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Introduction and History of Interpretation

The biblical psalms attributed to Asaph (Psalms 50, 73–83) exhibit the most concentrated collection of historical referents in the Psalter. These historical referents, embodied in the Asaphite collection, serve as the marshals of Israel's historical memory and establish a cultic framework in which Israel's memory is formed, its history re-presented , and its identity shaped. My contention is that the historical material in these psalms, paired as it is with a broad vocabulary of remembrance, is a form of cultic historiography that is principally attested in Asaph and is distinctive of the Psalter.

The Purpose of this Study

As a group, the Asaphite Psalms contain more historical material than any other individual psalm or grouping of psalms. These historical referents play an important role both in the Asaphite collection itself (in terms of how the historical material is at work in it) and, comparatively, within the broader cultic landscape preserved in various portions of the Psalter. There are other individual psalms that contain historical referents. These psalms, 105, 106, 135, and 136, have traditionally been classified (along with the Asaphite Psalm 78) as "historical"; they are noteworthy both for the prominence or volume of the historical material in them and in that they represent minor collec-

tions, paired together and sharing some key features. In addition, there are individual psalms that contain relatively brief historical referents (e.g., 66:6, 68:7, 99:6–7, 114:1). All of this material falls into the category that I label "cultic historiography." By this term I mean historical reflection located primarily in the psalms, written for recitation or performance in worship and often attributed to Levitical guilds or groups.[1]

It is also noteworthy that in addition to those of the Asaphite school, there are psalms attributed to other groups or individual members of the Levitical guilds: the Korahites (Psalms 42, 44–49, 84–85, 87–88) and the so-called Merarites (Heman: Psalm 88; Ethan: Psalm 89; and Jeduthun: Psalms 39, 62, and 77). In some cases, these psalms also contain what may appear to be historical referents. It is within this broader context of cultic historiography that the Asaphite material stands out, both in terms of its sheer volume and its distinctiveness.

Amidst the valuable contributions of the traditional interpretive approaches, there has been a glaring absence within the history of interpretation of these psalms to date. The nature of the historical material in these psalms has received little sustained, systematic attention. And while in many of the studies of this group, with their various agendas and emphases, it has been observed that "historical references" and "recapitulation" play a part in or are "typical" of the group of psalms, rarely is much more than the simple observation made.[2] The nature and function of the historical material is left either to speak for itself or is ignored almost altogether.

Methodology

The present study takes into consideration the traditional interpretive methods that have dominated Psalms study for decades and adds to them attention to the mnemohistorical (i.e., the intersection of history

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1. Yosef Yerushalmi has suggested that it is primarily through ritual and recital of "capsule history," historical remembrance that is formulaic, that memory flowed, was shaped, and was sustained not by historians but by "priests and prophets." Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (London: University of Washington Press, 1996), 11–12. See also Martin L. Brenner, *The Song of the Sea: Ex 15:1–21* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 154.

2. See, for example, Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch: Studies in the Psalter, III*, JSOTS 233 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); and Harry P. Nasuti, *Tradition History and the Psalms of Asaph* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). One exception is Erik Haglund, *Historical Motifs in the Psalms*, Coniectanea Biblica 23 (Lund: Gleerup, 1984). Haglund, however, is not primarily concerned with the tradition group from which the historical motifs are derived. More recently, see Christine Danette Brown Jones, *The Psalms of Asaph: A Study of the Function of a Psalm Collection* (PhD diss., Baylor University, Waco, TX, 2009).

and memory) content of the Asaphite corpus with an eye to understanding the nature and function of cultic historiography.

One of my basic presuppositions is that when a historical event or individual, what I refer to as a "historical referent," is found in a psalm, it is used intentionally, and this intentional usage shapes the psalm rhetorically. For example, a song of complaint could have any of a number of situations or events as its locus, including individual illness (Psalm 38), national troubles (Psalm 60), and the aggressive and destructive speech of the "enemy" (to either the individual, Psalm 64, or the community, Psalm 12); there may be any of a variety of reasons for complaint to the Lord. When a specific historical reference is made—a reference to the exodus, David, or the destruction of the temple—it cannot be viewed as accidental.

Mnemohistory is not like history proper. History is the critical study of what verifiably happened (or of verifiable people, institutions, etc.) and the understanding of those events; mnemohistory is concerned with the past *as it is remembered*. History deals with what actually happened. Mnemohistory deals with the impact of what is maintained. My analysis of historical reflection in the cultus as represented by the Asaphite Psalter is intended to contribute to the understanding of the rhetorical function of cultic historiography in general and to the role it played in the religious practice and theological expression of early Israel. In this study, I take for granted the validity of form and cultic criticism; indeed, more than "valid," such classical-critical approaches are necessary when seeking to understand a particular rhetorical function within poetry most likely written for worship—in this case cultic historiography. As such, my work is dependent on and indebted to Hermann Gunkel, Claus Westermann, Harry Nasuti, and Sigmund Mowinckel.[3] In addition to this, there has, in recent years, been an increase in attention on the literary function of various features of the psalms as poetry, which has had a salutary effect on the nuance and sophistication of interpretive efforts. Another assumption of the present study is the importance, indeed the crucial role, such observations play in the reading of the psalms. In particular, one may note the important surveys of Luis Alonso Schökel (types and genres of poetry) and William P. Brown (on metaphor).[4]

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3. Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998); Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); Harry Nasuti, *Defining the Sacred Songs: Genre, Tradition and the Post-Critical Interpretation of the Psalms*, JSOTS 218 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

Attention is also due to the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of biblical studies, both in terms of locating Israel in the ancient Near Eastern context (in comparison and contrast) and of the potential contribution of modern critical sociology. In the case of the former, the present study does not seek to make such comparative or contrastive claims. Rather, I draw on the works of other authors on the place and function of memory/history in Israel's neighbors—specifically the Egyptians in the work of Jan Assmann, the Romans in the work of Alain Gowing, and the Babylonians in the work of Gerdien Jonker.[5] In the case of the latter, there is value for the understanding and interpretation of the biblical psalms in modern insights into memory and history, and the interplay between them. The work of a selection of authors (with a significant contribution from the field of sociology) is reviewed in chapter two.

History of Interpretation

Franz Delitzsch (1871)

In his *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, Delitzsch identifies five categories of features that are definitive of the Asaphite Psalms: (1) names for God, (2) prophetic speech and judgment, (3) historical references, (4) northern characteristics, and (5) common language/vocabulary.[6] Delitzsch also concludes that the Asaphite superscription provides a link to the original Asaph who, though not the author of all of the psalms—several of which are best dated to the exilic or postexilic period—serves as the model or paradigm for a particular school of psalm writing. Delitzsch offered an early entry into the field of reflection on the Asaphite collection. His identification of these five characteristics of the Asaphite corpus remains an important contribution.[7]

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4. Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, Subsidia Biblica 11 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988); William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

5. Jan Assmann, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munchen: C. H. Beck, 1997); Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Alain M. Gowing, *Empire and Memory: The Representation of the Roman Republic in Imperial Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Gerdien Jonker, *The Topography of Remembrance: The Dead, Tradition and Collective Memory in Mesopotamia,* Studies in the History of Religions 68 (New York: Brill, 1995).

6. Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, 3 vols. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1888), 142ff.

7. In various ways, each of the studies mentioned here have engaged Delitzsch's categories outlining the distinctive elements of the Asaphite collection. In addition, it may be noted that an emphasis particular to the study of these psalms has been their prophetic qualities; see Alfred Haldar, *Asso-*

Sigmund Mowinckel (1962)

In *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, Mowinckel rightly observes that "it is, in fact, surprising that a cultic interpretation of the psalms has not been suggested long ago."[8] The Psalms of Asaph are particularly suited to this reflection: most likely stemming from a Northern cultus, the nucleus of which, according to Mowinckel, is likely dated to the preexilic period. Hand in hand with these observations is the assertion that what takes place within the cultic setting is intended to be effective.

With an objective inner logic, the cultic situations demand a particular content in a particular form. Within the framework of a divine service of worship, nothing is accidental. Everything has its significance and its purpose, which one must try to fathom.[9]

Mowinckel's observation about the content of the cultic poetry suggests the need for "fathoming the significance and purpose" (i.e., the rhetorical function) of the historical remembrance represented in the Psalms of Asaph.[10]

Martin Buss (1963)

In "The Psalms of Asaph and Korah," Buss offers a brief but important survey of the major themes and issues in the Asaphite Psalms. Buss concludes that these psalms are homogeneous, the work of a particular school of thought, with special affinity for wisdom, direct prophetic

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ciations of Cult Prophets among the Ancient Semites (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1945); William H. Bellinger, *Psalmody and Prophecy*, JSOTS 27 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984); Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, "Das Prophetische in den Psalmen: Zur Gottesrede der Asafpsalmen im Vergliech mit der des ersten und zweiten Davidpsalters," in *Ich bewirke das Heil und erschaffe das Unheil (Jesaja 45,7): Studien zur Botschaft der Propheten*, ed. Friedrich Diedrich and Bernd Willmes (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1998), 223–43. Three of the Asaphite Psalms are typically identified as "prophetic"—Psalms 50, 75, and 81. The prophetic character of these psalms has been widely noted and need not be reiterated here. Psalm 73 also shares these familiar prophetic concerns for the poor. Because of its use of direct divine speech and its plea for justice for the weak, lowly, orphan, and destitute (v. 3), Psalm 82 has also been identified as "prophetic." "The God quotations are usually understood as 'oracles' that were delivered by a cultic prophet or priest. While scholars have offered differing reconstructions of the activities and identities of such cultic prophets, the recourse to such prophets as the best way to explain the function of God quotations is a widely-held position." Rolf A. Jacobson, *Many Are Saying: The Function of Direct Discourse in the Hebrew Psalter*, JSOTS 397 (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 83.

8. Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel's Worship*, Vol. 2, X:12: "The traditional Jewish and Christian interpretation, however, took it for granted that the psalms were originally private, individual poetry. They were of course bound by the theory that most of the psalms had been composed by David and some of his supposed contemporaries, such as Asaph, Heman, etc."

9. Ibid., Vol. 2, X:29.

10. Mowinckel himself does not pursue in great detail the historical content of the Asaphite Psalter and its function, instead summarizing the collection as a whole, but the present study is indebted to his call for attention to the "particular content" of the cultic poetry.

oracles, and "historical recapitulation," which are "the work of religious leadership." Buss does not attend in detail to literary questions of the function of historical reflection/memory, but his work certainly does suggest such comparison. As Buss notes, "They [a circle of Levitical religious leaders/authors] may be described as forming a sizable class of religious leaders who were largely engaged in exhortation and in the propagation of memory of ancient events—in short, in the religious education of the people."[11]

Karl-Johan Illman (1976)

Illman's study of these psalms, *Thema und Tradition in den Asaf-Psalmen*, begins by acknowledging that their common superscription sets them apart from the rest of the Psalter. The question that drives his study is whether or not there is a discernable tradition-stream present in and derivable from these psalms. By way of answering this question, Illman evaluates content, themes, and key features that are shared by the so-called Psalms of Asaph, and his conclusion is striking. Illman finds that there can be no tradition group behind these psalms because there is no content that is ubiquitous.[12]

Differing so sharply from other scholars who identify numerous common themes, images, and vocabulary, Illman is either on to something or terribly off the mark. His base observation, that there is no one theme or motif that is to be found in every psalm that bears the name of Asaph, is undeniable. The problem, however, is in Illman's basic presumption that any tradition group would sound any one note so thoroughly that it would occur in everything they do, say, or produce. A further issue with Illman is his failure to offer a compelling explanation for the presence of the common superscription in which he sees so little importance or contribution. His simplistic dismissal of the superscription is a disappointment. Still, tradition-history provides an important entrée in the study of the Asaphite collection, one that Illman begins but is more fully explored in the work of Harry Nasuti.

11. Martin J. Buss, "The Psalms of Asaph and Korah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82, no. 4 (1963): 386.
12. Karl-Johan Illman, *Thema und Tradition in den Asaf-Psalmen* (Abo: Stiftelsens för Åbo Akademi Forskningsinstitut, 1976), 25–29, 55.

Harry P. Nasuti (1988)

In *Tradition History and the Psalms of Asaph*, building on the work of Illman, Nasuti offers a purely tradition-historical study of the Asaphite Psalms, beginning with a linguistic analysis of the Asaphite Psalms.[13] Among the conclusions he is able to draw from his analysis are that there is a definite cultic quality to much of the language, a considerable degree of correlation between the given Asaphite Psalms (contra Illman), and a significant block of material that is Northern or, as Nasuti prefers, "Ephraimite" in character. Nasuti allows, however, that there is also much that is clearly Jerusalemite that stands alongside the Ephraimite material. Ultimately what Nasuti outlines is a final form of the collection that reflects a convergence of Northern and Southern language and perspective. All of this, in Nasuti's estimation, witnesses to different phases or stages in the work of an Asaphite *school*, a conclusion that echoes Mowinckel. Nasuti's conclusions are largely convincing and serve as an important backdrop for a close study of the nature of the historical referents and their function within the Asaphite Psalms both individually and as a group.

Michael D. Goulder (1996)

The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch assumes the Asaphite Psalms to be adopted from Northern roots and edited for use in Jerusalem. For Goulder, this adoption and editing explains the mix of Northern and Southern vocabulary. There are, then, glosses that have been inserted into psalms originally composed for use in worship at Bethel and Gilgal to alter them for use in Jerusalem (e.g., Ps 78:9, 59-72). Goulder furthers this thesis through a "liturgical hypothesis" not only for the *Sitz im Leben* of individual psalms but for the reading of the collection as a whole. Goulder sees in the Asaphite collection a liturgy for use pre-, mid-, and postfestival. This liturgy is used as guidance and orientation through the entire pilgrim experience: Psalms 50, 73–74 as "prefestival" pilgrim psalms set the tone (one of humility) for the coming festival. 75–76 are then used at the beginning of the festival, shifting the tone to one of praise. 77–78 are the psalms of the vigil, hymns composed for use during the long hours of the night. Finally, 79–80 are petitions, which are the climax of the festival; laments in form, these

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13. Harry P. Nasuti, *Tradition History and the Psalms of Asaph*, SBL Dissertation Series 88 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 115–16.

psalms then prepare the festival worshippers for the New Year festival, which is the culmination of the pilgrimage, during which Psalms 81–83, which focus on joy in and celebration of the Lord, are highlighted, followed by a final petition against the wicked. Goulder summarizes his speculation on this festival litany, "We cannot but pay a tribute of admiration to the faith and courage of the Asaph psalmist who has produced such a psalm cycle."[14] Goulder sees the Psalms of Asaph as early, Northern, and attributable to a coherent source. His analysis takes his hypothesis to what may seem an inevitable conclusion: that the Asaph material was composed in the North out of oral traditions and forms belonging to the *Vorlage* (an early stage of the presentation) of the Deuteronomistic History. Goulder's argument flows quite freely from the adoption and incorporation of earlier Northern material into the Southern cultus, on into the formation of the Deuteronomic tradition in the Pentateuch.

The Scope of the Present Study

The focus of this study is a mnemohistorical approach to the material that makes up a significant part of the Asaphite tradition—the Asaphite remembered past—assessing the rhetorical function of this material and the theological emphasis communicated therein. The Asaphite cultus is rooted in history, in the commemoration of events that are not cyclical or repeatable (in the mythic sense of seasonal festivals of renewal) but that must be re-presented and thus reexperienced, reiterated, and thus remembered in order to shape the identity of the people. This has been an underdeveloped theme in the interpretation of these psalms.

As noted above, chapter 2, "Theoretical Considerations: History and Communal Memory," deals with matters of definition—what is "memory," what is "history," and what is the nature of the interplay between the two (i.e., mnemohistory). Chapter 3, "Mnemohistory and the Asaphite Corpus," explores the compositional history, cultic character, and singularity of the remembered past in Asaph. Chapter 4, "How Asaph Remembers," details the characteristic language, form, and genres in which the mnemohistorical referents are employed. Chapter 5, "Psalm 78: The Heart of What Asaph Remembers," focuses on the magnum opus of the collection and the longest poetic recourse to the past in the Hebrew Bible, while Chapter 6, "What Asaph Remem-

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14. Goulder, *Psalms of Asaph*, 176.

bers," outlines the principal contents of the Asaphite mnemohistory in the remainder of the collection, and Chapter 7, "Excursus: Residual Memories in the Asaphite Corpus," outlines material that is not intentionally called to remembrance. Finally, chapter 8, "Conclusions: Why Asaph Remembers," offers conclusions about the goals and purpose of mnemohistory in the cultic historiography.