

The Role of Psalms 135-137 in the Shape and Shaping of Book V of the Hebrew Psalter

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ABSTRACT

Book V of the Psalter (Pss 107-150) is an interesting collection of psalms. After the opening Ps 107, celebrating God's rescue of humanity from various dangerous situations, psalms attributed to David appear again after a virtual absence since Book II. These Davidic psalms (Pss 108-110 and 138-145) "frame" a grouping of festival psalms that are introduced by two brief alphabetic acrostics (Pss 111 and 112). Seemingly tucked away just after the Songs of Ascents (Pss 120-134), and before the resumption of psalms of David, lie Psalms 135-137, two magnificent community hymns followed by a heartfelt community lament. This essay explores the role of these psalms in the "shape" and "shaping" of the story of the Psalter. It will conclude that the psalms offer a highly stylized recitation of Israel's history that made a world for the postexilic community, recounting Yahweh's work in creation, summarizing the Pentateuchal stories of the ancestors (Pss 135-136) and providing a snapshot of exilic life in Babylon (Ps 137). Their assurance of Yahweh's presence and provisions allow David, in Psalms 138-145, to lead the postexilic people in blessing, praise, and thanks to the sovereign God.

KEYWORDS: Psalm 135, Psalm 136, Psalm 137, Psalms 135-137, Psalter Book V; shape of the Psalter, shaping of the Psalter.

A INTRODUCTION

Book V of the Psalter is an interesting collection of psalms. After the opening Ps 107, celebrating God's rescue of humanity from various dangerous situations, psalms attributed to David appear again after a virtual absence since Book II.¹ These Davidic psalms (Pss 108-110 and 138-145) "frame" a grouping of festival psalms that are introduced by two brief alphabetic acrostics (Pss 111 and 112). The festival psalms are Pss 113-118, recited at Passover; Ps 119, used at

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¹ In Books I and II, fifty-seven of the seventy-two psalms are "of David". In Book II, only one of the seventeen, and in Book III, only two of the seventeen are of David. In Book V, fourteen of the forty-four psalms are attributed to David. For details, see "A Brief Rehearsal of the Shape and Shaping of the Book of Psalms" below.

Pentecost; and Pss 120-134, recited at the Tabernacles.² Seemingly tucked away just after the Songs of Ascents (Pss 120-134), and before the resumption of psalms of David, lie Pss 135-137, two magnificent community hymns followed by a heartfelt community lament, all without superscriptions (unlike the psalms surrounding them). A number of scholars have posited that Ps 137 is a fitting conclusion to Songs of Ascents. If that is the case, then what functions do Pss 135 and 136 have in the narrative story of Book V?

In this essay, I will first briefly outline the shape and shaping of the Psalter in order to locate Pss 135-137 within the larger narrative of the book. I will then offer a rehearsal of various scholars' views of Ps 137 as an apt conclusion to the Songs of Ascents. Third, I will undertake exegetical treatments of Pss 135 and 136, discuss the commonalities between them, and explore their linguistic and thematic ties to Pss 111-118 and 120-134. Finally, I will discuss the theme or message of Pss 135-137 that moves the story of the Psalter to its logical conclusion, thereby positing their contribution to the "shape," or "story," of the Psalter.

B A BRIEF REHEARSAL OF THE SHAPE AND SHAPING OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS³

As a result of the intellectual influences of the Enlightenment and Hermann Gunkel's seminal form-critical work on the Hebrew Scriptures, scholars during most of the twentieth century largely viewed the book of Psalms as a somewhat miscellaneous collection of the praises and laments of ancient Israel that were best interpreted by grouping them together and studying them by "type" and "cultic use". In the last two decades of the century, three scholars "turned the tide" for psalm studies (and the study of the Hebrew Scriptures) and altered the landscape forever.

In his 1979 work *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, Brevard Childs argued that the final form of the Hebrew Scriptures is what the ancient Israelites preserved, not the underlying layers of tradition of which it consists, as Gunkel posited. Therefore, the best critical method for understanding the

² Cf. Erich Zenger, "The Composition and Theology of the Fifth Book of Psalms, Psalms 107-145," *JSOT* 80 (1998): 77-110 (100-101).

³ For a full discussion of the "shape" and "shaping" of the Psalter, see, among others, Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, "The Canonical Approach to Scripture and *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Book of Psalms: The Current State of Scholarship* (ed. N. L. deClaissé-Walford; SBLAIL 20; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014), 1-11; idem., *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997); and J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter: Psalms in Their Literary Context," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms* (ed. William P. Brown; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 250-262.

message of the Hebrew Scriptures is, according to Childs, to study its final shape – that which “became normative for all successive generations of this community of faith.”⁴ Childs pushed back against the historical-critical approach to studying the biblical text and maintained that scholarship cannot discover the history of the development of the canon because scribes and editors deliberately obscured the history of the shaping of the text in a process Childs called “actualization” – not just updating the past, but transmitting traditions in such a way as to prevent their “being moored to the past.”⁵ Therefore, the main focus of critical research should not be to pursue the editors’ “motivations and biases.”⁶ It is not the process that should function as the norm for interpretation, but the product of the process.

James Sanders’ response to Childs’ call to abandon the historical-critical method was more considered and realistic. He writes in an essay titled “Canonical Context and Canonical Criticism”:

There had been a relationship between tradition, written or oral, and community, a constant, ongoing dialogue, a historical memory passed on from generation to generation in which the special relationship between canon and community resided.⁷

Thus, for Sanders, community is the foundation of canon and the more we know about the history of the communities, who shaped the canon of scripture, the better we can understand scripture itself. Thus, historical settings are important, not in order to dissect the text, but rather to understand its shape as we have it today. Thus began a new era in the study of the book of Psalms.

Gerald H. Wilson, a doctoral student at Yale, studied the writings of Childs and Sanders, applied them to the book of Psalms, and laid the foundation for the late twentieth and early-twenty-first studies of the book. His dissertation, published as *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* in 1985, established the rationale for seeing a purposeful shape to the book of Psalms and proposed an overall “story-line” for the book.⁸ By a careful study of particularly the psalms at the “seams” of the Psalter – those psalms at the ends of each of the Psalter’s book, he determined that the Psalter relates and reflects on the history of ancient Israel

⁴ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979), 75.

⁵ Childs, *Introduction*, 79.

⁶ Brevard S. Childs, “Response to Reviewers of *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*,” *JSOT* 16 (1980): 52-60 (54).

⁷ James A. Sanders, “Canonical Context and Canonical Criticism,” in James A. Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1987), 153-174 (170).

⁸ Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBLDS 76; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

from the time of the reign of David in about the tenth century BCE to the people's return from exile in Babylon and resettlement in Jerusalem in 538 BCE. The story begins in Book I (Pss 1-41) with the reign of David; continues in Book II (Pss 42-72) with the end of the reign of David and the handing over of the kingdom to Solomon; Book III (Pss 73-89) reflects the story of the divided kingdoms and the fall of both the northern and southern kingdoms; Book IV (Pss 90-106) narrates the exile in Babylon, with a call to the people to acknowledge God as sovereign over them, since they are no longer an independent nation with a king and court; and in Book V (Pss 107-150) the Israelites return to Jerusalem and reestablishment of temple worship.

Thus, we may read the psalms in Book V of the Psalter as reflective of the post-exilic period of Israel's history. The closing words of Ps 106 at the end of Book IV are:

Save us, O LORD our God,
and gather us from among the nations,
that we may give thanks to your holy name
and glory in your praise. (v. 47)

The opening words of Ps 107 seem purposefully placed in answer to the cry at the end of Ps 106:

Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

The people have returned from exile in Babylon. They have rebuilt the temple to Yahweh and resumed their worship practices, but they do not have an independent form of government with a king and court to rule over them. They are vassals of the vast Persian Empire. Thus we read the people's words of hope in Book V of the Psalter. The centrepiece of Book V is a collection of psalms used at various festal celebrations in the life of Israel – celebrations best undertaken in Jerusalem, the centre of religious and political life in pre-exilic Israel.

Psalms 113-118, known as the "Egyptian Hallel," are traditionally sung as Passover; Ps 119, a wisdom acrostic about Torah piety, is used during the Feast of Pentecost; and Psalms 120-134, the Songs of Ascents, are recited during the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles or Sukkoth). Psalms attributed to David, the great king of ancient Israel, frame these centrepiece psalms. They are Pss 108-109 and Pss 138-145, with Ps 145 a masterful alphabetic acrostic that celebrates the kingship of God over the community of faith and over all creation. The "framing" of these festival psalms attributed to David, culminated by Ps 145's acclamation of God as sovereign, suggests that we see in the story of Book V

David leading the people in a celebration of God as sovereign in a newly restored Jerusalem, the centre of worship and festal celebrations in Ancient Israel.

The story of the shaping of the Psalter is the story of the shaping of survival. The Psalter was, along with the other texts that make up the Hebrew Scriptures, a constitutive document of identity for post-exilic Israel. Within that collection of texts, the community of faith found a new structure for existence and identity that transcended traditional concepts of nationhood. The story of the Psalter gave the post-exilic community a new rationale for existence, a new statement of national identity. With God as sovereign over them, the people could survive as a separate and identifiable entity within the vast empires of which they found themselves a part.

C PSALM 137 AS A CONCLUSION TO THE SONGS OF ASCENTS

Psalm 137 is a community lament included among those psalms in the Psalter more specifically identified as "imprecatory."⁹ Its setting is in stark contrast with the setting of the Songs of Ascents. While the Songs of Ascents depict the psalm singers either on their way to (Pss 120 and 121) or physically present in Jerusalem (Pss 122-134), Ps 137 is set "by the rivers of Babylon" (v. 1).¹⁰ But its focus on Jerusalem and Zion echoes that of the Songs of Ascents, where Jerusalem and Zion are mentioned ten times.¹¹ Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr. point out that while Ps 137 echoes themes found in the Songs of Ascents, it focuses on the remembered past rather than the present. The verb זכר occurs three times in the psalm, in vv. 1, 6, and 7, while "forget" (שכח) appears in v. 5; they state, "The artful and powerful articulation of memory makes it possible for the hopes of Zion to endure."¹² James L. Mays adds that the psalm "is a song of two cities. It sings of resistance against one and devotion to another."¹³

J. Clinton McCann Jr. maintains of Ps 137, "The combination of first-person plural and singular voices, the focus on Jerusalem, and even the length of the psalm make it similar to the Songs of Ascents (Pss 120-134)."¹⁴ The first-

⁹ Psalms 12; 58; 69; 83; 94; 109; 129; 137. Many others contain imprecatory language, including 17:13; 31:17; 35:4; 59:11-13; 69:22-28; 70:2-3; 139:19-22.

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of the many proposed origins of the Songs of Ascents, see Frank Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101-150* (Hermeneia; trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011), 287-295.

¹¹ Psalms 122:2, 3, 6; 125:1, 2; 126:1; 128: 5 (2); 129:5; 132:13.

¹² Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 576.

¹³ James L. Mays, *Psalms* (IBC; Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1994), 422.

¹⁴ J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "The Book of Psalms," in *The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. IV* (ed. L. E. Keck; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 641-1279 (1227).

person voice appears in Ps 137 fourteen times, paralleling its frequent occurrence in the Songs of Ascents, with, for example, eight occurrences in Ps 120, six in Ps 122, twelve in Ps 124, seven in Ps 126, and seven in Ps 130. Psalm 137 is nine verses long; and the average length of the Songs of Ascents, including the lengthy Ps 132, is, according to Erich Zenger, 6.7 verses.¹⁵

John Goldingay additionally compares Ps 137 to the Songs of Ascents. He writes, "Like many of the Songs of the Ascents, Ps 137 represents a unique take on the nature of one of the standard psalms forms; it is a distinct kind of community prayer psalm."¹⁶ Leslie Allen adds that it "is written in a remarkably prosaic way."¹⁷ James Mays concludes, "The combination of formal elements, corporate and individual styles, and concern with Zion give the psalm a resemblance to the Songs of Ascents. Perhaps that is why it concludes the three psalms (Pss 135-137) attached to the collection of the songs."¹⁸ McCann concurs, stating, "Given the similarities between Pss 134 and 135, as well as Pss 135 and 136, it is likely that Pss 135-137 form a sort of appendix to the Songs of Ascents."¹⁹

Thus, scholars have aptly argued that Ps 137 can be interpreted as a concluding word to the Songs of Ascents using, according to Brueggemann and Bellinger, the power of memory to keep hopes for Zion alive. Scholars also suggest that Pss 135 and 136 are further concluding words to the Songs of Ascents (as well as Pss 111-118) and act as something of a "prelude" to Ps 137 before Book V returns to psalms ascribed to David, which surround Pss 111-137. We turn now to Pss 135 and 136.

¹⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 295.

¹⁶ John Goldingay, *Psalms Volume 3: Psalms 90-15* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 601.

¹⁷ Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (WBC 21; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 305.

¹⁸ Mays, *Psalms*, 422.

¹⁹ McCann, "The Book of Psalms," 1227. Additionally, Erich Zenger writes, "At first sight, Ps 137 stands in isolation in the context of its neighbouring psalms. Like its two predecessors [Pss 135 and 136], it has no superscription that would locate it redactionally." He goes on to argue for Ps 137's placement as a "bridge psalm" between Pss 135-136 and the following Pss 138-145. He points out the incidence of "remember" (זכר) in Ps 137 (three times) and in Ps 135:13 and 136:23, the shared motifs in Pss 135 and 136 of God "striking down" the oppressors of Israel (Pss 135:10-11; 136:10, 17-20), and the concluding verse of Ps 135 that states, "Blessed be the LORD from Zion, he who resides in Jerusalem." Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 520.

D EXEGETICAL ANALYSES OF PSALMS 135 AND 136, HIGHLIGHTING THEIR COMMONALITIES AND TIES TO PSALMS 111-118 AND PSALMS 120-134

Psalm 135, classified as a community hymn, evinces a number of ties to the psalms that precede it as well as ties to Ps 136.²⁰ The psalm opens and closes (vv. 1-3, and 21) with a summon to “hallelujah (הַלְלוּ יְהוָה),” most often translated in English as “praise the LORD.” הַלְלוּ יְהוָה, and variations of it, occurs some seventy-five times in the Psalter, with no less than fifty-four occurrences in Book V.²¹ The phrase occurs nine times in Pss 111-117, opening and/or closing each of them. Verse 1 of Ps 135 specifies those summoned as “the servants (עֲבָדֵי) of the LORD,” as do the opening words of Pss 113 and 134.²²

After summoning the worshipers to give praise, verses 1-4 of Ps 135 outline the reasons for doing so. The worshipers are called in verse 1 to praise the “name (שֵׁם)” of the Lord; in verse 3, they are admonished to “sing to” the “name”; and in verse 13 the psalm singer states, “Your name, O LORD, endures forever.” References to the name of the Lord occur no less than fifteen times in Pss 111-118 and 120-134.²³ The words “you that stand in the house of the LORD, in the courts of the house of our God” echo Pss 111:1; 116:19; 117:26; 122:1-2; 132:5; and 134:1. Further, verse 3 of Ps 135 employs the poetic parallel “good (טוֹב)” and “gracious/pleasant (נְעִים)” just as Ps 133:1 does.²⁴

Verse 4’s notice that God has chosen Jacob/Israel for a possession (סִגְלָה) acts as a prelude for the historical recital by the psalm singer in verses 8-14.²⁵ Verses 5-7 affirm Yahweh’s position as greater than “all gods,” and continue with creation language describing God’s sovereignty over heaven and earth, the sea and the deep, the clouds and lightning, and the wind and the rain.²⁶ The words “Whatever the LORD pleases (חֵפֵץ) he does” in verse 6 recall the words of 115:3 and prepare the reader or hearer for the reiterated words of God’s power over the “idols of the nations” in Ps 135:15-18, which recall the words of Ps 115:4-8. As well, verse 6’s references to “heaven” and “earth” occur in Pss 113:4 and 6;

²⁰ For a full discussion of Ps 135’s ties to Ps 136, see the discussion of Ps 136 below.

²¹ The phrase is especially prominent in the last five psalms of Book V, Pss 146-150, with thirty-four occurrences.

²² Psalm 134 does not summon “the servants of the LORD” to “praise the LORD”; rather, it summons them to “bless (בָּרַךְ) the LORD.” The final verse of Ps 135 declares, “Blessed be (בֵּרַךְ) the LORD.”

²³ See Pss 111:9; 113:2; 115:1; 116:13; 118:10; 122:4; 124:8; 129:8.

²⁴ The NRSV renders נְעִים as “pleasant” in Ps 133:1 and “gracious” in Ps 135:3.

²⁵ In Exod 19:5, God says to the people, “if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession (סִגְלָה) out of all the peoples.” See also Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18.

²⁶ Verse 5’s words bring to mind the words of Jethro to Moses in Exod 18:11, “Now I know that great is the LORD, more than all the gods.”

115:3, 15, and 16; 121:2; 123:1; 124:8; and 134:3; while Ps 135:7's repeated "he makes (עשה)" is anticipated by Pss 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; and 134:3's repeated celebration of God as "the maker of heaven and earth."

Verses 8-14 resume the narrative begun in verse 4, affirming God's choosing of Jacob and Israel for a possession by recounting the provisions of God during the Exodus from Egypt, the Wilderness Wandering, and the Settlement in the Land. God "struck down the firstborn of Egypt" (Exod 12:29); Sihon king of the Amorites (Num 21); Og, king of Bashan (Num 21) and "gave their land as a heritage." The psalm singer then celebrates Yahweh as a god, whose "name (שם)" and "renown" (זכר) endure "throughout all ages (v. 13)." Verses 15-20 are a near parallel to Ps 115:4-8, depicting the powerlessness of the idol-gods of the nations. They are the works of human hands made of silver and gold (v. 15; Ps 115:4); they have mouths but do not speak, eyes but do not see (v. 16; Ps 115:5); ears but do not hear (v. 17; Ps 115:6), with no breath in them (v. 17; Ps 115:7); and those who make them will become like them (v. 18; Ps 115:8).

Verses 19 and 20 then admonish the "house of Israel," the "house of Aaron," the "house of Levi," and "you that fear the LORD" to bless the Lord. Again, the verses are a near parallel to Ps 115:9-11, but the psalms differ in two ways. The singer of Ps 115 calls on three groups of people to "trust (בטח) in the LORD,"—Israel, the house of Aaron, and those who "fear the LORD," and follows with a promise of blessing (ברך) from the Lord. In Ps 135, however, the psalm singer calls on four groups to "bless (ברך) the LORD," adding the house of Levi to the groups mentioned in Ps 115. The additional group named in Ps 135 may suggest a concern by the singer of Ps 135 to make a distinction between the house of Aaron and the house of Levi.²⁷

Verse 21's reference to Zion and Jerusalem echoes the ten-fold mention of them in the Songs of Ascents, the central focus of that group of psalms as well as Ps 137.²⁸ Psalm 135 closes by repeating its opening, "hallelujah (הללו)." The Septuagint, however, omits this closing "hallelujah" and places it instead at the

²⁷ According to the books of Ezekiel and Chronicles and the Priestly account in the book of Numbers, the temple personnel were all members of the tribe of Levi, but they were stratified into the Aaronid priests and the Levites. The Levites occupied a subordinate position to the Aaronid priests according to Num 3:6. It seems that originally all the members of the tribe of Levi were set aside for special service to the Lord, but those who could show descent directly from Aaron – and from Zadok, according to Ezekiel – occupied higher positions within the cult than the other Levites (see Ezek 44:10-16 and Neh 7:63-65). Nehemiah re-established the Levites in the Jerusalem temple during his term as provincial governor (see Neh 13:10-13), but the Levites performed the more "menial" chores while the Aaronid priests were the ruling elite of the temple.

²⁸ Psalms 122:2, 3, 6; 125:1, 2; 126:1; 128: 5 (2); 129:5; 132:13; 137:1, 3, 5, 6, 7.

beginning of Ps 136, perhaps in an attempt to tie it firmly to Pss 111-118 and Ps 135.

We move on to Ps 136, which, like Ps 135, is also classified as a community hymn. Each verse of Ps 136 follows a fixed format: a call to give thanks (הודו), followed by a refrain that states the reason for thanks: "for his (God's) steadfast love (חסד) endures forever." The same refrain occurs in a number of liturgical passages in the Hebrew Bible (1 Chr 16:34; 2 Chr 5:13; 7:3; 20:21; Ezra 3:11) and in other psalms in the Psalter (Pss 106:1; 107:1; 100:5; 118:1-4, 29). The somewhat parallel liturgical refrain formats of Ps 118:1-4 and the whole of Ps 136 are of special interest for the topic of this essay. In Ps 118:1-4, the refrain "for his steadfast love (חסד) endures forever" occurs just after the *athnah* in each verse. The same is true of Ps 136, but in addition, Hebrew manuscripts separate the refrain spatially from what comes before in each verse. Verse 1's call to "give thanks to the LORD, for he is good (טוב)" echoes the same call given in verses 1 and 29 of Ps 118. The word "good" appears as well in Ps 135:3, establishing an initial tie between Psalms 135 and 136. Further, verses 2 and 3's declaration that Yahweh is the "God of gods (אלהי האלהים)" and the "Lord of lords (אדני האדנים)" recalls Ps 135:5.

Verses 4-9 of Ps 136 recount the creative works of God: the heavens and the earth, the waters, the great lights, and the sun and the moon and the stars. The psalm singer employs participial forms in verses 4-7 signalling for the reader or hearer God's ongoing creative work in the world: "doing, making (עשה)" in verses 4, 5, 7; and "spreading out (רקע)" in verse 6. While in Ps 135 the verb עשה occurs in the perfect aspect in verses 6 and 7's celebration of God's creative work, "makes rise (מעלה)" and "brings out (מוצא)" in verse 7 are participles, affirming, as does Ps 136, the ongoing nature of God's creative work.²⁹

Verse 4 describes God as the one, "who alone does great wonders (נפלאות)." The Psalter often uses the word in reference to the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt and God's provisions for them in the wilderness wandering.³⁰ Its occurrence in verse 4, prefacing the psalm's creation language suggests that God's creative work is as much a "great wonder" as is God's work in Israel's history. It thus provides a tie from verses 4-9 to verses 10-22 of the psalm, where, in language nearly identical to that found in Ps 135:8-12, the psalm singer recounts the acts of God on behalf of the Israelites during the Exodus, the Wilderness Wanderings, and the Settlement in the Land. While Ps 135 does not employ participles in its historical recounting, Ps 136 does. This further confirms the close connection between God's creative and sustaining work in the world. "Struck (נכה)" in verses 10 and 17; "brought out (יצא)" in verse 11; "split (גזר)"

²⁹ See Judith Gärtner, "The Historical Psalms: A Study of Psalms 78; 105; 106; 135; and 136 as Key Hermeneutical Texts in the Psalter," *HeBAI* 4 (2015): 373-399 (395).

³⁰ See Pss 78:4; 86:10; 105:2, 5; and 106:2.

in verse 13, and "led (הלך)" in verse 17 are participles. Both psalms compare God "striking down (נכה)" the firstborn in Egypt with "striking down (נכה)" "mighty (עצום) kings" (Ps 135:10) and "great (גדול) kings" (Ps 136:17).³¹

In verses 23-25, paralleling Ps 135:13-14, the psalm singer recalls God's remembrance and rescue in the past (vv. 23-24) and affirms God's ongoing provision for them in the present with verse 25's affirmation in participial form that God "gives (נתן) food to all flesh." While the notice in verse 25 that God "gives food to all flesh" may at first glance seem out of place in a celebration of God as "God of gods" and "Lord of lords" (vv. 2-3) and as creator and deliverer (vv. 10-22), food is a theme that, while not common in the Psalter, is especially prominent the Songs of Ascents. Psalm 126:5-6 celebrates reaping the harvest food; in Ps 127:2, the reader or hearer is cautioned against "eating the bread of anxious toil." Psalm 128:2 promises that the one who "fears the LORD" will eat "the fruit of the labor of your hands"; Ps 129:7 states that the wicked will not reap a crop sufficient to fill their hands; and in Ps 132:15, God promises abundant food for the poor. James Limburg further reflects on Ps 136's closing description of God, "Psalm 136 puts the gift of daily food on the same plane as the great acts of creation, exodus, and conquest."³² Psalm 136 has been designated, "The Great Hallel," and the Babylonian Talmud offers this explanation, "And why is it called 'Great Hallel' (הלל הגדול) ? Rabbi Johanan says: 'Because the Holy One, blessed be he, is enthroned on high in the universe and yet gives food to all creatures.'"³³

Psalm 136 ends as it begins; forming an *inclusio* around the psalm, but with something of a twist. While verse 1 calls on worshipers to "give thanks (הודו) to the LORD for he is good (טוב)," verse 26 calls them to "give thanks (הודו) to the God of heavens (אל השמים)." John Goldingay suggests that the designation "God of heavens" expands the concept of a God who is "good" to Israel to the God of creation who is "good" to all.³⁴ In an interesting insight, Erhard Gerstenberger points out that the creation/historical recitation of Ps 136 encompasses twenty-two verses (vv. 4-25), the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.³⁵ If Gerstenberger's insight is accepted, we may understand Ps 136 to imaginatively imitate perhaps the alphabetic acrostics Pss 111 and 112 that introduce the festival psalms in the middle of Book V, thus forming an *inclusio* around the grouping of psalms.

³¹ For references to Sihon and Og (vv. 19-20), see Deut 1:4; 2:26-3:11; 29:6; 31:4; and Judg 11:19-22.

³² James Limburg, *Psalms* (WestBC; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 464.

³³ Babylonian Talmud *b. Pesah*, 118a.

³⁴ Goldingay, *Psalms* 3, 596.

³⁵ Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (FOTL 15; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 385.

E THE ROLE OF PSALMS 135-137 IN THE "STORY" OF THE PSALTER

The Songs of Ascents end with Ps 134, and psalms of David that begin and end Book V (Pss 108-110 and 138-145) do not commence again until Ps 138. We have observed various scholars' understanding of Ps 137 as an apt conclusion to the Songs of Ascents, and we have studied the grammatical, lexical, and thematic ties between Pss 135 and 136 and Pss 111-118 and 129-134. If one understands a purposeful "shaping" for the book of Psalms, what is the explanation for the placement of Pss 135-137 after the Songs of Ascents and before the final grouping of psalms of David? That is, how does one incorporate these psalms into the storyline of Book V, which relates the story of the post-exilic community's quest for identity and survival after their return from exile in Babylon? The people were living once again in their own land, the temple was rebuilt, and worship had resumed, but they were vassals to first the Persians, then the Greeks, then the Romans—they were free but not free.

A number of scholars suggest that those who shaped the Psalter into its final form purposely placed Pss 135 and 136 after Pss 111-118 and the Songs of Ascents. James L. Mays describes the two psalms as "partners in praise to resume the 'praise of the LORD' and 'O give thanks to LORD' psalms in Psalms 111-118, after the interval of prayer for the law of the LORD (Ps 119) and the pilgrim voices of the songs of ascents."³⁶ J. Clinton McCann suggests that the two psalms "form an appendix to the Songs of Ascents" and maintains that "it is as if the editors of the Psalter intended for Psalms 135-136 to articulate the praise invited by Ps 134:1-2."³⁷ John Goldingay further states that Pss 135 and 136 provide the "reasons or content" for the worship that Ps 134 calls for, but in which no "reasons or content" are given.³⁸ Erich Zenger asserts that the two psalms "introduce the historical-theological perspective that was lacking in the Pilgrim Psalter... In a sense, they offer the reasons for the pilgrimage to Jerusalem... a reminder of how the pilgrimages became possible."³⁹ If we accept Zenger's assertion, let us examine how Pss 135 and 136 introduce such a "historical-theological perspective." We begin with Ps 135. It echoes other words in the Pentateuchal narrative such as Exod 18:11 in verse 5; Deut 7:6 in verse 4; Jer 10:13 in verse 7; and Deut 32:36 in verse 14. Leslie Allen writes:

In Ps 135 older materials are unashamedly recycled to create a new composition of praise. The harmony of concerted worship, for which it pleads in vv 19-20, itself finds artistic illustration in the blending of older voices to form a contemporary medley...⁴⁰

³⁶ Mays, *Psalms*, 415.

³⁷ McCann, "The Book of Psalms," 1219.

³⁸ Goldingay, *Psalms* 3, 577.

³⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 500, 509.

⁴⁰ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 227-228.

Goldingay maintains that "if ever the term 'mosaic' applied to a psalm, then it is to Ps 135."⁴¹ Why a mosaic, a gathering together of other traditional texts to speak to the reader or hearer of Ps 135? According to James Sanders, in an essay titled "Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of Canon," in situations such as the Israelites found themselves in the postexilic period, sometimes "only the old, tried, and true has any real authority. A new story will not do; only a story with old, recognizable elements has the power for life required."⁴²

In times of transition, in those times when we wonder what our next step in faith should be, it is often helpful to look back over our past. What words have sustained us in the past? On whose shoulders are we standing? What are the very foundations of our faith? The singers of Ps 135 employ familiar words and ideas to express their faith in God. For, indeed, sometimes "only the old, tried, and true" has any real meaning.

Psalm 136 continues the tenor of Ps 135, offering in a liturgical format, another recitation of God's creative and sustaining works. Leslie Allen points out "the regular heartbeat of the congregational refrain" in the psalm,⁴³ its liturgical character inviting communal participation and communal response. A similar liturgical structure can be observed in a form of Ps 145 included in the Dead Sea Scroll 11QPs^a. Psalm 145 celebrates the sovereignty and kingdom of God (vv. 1-13) and God's good provisions for humanity (vv. 14-20). In the 11QPs^a form, each verse of the psalm is followed by the refrain, "Blessed is God and blessed is his name for all time," giving the psalm the following form:

I will extol you my god the King; and I will bless your name for all time and beyond.

Blessed is God and blessed is his name forever.

Every day I will bless you, and I will praise your name for all time and beyond.

Blessed is God and blessed is his name forever.

Great is the Lord and highly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable.

Blessed is God and blessed is his name forever. (vv. 1-3)

The message embedded within the liturgical form of Ps 136 is, as with Ps 135, the creative work of God in the world and God's care and provisions for the Israelite people. John Goldingay reminds us, however, that in neither psalm do we find full historical recitations of God's creative work and good provisions;

⁴¹ Goldingay, *Psalms* 3, 577.

⁴² James A. Sanders, "Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of Canon," in Sanders, *From Sacred Story*, 9-40 (18).

⁴³ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 234.

rather they are expressed in highly poetic language.⁴⁴ They amount to a succinct summary of the Pentateuchal narrative, what Judith Gärtner calls "a *relecture* of the Torah" and "theological conceptions of Israel's history in miniature."⁴⁵

In addition, as stated above, Erhard Gerstenberger suggests that verses 4-25 of Ps 136, those which recount the creating and providing acts of God in the psalm and which number twenty-two, are an imitation of the alphabetic acrostic form in Hebrew poetry. Acrostic poems were the works of highly skilled literary artists and functioned in ancient Israelite literature in a number of ways. First, they were most likely memory devices to aid in private and public – individual and corporate – recitation; second, literarily, they summarized all that could be said or that needed to be said about a particular subject from *alif* to *tav*, from A to Z. Third, Adele Berlin, commenting on the structure of another alphabetic acrostic, Ps 145, writes:

The poet praises God with everything from A to Z: his praise is all inclusive. More than that, the entire alphabet, the source of all words, is marshaled praise of God. One cannot actually use all of the words in a language, but by using the alphabet one uses all potential words.⁴⁶

Thus, while Ps 136 is not a true alphabetic acrostic, by imitating the form, the psalm may provide clues for understanding its message.

In both Pss 135 and 136, the Israelite readers or hearers are called to remember and recite God's creative and sustaining acts in their history. History is the means by which a person or a group comes to an understanding of who they are, where they have come from, and where they are going. Reciting history also makes one a participant in that history; the events live; the story creates a world; and the recitation helps to shape the future. Continued recitation creates, according to Judith Gärtner, "an interweaving of layers of time." The memory recited in Pss 135 and 136 is what she calls "collective memories," memories that "interpret and present the events of the past in an identity-forming and identity-reassuring way... subject to ongoing modification."⁴⁷ Walter Brueggemann maintains that "these Psalms 'make a world,'"⁴⁸ and goes on to say, "Israel's historical recital is a stylized retelling of its past, and therefore an

⁴⁴ Goldingay, *Psalms* 3, 596.

⁴⁵ Gärtner, "The Historical Psalms," 373 and 398.

⁴⁶ Adele Berlin, "The Rhetoric of Psalm 145," in *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel S. Iwry* (ed. A. Kort and S. Morschauser; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 17-22 (18).

⁴⁷ Gärtner, "The Historical Psalms," 374-75 and 398.

⁴⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment: Psalms, Modernity, and the Making of History* (LCBI; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 21.

intentional shaping of the present and a passionate yearning for a specific future."⁴⁹

The world proposed in Pss 135 and 136 is one in which Yahweh, the God of Israel, created the world and continues to actively participate in it (Pss 135:7 and 136:4-7), chose Jacob and Israel as a possession (Ps 135:4), delivered the people from Egyptian slavery (Pss 135:8-9 and 136:10-15), led them through the wilderness (Ps 136:16), protected them from enemy rulers (Pss 135:10-11 and 136:17-20), and gave them a land as an inheritance (Pss 135:12 and 136:21-22).⁵⁰ In addition, Ps 135 provides assurance that "the idols of the nations" are merely the work of human hands, while Yahweh is active in creation and history (vv. 15-18) and "gives food to all flesh" (Ps 136:25)

In verses 23 and 24 of Ps 136, the psalm's singer celebrates God who remembered the people in their "low estate" and rescued them from their foes. J. Clinton McCann observes:

While it is possible that vv. 23-24 refer simply to the exodus and subsequent events recounted in vv. 10-22, it is likely that they carry the story further by reflecting the return from exile. To be sure, they would certainly have been understood this way in the post-exilic era.⁵¹

Dirk Human observes that in verse 23, the reader "encounters a sudden change in language and style." But, unlike McCann, Human maintains that verses 23 and 24 refer to a current exilic situation of the community. Interestingly, though, he points out a striking similarity between the phrase "from our foes" in verse 24 (מצרינו *miṣārênû*) and the word "Egypt" (מצרים *miṣrayim*), adding strength to McCann's suggestion. The exile in Babylon and the Egyptian captivity were the two times in Israel's history when the people were outside the land promised to them and since the focus of Pss 135 and 136 is the escape from Egyptian captivity.⁵²

Positing a memory of deliverance from the exile in Babylon as the backdrop to the words of Ps 136:23-24, the story begins in Ps 135 and continues in Pss 136 and 137. The repetition of "remember" (זכר) in verses 1, 6, and 7 of Ps 137 and its occurrences in Pss 135:13 (translated "renown" in the NRSV) and 136:23 further ties the three psalms together. Read together, then, Pss 135-137 create a world that spans the whole of God's history with humanity and the

⁴⁹ Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment*, 29.

⁵⁰ See Dirk J. Human, "Psalm 136. A Liturgy with Reference to Creation and History," in *Psalms and Liturgy* (ed. Dirk J. Human and Cas A. Vos, JSOTSup 410; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 73-88.

⁵¹ McCann, "The Book of Psalms," 1225.

⁵² Human, "Psalm 136," 83. He does suggest in footnote 31 the Babylonian exile as a possible setting for the words of verses 23 and 24.

people of Israel, from creation to the return from exile in Babylon. The postexilic community heard in the words of these psalms assurance that God, as creator and sustainer, was present in both their ancestral and immediate past and continues to be present with the people despite the exigencies of their current lives. Thus the stylized memory of God's ongoing creative activity and God's provision for the people, as rehearsed and recited in Psalms 135-137, provided the necessary assurance for the postexilic community that the "our Lord is above all gods (אֲדֹנָינוּ מִכָּל־אֱלֹהִים)" (Ps 135:5).

Walter Brueggemann writes, "The world proposed in these Psalms ... is at the same time a protest and polemic. The Psalms not only propose and constitute a world; they intend also to unmake, deconstruct, and unmask other worlds which seduce and endanger Israel."⁵³ Brueggemann's words strengthen Erhard Gerstenberger's contention that verses 4-25 of Ps 136, twenty-two verses in length, are composed in "imitation" of the alphabetic acrostics in Hebrew Bible. Kathleen O'Connor, in *Lamentations and the Tears of World*, writes, "Alphabetic devices embody struggles of survivors to contain and control the chaos of unstructured pain."⁵⁴ The postexilic community had returned to the land of promise, but they lived under foreign rule that threatened their existence as the people of Yahweh. They rebuilt the temple; they continued their worship practices (Pss 111-134); and the words of Pss 135-137 provided the rationale for continuing to worship Yahweh in faithful confidence. Erich Zenger maintains that Pss 135 and 136, "introduce the historical-theological perspective that was lacking in the Pilgrim Psalter ... In a sense, they offer the reasons for the pilgrimage to Jerusalem ... a reminder of how the pilgrimages became possible."⁵⁵

In the story of the Psalter, Book V recounts the return from exile in Babylon and narrates life in the postexilic period. Psalm 107 celebrates God's deliverance of the people; Pss 108-110 and Pss 138-145, psalms attributed to David, form an *inclusio* around Pss 111-134, which open with two brief acrostics (Pss 111-112) that recount God's good provisions for humanity and outline humanity's response. Klaus Seybold suggests that Ps 111 is "theology," while Ps 112 is "anthropology."⁵⁶ That "anthropology" follows in Pss 113-134, humanity's words to God in various festival celebrations in the life of Israel: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Judith Gärtner states that the following psalms, Pss 135 and 136, "turn out to be key hermeneutical texts in the Psalter, since through them the commitment to YHWH as the one God in creation and

⁵³ Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment*, 26.

⁵⁴ Kathleen O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 12.

⁵⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 500, 509.

⁵⁶ Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT I/15; Tübingen: Mohr, 1996), 440.

history is placed in a significant pivotal point for the formation of the Psalter."⁵⁷ I suggest that Ps 137 completes this perspective.

Psalms of David resume in Ps 138, culminating in David's celebration of God as sovereign in Ps 145, and David and all creation will "bless" (ברך, Pss 135:19-21; 145:1 and 21), "praise" (הלל, Pss 135:1,3, and 21; 145:2 and 21), and "give thanks" (הודו/יודו, Pss 136:1-3, 26; 145:10). All that remains for the community of the faithful to do is continue their "praise" (Pss 146:1-2, 10; 147:1, 12, 20; 148:1-5, 7, 13-14; 149:1, 9; and 150:1-6).

F CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have outlined the storyline of the Psalter with an emphasis on Book V; presented scholars' understanding of Ps 137 as a conclusion to the Songs of Ascents (Pss 120-134); offered an exegetical and thematic analysis of Psalms 135 and 136 that tie them to the festival psalms (Pss 113-118 and 120-134) that precede them and link them with one another; and explored the themes of Pss 135-137 that move the storyline of Psalter to its conclusion in Psalms 146-150. I conclude that the three psalms offer a highly stylized recitation of Israel's history that made a world for the postexilic community, recounting Yahweh's work in creation, summarizing the Pentateuchal stories of the ancestors (Pss 135-136) and providing a snapshot of exilic life in Babylon (Ps 137). Their assurance of Yahweh's presence and provisions allow David, in Psalms 138-145, to lead the postexilic people in blessing, praise, and thanks to the sovereign God. Thus, borrowing the words of Judith Gärtner, Pss 135-137 "turn out to be key hermeneutical texts in the Psalter."⁵⁸

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⁵⁷ Gärtner, "The Historical Psalms," 398.

⁵⁸ Gärtner, "The Historical Psalms," 398.

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