

Psalm 80 and Its Neighbors in the Psalter

The Context of the Psalter as a Background for Interpreting Psalms

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In 1913 the German scholar HERMANN GUNKEL stated: "An internal order of the Psalms has not been handed down: In the collection of the Psalter each song stands by itself, and we have no right to join it with the preceding or the following one."¹ A similar assertion was repeated in the Introduction to the Psalms 1933.² Perhaps it was this attitude of the influential scholar that was the reason why no one surveyed the coherence of the psalms in the collections of the Psalter for many decades. In a brief study in 1962 WESTERMANN tried to find form-critical criteria for the grouping of the psalms: The collections are structured by psalms of the individual and the community, psalms of praise and psalms of lament.³ In the last decades psalm exegesis ventured beyond the confines of form criticism, and - among other things - the Psalter as a whole "book" moved into the center of academic interest. The attempt to discern the purposeful placement of psalms within the collections received growing scholarly attention.⁴ A large number of publications on the topic "The Shape

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¹ GUNKEL (1913) 93 (author's translation).

² See GUNKEL/BEGRICH (1933) 434.

³ See WESTERMANN (1962) 278-284. He observes that the genres he had delimited concentrate on the collections of the Psalter (with a few exceptions), e.g. lament psalms of the individual are only found in Pss 3-41 and 51-72; larger groups of hymns occur only in the second half of the Psalter.

⁴ For a good introduction to this issue see the volume of collected essays edited by J.C. MCCANN (1993), "The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter." It contains articles on the method and its application (by J.L. MAYS, R.E. MURPHY, W. BRUEGGEMANN, G.H. WILSON, D.M. HOWARD, P.D. MILLER and J.C. MCCANN) and gives references to scholarly literature. Note furthermore the essays in the April, 1992 issue of the journal *Interpretation* (MCCANN, WILSON and others) and the basic work of G.H. WILSON (1985), "The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter." GILLINGHAM (1994), 232-237, and WEBER (1995), 265-269, sum up the state of research. - In the German speaking area HOSSFELD/ZENGER (1993), 24 (introduction with further references to literature; see also ZENGER (1991), 397-413), LEVIN (1993) and MILLARD (1994) pursue this subject. LEVIN starts with a tradition-historical investigation of the *Psalter*. MILLARD proposes a form-critical analysis of the *Psalter* as a whole book. In his study on Psalm 31 BONS (1994), 260-264, examines the relationship of Psalm 31 to Pss 30, 32, and 33. In a similar way WEBER (1995), 285-290,

and Shaping of the Psalter” appeared, including, of course, the fruitful work of the Book of Psalms Section within the Society of Biblical Literature. Let me first present some considerations about the way how I want to apply this approach to the analysis of a single psalm. Second, I will demonstrate an example: Psalm 80 and its neighbors in the Psalter.

I

The starting point for psalm exegesis is the single psalm in its individual form, structure, and content. The question for an intentional grouping of psalms and the Psalter presupposes detailed investigations of the texts and the historical growth of the Psalter. With this data in mind one can try to detect hermeneutical and theological perspectives of a planned and considered arrangement of the psalms. The Book of Psalms is not a coincidental conglomeration of single texts, but it has a provable shape and a shaping guided by theological interests.⁵ The composition of the psalms in the collections of the Psalter therefore has a theological meaning and an intention of its own. This is a further important step in the history of use and re-use of the particular psalm by the community. The way in which a certain psalm is worked into a collection has important implications for its interpretation: The new situational frame, i.e. the psalm as a part of a collection or book, and the new literary context, i.e. the psalm and its neighbors, open new horizons of meaning and sense. GERSTENBERGER states: “Every psalm that is stitched to its associate texts can make completely new statements in the context of its neighborhood.”⁶ The influence of the context of the psalm on its function and message must be considered.⁷ In addition, one can

analyses the neighborhood of Psalm 77, i.e. its relation to Psalms 76 and 78. In 1976, BARTH investigated the question of *concatenatio* in the First Book of the Psalter (Pss 1-41).

⁵ WILSON (1992), 129, presents the indicators of this shape and shaping and the interests behind them. Especially the psalms at the seams of the “books” of the Psalter (Pss 1, 2, 73, 89, 150) play an important role in these investigations. - On the other hand GERSTENBERGER (1994), 3-13, calls in question a well-rounded concept of the Psalter with leading theological ideas.

⁶ GERSTENBERGER (1994) 6 (author's translation).

⁷ In his study on Psalm 77 WEBER (1995), 285-290, examines the relationship of Psalm 77 to the immediately preceding and following psalms in a similar way: Psalm 76 is closer connected to Psalm 75 than to 77, i.e. there is a break between 76 and 77, and 77 points back to the lament psalms (73/74) at the beginning. On the other end Psalm 77 is tightly bound to Psalm 78, which works as a theological interpretation for the “open end” of Psalm 77. The decline of the Joseph tribes is God's judgment on the disobedient people; Judah and Jerusalem, the Davidic kingdom and Mount Zion are the only institutions for Yahweh's presence. Both psalms come together in their relation to the Moses tradition (compare 77:6

learn very much about the thoughts and intentions of the people that compiled the collections: By the way they placed each psalm they reveal how they understood the *individual* psalm, and, more important, how they wanted the psalm to be understood. So we gain more insights into the theological ideas and thoughts of the faithful users of the psalms.

II

The results of this approach can be shown with Psalm 80 as an example. Psalm 80 shares the superscription **לְאַסָּף** with the surrounding psalms. Most studies on the Asaph collection mention the common elements of Psalm 80 with the other Asaph psalms.⁸ On the textual surface Psalm 80 is connected to the preceding Psalm 79 by several “catchword connections,” and in a similar way Psalm 80 is linked to Psalm 81 by means of common terminology and motifs.

Psalm 79 ends with the self designation of the people before God as “flock of your pasture,” while Psalm 80 begins with the vocative “O shepherd of Israel.” Both psalms share the following elements: the appeal for help (see 79:9; 80:4,8,15-16,20)⁹ and for vengeance upon the enemies (see 79:6; 80:17), further the questions “How long?” (in 79:5 with **עַד־מַה**; in 80:5 with **עַד־מַתִּי**) and “Why?” (in 79:10 and 80:13 with **לְמַה**). “Fire” as a metaphor for the judgment is found in Ps 78:21,63; 79:5 and 80:17. “God’s face” (**פָּנִים**) plays an important role as the object of the prayer in Psalm 79:11 (translated as “before you”) and in the refrain in Psalm 80: “let your face shine, that we may be saved.” In Psalm 79:6 the heathens will be punished, because they did *not* call out the name of God in praise, and in Psalm 80:19 this cultic praise is promised. All these elements led to the arrangement of the Psalms 78, 79, and 80 in that sequence.

There are similar connections between Psalm 80 and 81. “Joseph” functions as a designation for the people of Israel in Psalm 80:2 and 81:6. “Egypt” and the tradition of the exodus are mentioned in Psalm 80:9 and 81:6-11 (see also Psalm 78:12,43,51). **עֲדוּת** is a further key word meaning “testimony” and “decree.” This term plays an important role in Psalm 78:5,56 and 81:6. In Psalm 80 **עֲדוּת** was put into the superscription. The topic “exodus from Egypt” and God’s speech in Psalm 81:7-17 as a kind of answer to the

with Deut 32:7ab, and 78:3-5 with Deut 32:7cd), and both share the shepherd-flock metaphor (Psalm 77:21 shows Moses as the leader of the flock; 78:70 presents David as the “new Moses”).

⁸ See ILLMAN (1976); SCHELLING (1985); NASUTI (1988); WEBER (1995) 273-304.

⁹ The verse numbering follows the Hebrew (Masoretic) text.

“Why?”-question in Psalm 80 are probably the reasons why Psalm 80 and 81 were arranged in this sequence.¹⁰

However, the placement of Psalm 80 is not only due to those structural and semantic relations. It shows how the editors (here: the Asaph collectors) understood the text, or how they wanted Psalm 80 to be understood. Psalm 79 almost certainly bewails the catastrophe in 586 BCE. So the collectors that placed Psalm 80 after Psalm 79 conceived and used the psalm as an appropriate reaction to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile.¹¹ As Psalm 78 closes with the election of the Davidic kings and Mount Zion, so Psalm 79 laments over the destruction and loss of these divine institutions in almost immediate succession.¹² Psalm 80 resumes the metaphor of “sheep and shepherd” from 79:13 and poses the catastrophe of Jerusalem in a broader national context. The metaphor of the wine shows this overarching view of the whole people of God. If one reads these psalms in their canonical sequence, one certainly notices that they did not come into being successively and that they were not designed for this cluster of texts. However, it also becomes obvious how the compilers and tradents of this cluster (Psalm 78, 79, and 80) understood these prayers, namely in the light of God’s traumatic rejection of the Davidic kings and Mount Zion in the 6th century. This topic also dominates Psalm 89, which rounds up Book III of the Psalter (Psalms 73-89). Most of the communal laments were put in this third book of the Psalter.¹³ Here is an obvious intention for a deliberate formation at work.

In this context the history of Psalm 80 leaps to the eye. Probably the basic stock of the text stems from the late 8th century. The reference to the three tribes Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh might point to the last years of the Northern Kingdom, i.e. the ‘puppet state’ which Tiglath-Pileser III left over after his campaign to Syria and Palestine in 733. This area, described by the territory of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh and presumably also (at least

¹⁰ See SCHELLING (1985) 240. SCHELLING presents such an analysis for all Asaph psalms. With this data he proves the obvious intention of the collectors to fashion a well-rounded formation.

¹¹ See MCCANN (1988) 36.

¹² See MCCANN (in: *id.* (1993)) 99.

¹³ See MCCANN (1988) 36. MCCANN (in: *id.* (1993) 96-100) demonstrates how the arrangement of communal laments together with songs of hope in Book III is an intentional composition: It wants to elaborate the experiences of the Exile and diaspora, but also the feelings of new hope for the faithful community. By this collective reinterpretation under the impression of a failed Davidic covenant and the Exile the single psalms appear in a new light.

parts of) Benjamin was regarded as the core of Israel. After a decade of warfare the Assyrian kings Shalmaneser V and Sargon II conquered this 'rest' of the Northern Kingdom and destroyed the capital Samaria and the other cities in the Ephraimite hill country (722/720). This catastrophe of the people of Israel can be a plausible background for the communal lament Psalm 80. Possibly refugees from the Northern Kingdom fled after the fall of Samaria to Jerusalem and, bringing their traditions with them, created a communal lament for a public ritual at the temple. The result, Psalm 80, asks Yahweh Sabaoth, the Lord of Hosts, that he might turn his face of salvation to his people anew and that he will restore the former prosperity of the kingdom, as it is known from the times of David and Solomon.

This psalm was handed down in the tradition. The results of literary criticism show that verse 18 is a secondary part of the text. Syntax and terminology suggest that it is a prayer for an individual person, probably a Davidic king (compare Psalms 2:7; 18:36; 20:7; 89:22; 110:1 to Psalm 80:18). The statement that God made this king strong does not fit into the political and social situation of the 8th century. It is much more plausible that the theologians of the time of King Josiah (7th century) supplemented the psalm with this supplication. The editors updated the text for the new situation of the powerful ruler Josiah and his ambitions to extend his control into the old territory of the Northern kingdom: a 'restoration' which Psalm 80 asks for.

Nothing stands against the assumption that some decades later Psalm 80 was applied to *the* situation of the 6th century: the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile. Again, Psalm 80 served as a powerful prayer of communal lament. That Psalm 80 was used and conceived to bewail the catastrophe of 586 and the following years is attested by those who put the text in a sequel with Psalm 79. For the later Asaph collectors it was clear that both psalms refer to the same incident, the ruin of Jerusalem in the 6th century.

The composition of Psalm 80 with 81 makes the theological intentions of the Asaph collectors visible. Psalm 81 is the answer to the "Why?" question of Psalm 80 (verse 13). Psalm 80 does not contain a confession of sin or guilt, and there is no trace of any explanation for the immense distress or any solution of the problem. The conflict between the tradition of God's promises and his fidelity and the present desperate condition of his people,¹⁴ i.e. the question of theodicy is left open. Psalm 80 ends with an appeal for help, and there is no answer to the two questions of verse 5 and 13 in the psalm itself. Psalm 81,

¹⁴ For the issue of the conflict of faith and experience in the psalms see the study of BROYLES (1989) on psalms of lament and complaint.

however, remembers again the event of the exodus and the great deeds of God against Egypt (verse 6), but now from God's point of view (verses 7-17): In his speech God mentions the testing of the people at Meribah (verse 8), his commandment not to adore another God (verses 9-10), his promise to take care of the people (verse 11), and, above all, God bewails the disobedience and the stubborn hearts of his people (verses 12-17). By God's own statement in Psalm 81:7-17 it becomes clear and obvious for the reader of both psalms, that this disobedience, these stubborn hearts, their own counsels are the reason for the catastrophe of the people and the success of the enemies that Psalm 80 complains about. It is not God's absence or God's wrath that causes the trouble of the people, as Psalm 80 itself might suggest (compare verse 5). This observation shows how a single psalm, here Psalm 80, will be interpreted anew by inserting it into a collection and by connecting it to its neighbor psalms. A new horizon of sense and understanding arises.¹⁵ This new horizon, this new sense can even contradict the original intention and expression of the text. Just in the case of Psalm 80 the sharp accusation of God in this text gets softened, even neutralized by God's speech in Psalm 81:12-15. The question of theodicy raised earlier is answered: "Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels. O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways! Then I would quickly subdue their enemies, and turn my hand against their foes." (NRSV)

Thus Psalm 80 gets a new face by its *placement* in the Asaph collection between Psalms 79 and 81. Its neighbors shed a new light on the text, and its understanding becomes different from its original sense. Its metaphors gain a new topicality: The praying community has the destroyed Jerusalem, the troops of the great power Babylon and the plundering neighborhood nations (e.g., Edom) before their eyes. To be sure, the psalm is still a desperate lament of the people, yet the faithful direct their word towards God, and yet the "Why?" question remains unanswered. But already Psalm 81 tries to give an answer: The question about God and his attitude towards the distress of the people shall be solved in a common theological way.¹⁶ The disobedience and the stubborn

¹⁵ In a similar way Psalm 78 is the (new) horizon of interpretation for Psalm 77, as WEBER (1995), 290, points out (see above, note 7).

¹⁶ The open question of theodicy is answered according to a concept which in a sense can be called "deuteronomistic": This group of theologians has learned from the prophets of judgment and interprets the fall of Jerusalem as follows: Not *YHWH* but Israel and its continuous disobedience are responsible for the fact that the national existence of the people of God declined and the great Davidic kingdom ceased to exist (for the issue of the Deuteronomistic History see - among many others - ALBERTZ (1992) 400).

hearts make it impossible for God to do good things for his people. From the combination of Psalm 80 and 81 develops a catechetical concept of religious education by question and answer. The question is the communal lament of Psalm 80, the answer is God's own speech in Psalm 81 (verses 12-17). Perhaps here lies the first step of the transition from the word of a human being (communal lament) to the word of God (the Psalter as Holy Scripture).

III

The first step of psalm exegesis is the detailed analysis of the individual text: its form, structure, content, and setting. Sometimes it is possible to find a hypothesis for placing the psalm in a certain historical situation that has some probability. And sometimes, or often, it is possible to find out what the psalm meant in the situation it was probably written in. But this primary or original sense and setting can change in the history of use and re-use by the community, as we have learned from the example Psalm 80. The neighbors of a psalm shed a new light on the single text that can cause a new sense, a new message. This message, the statement the psalm makes *in its neighborhood*, can be different from the "original sense," and therefore it has to be considered in psalm exegesis, how the neighbors of a psalm change its "face." This changing of the sense is often due to intentional grouping of the psalms. From the composition of the psalms one can learn much about the theological ideas and concepts of the circles that produced the collections of the Psalter. In the case of Psalm 80 and 81 we found out a concept of religious education, question (lament) and answer (God's speech).

This kind of investigation I demonstrated with Psalm 80 should be a part of every interpretation of a single psalm. This will bring new insights in the history of the psalm between its formation and its placement in the canon (Psalter). So we learn how the community of the psalm collectors understood and re-used the particular psalm, and we can confront this understanding with the comprehension of that psalm that we have in our world. Furthermore, by this methodological aspect one can get more knowledge about overarching hermeneutical and theological principles of the psalm collectors. Thus the investigation of the neighborhood or context of a single psalm will also bring more light into the mysteries of the shape and shaping of the Psalter.

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