

## Introduction to Book 3 (Psalms 73-89)

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The psalms of Book 3 bear many similarities to those of Book 2, leading many to conclude that both were compiled for use during the Jewish exile in Babylon. The psalms reflect Jewish thought during this period of time when so much of their world was turned upside down. The temple had been destroyed; the whole system of sacrifice, priesthood and festival seasons was disrupted; and there was no Davidic king on the throne. These facts raised huge theological questions to the Jew such as: Has God abandoned us? Since the temple has been destroyed, where can we meet with God? What about God's promise to David that one of his descendants would always be on the throne? and Why bother being good when our enemies are evil and yet they are prospering? The psalms don't necessarily provide definitive and specific answers to these questions, but they reflect the struggle that was going on within Judaism during this pivotal period of history. Would they remain faithful to the covenant when all of the structures that supported it (the temple, priesthood, and festivals) were in disarray?

### *Characteristics of Book 3*

This group of psalms is easily divided into two distinct collections: The Asaphite Collection (73-83) and the Prayers in the Exile (84-89).

### *The Asaphite Collection (Psalms 73-83)*

The first eleven psalms are ascribed to Asaph (as was Psalm 50), bringing the total number of Asaphite Psalms to twelve. Within the eleven psalms of the Asaphite collection in Book 3, there seems to be something of a chiasmic structure. It begins with Psalm 73 which lays out the central question the Jews are asking during the exile, namely, why bother to be faithful to the covenant when the wicked Babylonians seem to be prospering without it. Then Psalm 74 follows by graphically describing the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians while at the same time, praying for deliverance. The next eight psalms (75-82) seemed to be paired with one another with Psalm 78 and its thorough recounting of Israel's history at the center (the Masoretes viewed Psalm 78 as central to entire Book of Psalms). The Asaphite collection concludes with Psalm 83, which like Psalm 74, calls upon God to rescue his people as he had done in the past.

**73 Introduction:** A Wisdom Psalm that asks (and answers) the primary question: "Why bother to keep the covenant?"

#### **74 Prayer for rescue from foreign oppression**

(a communal lament over the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians)

1. The God who humbles and exalts is the Savior God of Israel

**75** God humbles and exalts

**76** God will judge and be victorious in battle

2. God's saving acts remembered

**77** an individual lament/meditation on God's deeds

**78** an explanation for Israel's sufferings / their faithlessness is held in contrast to God's faithfulness (Judah chosen, Zion secured, David the shepherd). At 77 (Hebrew) verses it is the longest and central psalm in the Asaphite collection.

3. Plea for help from enemy attacks

**79** pay back blood for blood

- 80** Israel is God's vine, a prayer to restore the vine
- 4. God judges his people (81) and world powers (82)
  - 81** call to worship, listen and be satisfied with honey from the Rock
  - 82** the gods (i.e. rulers) of this world are judged for how they treated the weak
- 83** Prayer for rescue from foreign oppression  
(a host of nations are judged for conspiring to destroy God's people)

### *Prayers in Exile (Psalms 84-89)*

The second collection in Book 3 consists of six psalms, with four of them attributed to the Sons of Korah, one to David, and one to Ethan the Ezrahite. The inclusion of the four psalms of the Sons of Korah may connect Books 2 and 3 as the former begins with eight psalms of the Sons of Korah (42-49) and the latter concludes with four (84-85; 87-88), essentially framing the two books with psalms by the Sons of Korah. Just as there are twelve psalms of Asaph in Books 2 and 3, there are twelve psalms of the Sons of Korah. Remember that Psalms 42-43 are actually one psalm, so perhaps their division into two psalms was necessary to create this symmetry between these two collections of psalms with 12 psalms each by Asaph and the Sons of Korah. Prayers in Exile (84-89) according to author:

#### **Sons of Korah**

- 84** – individual prayer, longing for the House of God and pilgrimage
- 85** – communal prayer for a renewal of God's mercies and a return from exile

#### **David**

- 86** – individual prayer for mercy

#### **Sons of Korah**

- 87**– YHWH will establish Zion and the nations will be blessed through her
- 88** – individual lament (very dark with little connection to previous psalms)

#### **Ethan**

- 89** – Praise the God of creation and covenant, lament over Israel's unfaithfulness, appeal to God's faithfulness

These six psalms all show a special concern for Israel's moral responsibility to the Lord and in particular for her sin and the disasters it has brought upon the nation. While there are elements of hope and joy (Psalms 84, 87, 89), there are also moments of deep darkness (Psalm 88). These psalms of the exile reflect the reality of living by faith in a world that has been undone by the consequences of sinful moral choices.