this historical process of rereading... was the gradual growth of a new theological concept, the anticipation of a Davidic king of a different kind: the Messiah."⁷² These early interpreters evidently witnessed the singing of steadfast love and faithfulness in Ps 89.

Thus, Psalm 89 contains theological and thematic reflections, employs intertextuality of messianic passages, fails to resolve the painful questions about the Davidic dynasty raised by the exile, is prominently placed in the Psalter's narrative impulse and was evidently interpreted messianically by some of its earliest interpreters. While no single one of these points would clinch the case for concluding that Ps 89 possesses a messianic significance, together they prove difficult to ignore. Together these elements assert that both YHWH's steadfast love and faithfulness remain. While they are both questioned, the facets of the psalm outlined above affirm that in the end Ps 89 sings of them in expectation. The final element of this article's examination of Ps 89 is its presence in the New Testament.

⁶⁷ Heim, "The (God-)Forsaken King," 296, likewise observes: "In view not only of its original historical setting but also of its setting in the biblical canon, the psalm has acquired messianic implications that an exclusive focus on its original *Sitz-im-Leben* may fail fully to uncover. The exilic experience of the psalm's first audience forced questions about the relationship between divine promise and political reality that refuse to go away, as the later biblical material testifies."

⁶⁸ David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms* (JSOTSup 252; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 255.

⁶⁹ Mitchell, 255. Cf. Anderson, *Psalms*, 2:648; Leupold, *Psalms*, 640.

⁷⁰ Mika S. Pajunen, "4QPs[x]: A Collective Interpretation of Psalm 89:20–38," *JBL* 133/3 (2014): 380, 382. Cf. Dwight D. Swanson, "Qumran and the Psalms," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (ed. Philip S. Johnson and David G. Firth; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), 253.

⁷¹ Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter*, 255–56; Weiser, *Psalms*, 593–594.

⁷² Heim, "The (God-)Forsaken King," 322.

D PSALM 89 IN THE NEW TESTAMENT⁷³

A brief perusal of the New Testament might, at first, appear to undo the above arguments all at once.⁷⁴ There are no explicit references or direct quotations of Ps 89 in the NT. Nevertheless, there are several clear allusions to Ps 89, not to mention the culmination of themes present in the psalm. As Eaton correctly observes: “For the New Testament the faithfulness of God is vindicated in Christ, heir of the Davidic oracles (Luke 1.32–3; Acts 2:29f.; 13:22f.).”⁷⁵ The same may be said for steadfast love. Two of the most explicit allusions and the manner in which they confirm Eaton’s observation are discussed in the rest of this article.

The first allusion to note is in Acts 13:22. On closer inspection, it becomes apparent that, in his speech in Acts 13, Paul employs the phrase “I have found (in) David” from Ps 89:21.⁷⁶ While evidently based on the phraseology of the Old Testament and placed within quotation marks in some English translations (e.g. CSB, ESV, NIV), it is not an exact quotation and is clearly conflated with other passages (1 Sam 13:14 in the first instance and arguably Isa 44:28).⁷⁷ Nonetheless, the New Testament text mirrors the LXX: εὗρον Δαυῖδ. The significance of this quotation or allusion is Paul’s emphasis that Jesus is the offspring of David (Acts 13:23). This picks up on the theme of offspring in Ps 89:29–38. In other words, Paul ties the content of Ps 89 to the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth in such a way that Jesus is seen as the resolution to the open-endedness of the psalm.⁷⁸ He is the Davidic descendant who will endure forever (Ps 89:38)—he is the steadfast love and faithfulness sung about in Ps 89 personified. Perhaps, as Marshall tentatively suggests, “The commendation of David may be meant to set up a typology with David’s descendant, Christ, and to establish the credentials of the latter in view of his pedigree.”⁷⁹ More positively, it could be argued that this is not a fresh reading of the psalm. Rather, Paul is simply applying the messianic hope expressed in the Old Testament generally and Ps 89 particularly to the person of Jesus.⁸⁰ Jesus is the Davidic

⁷³ Some intriguing Old Testament correspondences are worth noting. See, for example, Isa 55:1–5 and Jer 33:14–26. Cf. Pohl, “A Messianic Reading of Psalm 89,” 522–525.

⁷⁴ Mays, *The Lord Reigns*, 17; Whybray, *Reading the Psalms*, 94.

⁷⁵ John H. Eaton, *Psalms* (TBC; London: SCM Press, 1967), 222.

⁷⁶ See Grogan, *Psalms*, 355; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (trans. Keith Crim; CC; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 199.

⁷⁷ C. K. Barrett, *Acts 1–14* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 636; Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary (3:1–14:28)* (vol. 2; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 2061.

⁷⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 452–453; David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PNTC; Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 388.

⁷⁹ I. Howard Marshall, “Acts,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 584.

⁸⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (Revised; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 256, writes: “This coming ruler would be a new and greater David...

descendant longed for in Ps 89. Longenecker's remarks aptly summarise the point being made here: "Paul's Christian proclamation begins by announcing that God has brought forth the messianic Deliverer from David's line in the person of Jesus."⁸¹

The second allusion to note is that in Rev 1:5 the connection between Ps 89 and Rev 1:5 is perhaps slightly more obvious given that three phrases from Ps 89:28, 38 are employed in Rev 1:5: "faithful witness," "firstborn" and "ruler of the kings of the earth." Even though the wording is not an exact match with the LXX, many commentators both note and defend the allusion.⁸² Beale perceptively observes:

Commentators are no doubt right in seeing Ps. 88(89): 27, 37 as the designation of Christ as "faithful witness," "firstborn," and "ruler of the kings of the earth" since all three phrases occur there. However, the significance of this allusion is not usually discussed.⁸³

Although Beale's ensuing discussion is not what one would hope for after such a remark, he does helpfully conclude that "John views Jesus as the ideal Davidic king on an escalated eschatological level."⁸⁴ It is difficult to read Rev 1:5 any other way than that Jesus is designated the faithful witness, firstborn son and ruler of the kings mentioned in Ps 89. Thus, the first thing John asserts about Jesus Christ in Revelation is that he is the Davidic descendant promised in the Old Testament and realised in the New Testament. This is the realisation of the steadfast love and faithfulness in Ps 89. By alluding to Ps 89's terminology, John confirms that Jesus's witness is true and that his pre-eminence is unrivalled. Once again, it is legitimate to note the pre-existent messianic interpretation

As the postexilic centuries passed... the longing for this messianic deliverer became more intense than ever." Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (TNTC; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), who is more specific, noting: "The promises in question are those made to David that he would have offspring who would rule after him forever (2 Sa. 7:12–16; cf. 22:51; Pss. 89:29, 36f.; 132:11f., 17). This offspring is identified as Jesus." See also, Bock, *Acts*, 452–53.

⁸¹ Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," (ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; EBC vol. 9; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 425.

⁸² David Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (WBC 52a; Dallas: Word Books, 1997), 37–40; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), 190–191; Grogan, *Psalms*, 301; Heim, "The (God-)Forsaken King," 3016–3321; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Revised; NIBCNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 49; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 62n.19; 63; Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 76.

⁸³ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 190.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

connected to Ps 89 present in Judaism.⁸⁵ If the argument outlined above in favour of reading Ps 89 with a messianic significance is convincing in its own right, the fact that New Testament authors likewise understood the psalm as lending itself to a messianic interpretation further solidifies the argument. Thus, Mounce contends that the messianic reading of the psalm defensibly stems from Ps 89 itself;⁸⁶ or to put it another way, "In Revelation 1 each allusion makes a statement about Jesus the Christ which identifies him as the answer to the question posed in Psalm 89."⁸⁷

E CONCLUSION

Psalm 89 occupies a defining role in Psalter studies. It does so precisely because of its messianic significance. The psalm employs theological themes which culminate in the messiah, is heavily based on 2 Sam 7, fails to resolve, holds an important position in the Psalter's shape and clearly contributes to the development of messianic hope in its early interpretation. Its mere presence in the Psalter, along with other royal psalms, is a telling indicator. As Mitchell observes, "Like other royal psalms, Psalm 89's preservation in the Psalter after the eclipse of *bet*-David suggests it was understood as indicating an anticipated future Davidide."⁸⁸ Given these arguments and in light of the two New Testament allusions identified, it is justifiable to conclude with Kirkpatrick that "the Incarnation was the true solution to the Psalmist's perplexity, as the supreme demonstration of the lovingkindness and faithfulness of God in the fulfilment of His promises."⁸⁹ The messianic significance of Ps 89 is witnessed in its singing the steadfast love and faithfulness of YHWH.

⁸⁵ Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 39; G. K. Beale and Sean M. McDonough, "Revelation," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 1089; Alan F. Johnson, "Revelation," in *EBC*, (ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland; Revised, vol. 13; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 600.

⁸⁶ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 49.

⁸⁷ Heim, "The (God-)Forsaken King," 319.

⁸⁸ Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter*, 255.

⁸⁹ Alexander F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (CBSC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 531. Cf. Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, 199; Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use*, 500.

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