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Remembered space as hermeneutical method in Psalms studies with reference to Psalm 90

Author:
Marina R.C. Kok-Pretorius[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Marina Kok-Pretorius,
marinakok95@gmail.com

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This article combines the model of critical spatiality with collective memory and religious imagination in order to create a theoretical basis from which to study biblical texts. The combination of critical spatiality, collective memory and religious imagination amount to remembered space as hermeneutical method. In order to be able to employ remembered space as hermeneutical method, as applied to Psalm 90 in this article, a number of aspects must be considered. These aspects include the different dimensions of space as per spatial theory, the bases of ancient Near Eastern worldview and spatial orientation, as well as the theoretical principles of collective memory.

Contribution: After considering all of these aspects, the article argues that remembered space provides a fresh perspective on the interpretation of biblical texts, highlighting the spatial notions, collective memory and imaginative outcomes underlying biblical texts. As a case in point, Psalm 90 employed remembered space through imaginative remembering to reimagine stability, identity and faith in a post-exilic time of crisis, instability and trauma.

Keywords: critical spatiality; collective memory; religious imagination; Psalms; Old Testament.

Introduction

Studies on the Psalter have become increasingly popular in recent decades, with a myriad of methods applied in reading the Psalms. Among those methods are canonical criticism, narrative theory, social-scientific criticism and critical spatiality. This article aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation in Psalms studies, specifically in the field of critical spatiality and the Psalter.

Critical spatiality as a lens through which the Psalms can be studied is continuing to grow (Warf & Arias 2009:1). Prinsloo (2021:168) believes that 'the spatial story of the Psalter still needs to be told'. Therefore, this article focuses on an aspect of critical spatiality that is still in its infancy: remembered space. Although the field of memory has gained popularity in biblical studies (Bosman 2014:1), the combination of space, memory and imagination applied to biblical studies in general and the Psalms, in particular, are yet to be fully explored.

Critical spatiality with a focus on remembered space

James Flanagan (1999:23) makes a convincing argument for the necessity of critical spatial studies in biblical texts. According to him, social-scientific studies primarily made a case for analysing the material aspects of the ancient world, such as social institutions, values and structures. However, there was room for expanding this analysis to the cognitive aspects of the ancient Near Eastern social world, such as spatiality. This led to the emergence of critical spatiality as a subcategory of social-scientific studies.

The first matter on the agenda concerning a critical spatial study is to describe the term 'space'. When discussing the notion of 'space', we tend to join it conceptually with the notion of 'place'. However, in the model of critical spatiality, a distinction is made between these two concepts, even though they are still closely related. People ascribe meaning to places, giving that place spatial significance. As soon as a place begins to function on a symbolic, cognitive level, it becomes a space. Furthermore, how people perceive place and space is determined by their worldview, social values and the customs of society.

Investigations on the concept of space have thus led social science scholars to understand space as a social product. This notion has especially been endorsed by the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991:86), who found that social relationships are embedded into space. Hence, people and societies play a role in creating the spaces in which they live (Lefebvre 1991:73). Each society

produces its own spaces of significance based on the meaning they ascribe to different spaces – whether it be religious, mythical or symbolic (George 2007:15). Therefore, the model of critical spatiality is based on the principle that a society's understanding of space is not only limited to the physical space in which they live. Instead, space is understood as a mental construct with various dimensions. The construct of space is formed within the structure of human experience (Berquist 2002:14). Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) focuses explicitly on how experience determines a society's production and interpretation of space. According to Tuan (1977:9), experience is learning from what has happened to a person and then creating reality out of what a person has undergone. In this sense, experience is a (social) construct – created out of feeling, thought and memory within a specific social context (Tuan 1977:10).

The philosopher Michel Foucault (1986:24) argues that a society constructs its own space in utopias and heterotopias. Utopian space refers to the ideal or perfect spaces in a society and is, therefore, unreal spaces or spaces with 'no real place' (Foucault 1986:24). In contrast with this, heterotopias are spaces that can be found in physical places, yet they contest or invert the other real spaces in society. Heterotopian spaces are spaces of crisis or deviation – spaces such as prisons, cemeteries and psychiatric hospitals – removed to the outskirts of society (Foucault 1986:25). A society can alter what it perceives as heterotopian spaces throughout its history. Overall, the biblical texts also employ the notions of utopia and heterotopia. The desert experience and exile events attested to in biblical texts function as heterotopias or spaces of crisis, while the presence and saving acts of YHWH create a utopian experience for which the people of YHWH long.

Quite a few scholars played a role in distinguishing between different dimensions of space. Lefebvre (1991:11,40) identifies three types of space: physical or perceived space, mental or conceived space, and social or lived space. These three dimensions of space are also termed 'spatial practice', 'representations of space' and 'representational space', or firstspace, secondspace and thirdspace. The three territories of space are interconnected and are not merely abstract concepts but take root in the life of a society. A society's physical space is seen in the places the members create, build and inhabit, while the representations of space (mental space) become evident in their political and religious institutions. On the other hand, the social space or representational spaces of a society culminate in concepts such as their writing systems and artworks (Lefebvre 1991:43). Flanagan (1999:29) mentions that any space and all spaces consist of all three dimensions simultaneously.

Edward Soja followed the work of Lefebvre. He also pays close attention to the 'trialectics of spatiality' as perceived or real space, conceived or imagined space and lived space or thirdspace. Soja (1996:74–76) focuses explicitly on thirdspace as a 'third way' or an alternative understanding to a binary notion of space. By proposing that thirdspace represents a third option, the Other, Soja (1996:5) aims to inspire a critical spatial imagination in making sense of the world. Thirdspace as the 'Other' can also be linked with Foucault's (1986:24) concept of heterotopias, or other spaces. Thirdspace allows for the creation of counterspaces and the transformation of other dimensions of space through imagination (Prinsloo 2013:8). These three dimensions of space are also applied when studying biblical texts from a critical spatial perspective.

In this sense, literary spatial theory can be applied to biblical texts. However, in this process, literary spatial theory should be contextualised within an ancient Near Eastern spatial orientation, as Prinsloo (2013:9) rightly states. In order to be able to do this, an important distinction is to be made between literary spatial theory and an ancient Near Eastern spatial orientation. Literary spatial theory includes narrative spatial theory, referring to the space that is produced within a narrative, consisting of the narrator's space and the narrated space (Prinsloo 2013:7). In addition, literary spatial theory also includes social space encompassing the different dimensions of space (firstspace, secondspace and thirdspace), as largely discussed in this section. Yet, when relating these aspects of literary spatial theory with biblical texts, the pre-scientific, pre-modern character of ancient Near Eastern worldview(s) must be taken into consideration (Prinsloo 2013:9). This is necessary because the cultural context of the ancient Near East as well as the way in which these cultures understood the cosmos determined their orientation towards space (Wyatt 2001:35).

In what follows in the section 'Critical spatiality as a construct in the ancient Near Eastern worldview', the spatial orientation of the ancient Near Eastern world is discussed, while another dimension of space, stemming from an ancient Near Eastern spatial orientation, is also introduced. This dimension is fourthspace or remembered space, as Victor Matthews (2013:62) calls it. Based on the discussion in this section, I give an outline of the different dimensions of space in Table 1.

Critical spatiality as a construct in the ancient Near Eastern worldview

Corrigan (2009:157) notes that spatiality has always been an aspect of religious studies, as seen in cosmologies of the ancient world and investigations into religious space and place. Berquist (2002:25) believes that the Hebrew Bible, in particular, is preoccupied with space. The Promised Land, its conquest, loss and restoration take centre stage in the narrative of the Hebrew Bible, thus placing the matter of space central (Berquist 2002:25). Regarding the link between critical spatiality and biblical studies, Prinsloo (2013:4) writes that the entire biblical narrative transpires in a 'place and space of some kind'. In line with these observations, Foucault (1986:23) thinks that the construction of space is closely

TABLE 1: Spatial dimensions to be examined in biblical texts.

Dimension of space	Explanation of dimension
Firstspace	Physical places
Secondspace	Mental space – societal institutions
Thirdspace	Social or lived space
Fourthspace	Remembered space

connected to the sacred. The differentiation between private space and public space, family space, social space and cultural space, and between workspace and leisure space, are all undergirded by the presence of the sacred.

This principle is certainly evident in ancient Near Eastern cosmologies. How ancient Near Eastern people viewed their world was closely connected to their religion. Although more than one worldview is present in ancient cultures, biblical texts describe the world in three storeys: heaven, earth and the underworld. In this worldview, heaven is the territory of the gods and heavenly beings, the earth is a flat plate resting on pillars on which humans live, and the netherworld is a negative space where the dead reside (Prinsloo 2006:743).

According to Wyatt (2001:33), ideas on time and space are culturally developed and specific. These spatial-temporal notions shaped and framed the worldview(s) of ancient Near Eastern societies. Regarding orientation, the four directions function on a spatial level, with the East being the primary orientation (Prinsloo 2013:9). The East directs one to the rising sun and signifies a new beginning and life. The Hebrew word for East, מדק, also means 'face' or 'past', symbolising the orientation that one faces the past. Elaborating on the importance of this notion for spatial orientation in the ancient Near Eastern world, Wyatt (2001:36) writes: 'We "see" the past, which thus provides us, through memory and narrative, with accounts of how we came to be where we are.'

According to this description, the past is in front of a person – one can look at the past, while the future remains unknown, behind a person (Prinsloo 2013:9). The past and remembering the past is one of the most important aspects of spatial orientation for this article because it directly links with fourthspace or remembered space. Fourthspace holds that remembering the past through the collective memory of a community reshapes, transforms and reconstructs the usage of space – on firstspace, secondspace and thirdspace levels (Matthews 2013:61). A more detailed description of remembered space follows in the section 'Remembered space'.

On the opposite side of East lies West. Like the word 'East' in Hebrew, the word 'West' [אחר] also has symbolic meanings. West means 'back' or 'future'. This implies that the future lies behind us, unknown and unseen (Wyatt 2001:36). Together, East and West lie on a horizontal axis and form the temporal aspect of ancient Near Eastern spatial orientation.

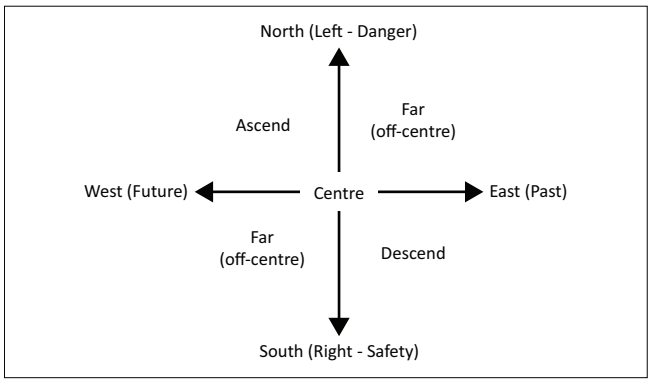
The directions of North and South also play an important role in spatial orientation. According to Wyatt (2001:36), the South is on the right side and is connected with morality, safety and well-being. North is on the left side and signifies danger (Wyatt 2001:36). Prinsloo (2013:9) elaborates on spatially significant terms for the ancient Near East. Near and far are both spatial terms – with 'near' being positive and 'far' being negative. Similarly, ascend and descend also function on a spatial level on the vertical axis. When moving 'up' or ascending, one draws closer to heaven, the realm of the gods, which is a positive space. When moving 'down' or descending, one draws farther from the realm of the gods and closer to the netherworld, a negative space (Prinsloo 2013:10).

At the meeting point between the vertical and horizontal axes lies the centre of the universe. In biblical terms, Zion and the Jerusalem temple form the centre and meeting place between heaven and earth (Prinsloo 2013:10). When moving farther away from the centre – Jerusalem and the temple – one is off-centre, which implies disorientation and chaos. Being at-centre signifies well-being, balance and orientation (Prinsloo 2013:10). This view of orientation, disorientation and reorientation corresponds to the scheme that Walter Brueggemann (2007:2–3) proposes when reading the psalms. According to Brueggemann (2007:4), many biblical texts, especially in the psalms, do not originate from a point of equilibrium or orientation, but rather from a space of disorientation or dislocation, moving to a space of reorientation and relocation.

Based on these insights, I demonstrate the classifications used for an ancient Near Eastern spatial orientation in Figure 1.

Applying the model of critical spatiality to biblical texts consists of three movements. Firstly, the features of an ancient Near Eastern spatial orientation are identified. Secondly, they are integrated with the three-storey worldview reflected in biblical texts. Thirdly, the different dimensions of space – firstspace, secondspace, thirdspace and fourthspace – are investigated to ascertain how space is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed.

Flanagan (1999:39) takes Egypt, the Wilderness and the Promised Land, Canaan, as an example of how space in all its dimensions functions in biblical texts. On a firstspace level, Egypt is where the Israelites were enslaved and suffered. On the secondspace level, Egypt was experienced as a negative space of fear; on the thirdspace level, it was a space of obstruction. The Wilderness functions similarly – as a firstspace of desolation, a secondspace of a struggle with the presence of God, being off-centre and a thirdspace of negative life experiences and complaints. On the other hand, the Promised Land functions as a positive space, being at-centre and close to YHWH.



Note: Vertical axis-moral and horizontal axis - temporal.

FIGURE 1: Ancient Near Eastern spatial orientation.

Remembered space

Victor Matthews (2013:62) calls remembered space a fourth dimension of space. Remembered space is that aspect of space that comes to the fore after all other dimensions of space have played a role in the consciousness of a community. Remembered space aims to function within the collective memory of a society or community to conserve and sustain the multi-dimensional spatial notion of a community. The basic underlying principle of Matthews's (2013:74) remembered space is that the various dimensions of space are transformed as times and circumstances change. However, through memory, one can mentally recall what has taken place in that space in the past and the significance attached to that space. This is because every memory resulting from a community's interactions ascribes remembrance to space (Matthews 2013:74). In the end, this means that remembered space creates a link to the past, which at the same time provides a key to how space is produced in the future (Matthews 2013:75). Remembered space can thus be defined in the following way: the dimension of space in which the collective memories of a people's shared history are imaginatively reconstructed to transform their identity in light of present circumstances and future hopes. From this definition emerges two basic principles connected to remembered space: memory and imagination.

Memory

When speaking about memory, Ricoeur (2004:44) links it with imagination because memory is 'an image of the past'. Halbwachs ([1925]1992:41–42) writes on the social framework of collective memory and, in agreement with Ricoeur, notes that memory consists of images. Based on the work of these scholars, it becomes clear that there is a definitive link between memory and imagination. Yet, for this discussion, these two notions are handled separately to grasp the meaning of each for remembered space.

The type of memory that plays a role in remembered space is, more specifically, what scholars define as 'collective memory' (Halbwachs [1925]1992:54). Collective memory refers to the memory that functions within a group or society. Brenner and Long (2009:2) distinguish between personal memory and public memory. Assmann (2011:5–6) categorises memory further into mimetic memory, communicative memory, the memory of objects and cultural memory. Cultural memory corresponds to collective memory and is the most important aspect of memory in remembered space. Cultural memory entails the 'handing down of meaning', as Assmann (2011:6–7) puts it. This is seen in society's rituals, icons, symbols and representations, such as temples and monuments. By implication, this means that cultural or social memory encompasses first-, second- and thirdspace. Additionally, collective memory shapes the social identity of a group or society by actively remembering the past.

Assmann (2011:16) continues to point out that the Israelites were one of the communities that shaped memory culture, which has to do with remembering that forms a community. The space in which a society's remembering occurs moves from certain fixed points, such as fateful events from the past (Assmann & Czaplicka 1995:129). In the context of biblical texts in general and Psalm 90, in particular, the exodus and exile serve as these 'fateful' events shaping the remembered space of Israel. In this sense, collective memory can also be selective, giving a people the space to reconstruct memory in the process of adding meaning to remembering (Brenner & Long 2009:4). Bowman (2013:93), in agreement with Brenner and Long, adds that the texts of Israel reflect a specific way of remembering. This way of remembering is informed by imagination.

Imagination

Prinsloo (2013:11) notes that the Hebrew Bible is a product of religious imagination. According to Yates (2007:82,104), memory is achieved through place (or, in the case of this article, space) and the use of imagination. Taliaferro and Evans (2011:1) believe that imagination is one of the most important forces determining our understanding of reality because imagination is the ability to form mental or memory images used to reinterpret and reconstruct the past as a community looks to the future. In the context of the biblical texts, imagination – similar to memory – functions collectively in society. Although imagination and the mental images formed through imagination are always subjective, whether individually or collectively, this does not mean that imagination is nonsensical or irrelevant. It is, however, still important to note Ricoeur's (2004:54) criticism concerning memory and imagination. Ricoeur (2004:54) considers one of the pitfalls of imagination to be that imagination functions on a hallucinatory level – meaning that remembering and imagining are two different things. Yet, together with Sartre (1965:261), this article appeals for a distinction between the imagined and the real, thus between the so-called 'factual history' of something and the reinterpretation of past events. In line with the postmodern paradigm, there is, after all, no such thing as an objective view of the past. All accounts of the past are interpretations, and imagination plays a vital role in all of these interpretations. Taliaferro and Evans (2011:11) also have a more positive understanding of the function and meaning of imagination. They suggest that imagination has a fourfold function: firstly, to help us form an image of the state of matters; secondly, imagination is vital in ethical and philosophical consideration; thirdly, imagination makes clear what our knowledge on a particular subject is; and fourthly, imagination assists us in identifying the connections between things.

Brueggemann and Linafelt (2012:9) regard imagination as a positive contributor to the formation process of biblical texts. They call this process 'imaginative remembering'. Here, memory and imagination once again come together to form remembered space. According to Brueggemann and Linafelt (2012:9), remembering the past has space for imagination. When we recall the past, we move into the realm or space of the imaginary (Ricoeur 2004:53). Through imagination, the space of the past is reinterpreted and reconstructed so that collective memory can have meaning for a new generation.

Viljoen (2016:3–6) suggests a few practical guidelines for applying a hermeneutic of imagination to studying biblical texts. Firstly, scholars or exegetes should transport themselves from the 21st century to the ancient world. Secondly, attention should be paid to the symbols and metaphors in a text. Within the context of this article, these two steps would imply that the socio-spatial orientation of the ancient Near Eastern world as well as the symbols and metaphors present in Psalm 90 are studied in terms of spatial, memory and imaginal features.

Applying the method of remembered space to Psalm 90

In this section, the method of remembered space, as discussed in the previous section, is applied to Psalm 90. First of all, it is, however, necessary to provide a brief background on the place of Psalm 90 in the Psalter. After this, a spatial analysis follows, together with the interpretation of Psalm 90 from the perspective of remembered space.

Gillingham (2015a:1) describes the Psalter as 'a drama in five parts'. As a result of Gerald Wilson's (1985:209–214) work on the editing of the Psalter, the Psalter is divided into five books with the assumption that Books I–III are closely related and mostly pre-exilic, while Books IV–V form a postexilic pair. Following this assumption, Psalm 90 represents the introduction to Book IV of the Psalms and a theological shift within the Psalter. Wallace (2007:15) describes this shift as a move towards a 'Yahwistic theocracy', away from the Davidic focus of the previous three books of the Psalter. Therefore, a discussion on Psalm 90 must also consider the larger setting of Book IV.

Gillingham (2015b:87) argues that Book IV of the Psalter reflects on the failure of the monarchy and the resulting events of the exile. The superscription of Psalm 90 places the psalm as a prayer in the context of the Moses tradition (Ps 90:1). By focusing on Moses as a mediator, Psalm 90 takes the people of Israel back to a time before the Davidic monarchy, before temple worship. Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014:392) state that Moses and the exodus remind Israel of a time when the temple and a king did not determine their relationship with God. Instead, the people's relationship with YHWH depended on his saving presence in the wilderness. Whereas the temple was their place of safety and a shelter of protection, in the exilic and post-exilic setting – as in the wilderness – it is YHWH who becomes a safe space for his people (Mournet 2011:70).

Spatial analysis of Psalm 90

Following the above line of thought, Psalm 90 is situated within three periods. The psalm is read by a post-exilic audience, albeit set during exile, while remembering the exodus events in the wilderness (DeClaissé-Walford 2019:27). This is the spatial starting point for Psalm 90. The firstspace or physical space, present in Psalm 90 is simultaneously the desert during the exodus, Babylonia during exile and Judea during the post-exilic time. What these three spaces have in common is that they all represent spaces of disorientation. They are heterotopian spaces – spaces of crisis (Foucault 1986:25). On a secondspace level, Psalm 90 thus denotes a space of instability and powerlessness on the part of the community. Being in exile, with their religious and political institutions in shambles, the Israelite community found themselves in a negative space, off-centre, far from the presence of YHWH, as symbolised by the temple in Jerusalem. Everything that the people of YHWH had relied upon for security and meaning in their lives was destroyed. A post-exilic community, reading Psalm 90, would identify strongly with these experiences. Although they have returned from exile, they did it in a space of disillusionment – coming home to a city and life in ruins. Within a metaphor of life and death, they lament their reality, the fleetingness of life, and grapple with divine wrath as a consequence of their own wrongdoing (Ps 90:3,5–6,7–9). In this sense, time-space plays a vital role in Psalm 90, recalling Wyatt's (2001:33–36) argument on the link between time and space. Set within the space of Psalm 90, words such as days (Ps 90:10 ימים), years (Ps 90:10 שנים), morning (Ps 90:6 בקר) and evening (Ps 90:6 ערב) all denote time. According to Psalm 90, the space in which time operates is negative because it is limited and finite. It is a space in which YHWH has the last say. YHWH is the orientation point in a world of disorientation (Brueggemann 2007:37–39).

Desperately searching for reorientation, the community calls on YHWH. Starting with a confession that YHWH is their dwelling place (Ps 90:1 מעון), the community tries to make sense of life's trouble and sorrow on a thirdspace level. As a patron, YHWH is a safe (lived or third) space for his people. Therefore, they search for YHWH's presence amid chaos, petitioning that God turn back and show them compassion. The prayer that is Psalm 90 intends a reorientation of the relationship between YHWH and his people. In order to move closer to YHWH, the psalmist dangles between the danger of mortality (Ps 90:3 דכא) and the safety of YHWH's infinity (Ps 90:2 עולם), between the past and the future. To achieve this, the psalmist employs imaginative remembering.

Remembered space in Psalm 90

Based on the spatial analysis, Psalm 90 can be described as a lament for lost space. Not only did the Israelites physically lose their native land on a firstspace level, but they also lost everything related to their lives there on a second- and thirdspace level. To reconstruct their life, they turn to remembering, or fourthspace. The imaginative remembering in Psalm 90 is found on two levels. Firstly, the Israelite community remembers their own history through the figure of Moses, to whom this psalm is ascribed. Secondly, they call on YHWH to remember to have compassion for them in their distress.

Using Moses and the exodus tradition as a fixed point, Psalm 90 creates a space for remembering the past while imagining a better future. The collective cultural memory of how

YHWH rescued the Israelites from the wilderness gives the exilic and post-exilic communities the courage to imagine YHWH (re)turning to them. Furthermore, they call on the memories of past generations to confess YHWH as a dwelling place, a space of safety and stability (v. 1). Building on this surety, Psalm 90 imagines a future in which YHWH gives his people stability by letting them live in the space of his loving-kindness and by establishing and giving permanence to the work of their hands (vv. 14 and 16).

From a situation of despair, Psalm 90 remembers that YHWH re-established his covenant with the Israelites in the desert through Moses and, therefore, imagines a time when YHWH will re-establish his relationship with his people again. Through memory and imagination, Psalm 90 reconstructs and transforms the people's lament of lost spaces into rejoicing in a returned God who is an everlasting dwelling place.

Conclusion

This article sets out a theoretical basis for the study of biblical texts from the perspective of remembered space, with reference to Psalm 90. Firstly, an ancient Near Eastern spatial orientation was considered. Secondly, the different dimensions of space to be recognised in texts were described. Thirdly, the two features forming remembered space – memory and imagination – were also taken into consideration.

From this perspective, it became clear that Psalm 90 is a prayer replete with spatial notions, collective memory and imaginative outcomes. When read from the perspective of critical spatiality, memory and imagination, the meaning of Psalm 90 is highlighted. The multi-faceted significance that the psalm has to this day also becomes apparent. Adamo (2020:9), writing from an African perspective, states that Psalm 90 is an 'expression of faith' that YHWH will still protect and perform miracles as he did for ancient Israel – particularly in times of despair and hopelessness. Psalm 90 affirms through imaginative remembering that YHWH has been a constant presence on which Israel could rely throughout all time (Goldingay 2008:34).

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M.R.C.K.-P. is the sole author of this article.

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