Hope for this in-between time

Interweaving complaint and praise in the Psalms

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> *"But I trusted in your steadfast love;*
> *my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.*
> *I will sing to the Lord,*
> *because he has dealt bountifully with me." (Ps. 13:5–6)*[1]

So surprisingly concludes a psalm that begins with "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me for ever?" (v. 1). This change in mood has been deemed *Gewissheit der Erhörung*, "certainty of a hearing,"[2] suggesting that lament psalms move from complaint to resolution. Canonical readings of the psalter have also emphasized its movement toward orientation and praise in light of the doxologies at the end of Book 5 (Ps. 146–150). Yet readers of the Psalms recognize the vast amount of complaint within it, which raises the question of whether there are also movements *away* from resolution in the psalter—expressing "uncertainty of a hearing"[3]—and whether attempts to subordinate complaint to praise within the Book of Psalms transgresses its basic character. In this essay, I observe the interweaving of complaint and praise in Psalms 89, 27, and 42–43 and argue that this correlates to the character of the Christian life *in via*, on the way. I then turn to Augustine's expositions on the psalms to describe how the Bishop of Hippo invites

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1 Unless otherwise noted, all biblical references are the NRSV translation and use the chapter and verse numbers of the NRSV.

2 See Joachim Begrich, "Das priesterlichs Heilsorakel," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 52 (1934): 81–92.

3 Frederico G. Villanueva, *The 'Uncertainty of a Hearing': A Study of the Sudden Change of Mood in the Psalms of Lament*, Vetus Testamentum, Supplements (Boston: Brill, 2008).

readers to groan with the psalms as pilgrims. Since Augustine wrote and presented orally these expositions for a varied public across three decades of ecclesial turbulence (392–422 CE),[4] they could speak well to the complex communities of our own time.

From praise to lament

Psalm 89

"A prayer for help in reverse,"[5] Psalm 89 is a communal lament with a clear movement from acclamation of God for his past acts of faithfulness, to complaint.[6] In verses 1–37, the psalmist offers praise to God, expounding God's mighty deeds in creation, by which God is known as king of the universe (vv. 5–18), and in covenant with Israel, especially through David, his servant (vv. 19–37). Verse 38 supplies the reversal: the Davidic dynasty was to be as sure as the sun and moon (vv. 36–37), "but now you have spurned and rejected him; you are full of wrath against your anointed." Through verse 45, the psalmist describes the disarray and humiliation into which the Davidic line has fallen, before breaking out into full-blown complaint in verse 46: "How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself for ever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?" In verse 49, the psalmist reflects back on the earlier portion of the psalm, reminding the LORD of promises to David, with a question that could be viewed as the crux of the psalm: "LORD, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?"[7] The psalmist then asks God to recall the taunts and insults the people have endured (vv. 50–51). The final verse appears to have been appended as a conclusion to Book 4: "Blessed be the LORD for ever. Amen and Amen" (v. 52).

Mays argues that it is imperative to see the ways in which God's reign is described and God's faithfulness acclaimed in the sections prior to the

4 Michael C. McCarthy, SJ, "An Ecclesiology of Groaning: Augustine, the Psalms, and the Making of the Church," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 26.

5 Beth Tanner, "Psalm 89," in Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 674.

6 Psalm 89 has played important roles in canonical approaches to the book of Psalms since Gerald Henry Wilson argued that Books 1–3 narrate the story of the Davidic kingship from its inception (Psalm 2) to its failure (Psalm 89), to which Book 4 responds. See Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBLDS 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 207–15; on recent canonical approaches to the Psalms, see Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Book of Psalms: The Current State of Scholarship* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).

7 James L. Mays, *Psalms*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 283.

complaint. The text of verses 1–4 repeat and emphasize the word "forever"; in verses 5–8, God is located among the council of divine beings to highlight God's incomparability, even more great and awesome than the holy ones. Verses 9–14 announce God's victory over the sea and its monster, Rahab, at creation, justifying God's place as the highest in the divine council. The God on whose might and victory the very existence of the world depends is clearly not subject to the ebbs and flows of historical moments. Set in this context, God's choice and covenant with David are an extension of God's cosmic reign and faithfulness to the world, but the rejection of David's line does not threaten the latter. Discontinuity between God's transcendent might and promise to David, on the one hand, and the rejection of the Davidic line, on the other, give rise to the question, "How long?" (v. 46).[8] The promise and the current reality are held in relationship to God's transcendent power, love, and mercy, the memory of which gives rise to both acts of praise and complaint.

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Psalm 27

Psalm 27 can be divided into four parts.[9] In the first (vv. 1–3), the psalmist voices trust in God through reflection on what would happen if and when the psalmist comes under attack by his enemies, and through the rhetorical questions, "Whom shall I fear?" and "Whom shall I dread?"[10] These questions suggest God's incomparability in power and faithfulness on account of which no one is to be feared. Recognition of the incomparability of God sparks longing for God's presence. Verses 4–6 continue to voice trust in God but within the context of worship in the sanctuary. In verse 4, the psalmist describes their request to God to dwell in the

8 Mays, *Psalms*, 284–85.

9 Previous generations of scholarship divided Psalm 27 into two songs, with the vow in v. 6 concluding the first. See Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Hartwell, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 245; Herman Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 121; and C. A. Briggs and E. G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1906), 236.

10 Translation by Rolf A. Jacobson, "Psalm 27," in deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 266.

"house of the LORD" throughout their life, and in verse 6, she promises sacrifices and praise offered to God "in his tent." Verses 7–12 constitute a new section, which is more distinct from verses 4–6 than the latter is from verses 1–3. Verse 7 begins with a petition, "Hear, O LORD, my voice when I call, be gracious to me and answer me!" This and related petitions (vv. 9, 11–12) include a complaint expressing the situation of the psalmist: "False witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence" (v. 12). The psalm concludes with a statement of trust—"I will see the LORD's goodness in the land of the living" (v. 13)—and a communal exhortation to strength and confidence (v. 14).[11]

Verbal correspondences link the four sections of the psalm and invite reflection on the relationship between the petitions and the statements of trust.[12] "My adversaries" referenced in v. 2, who are not to be feared, are identified in v. 12: those who speak falsely against the psalmist in court (cf. Exod. 20:16). Such speech was not only unjust but also deathly in ancient Israel (cf. 1 Kings 21), yet the psalmist declares, "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living" (v. 13). "The goodness of the LORD" connects to the singular petition in verse 4 "to behold the beauty of the LORD," suggesting that the hope and exhortation voiced at the conclusion of the psalm springs from the presence of the Lord and the psalmist's pursuit of this presence. "Seeking" connects the petition to be in the presence of God in the temple in verse 4 to the pursuit of God's "face" in verse 8. References to "hiding" connect the petition "Do not hide your face from me" (v. 9) with the psalmist's trust that God will hide *him* in God's "shelter" and "tent" (v. 5).[13] The acclamation of God as the psalmist's salvation (v. 1) grounds the petition not to be cast away in verse 9, as if to say, "You are my salvation; show yourself to be my salvation." In these ways, the movements of prayer in Psalm 27 do not seem to move in a linear direction, but rather,

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11 Jacobson, "Psalm 27," 271.

12 Villanueva, *Uncertainty*, 116–17.

13 Cf. Jacobson, "Psalm 27," 271.

the psalmists' pursuit of the presence of God in the center of the psalm (vv. 4–10) gives rise to both petitions and trust.

Psalms 42–43

As in Psalm 27, in Psalms 42–43, it is pursuit of the presence of God—longing for the presence of God—that evokes the psalmists' statements of confidence and petition. These two psalms are closely connected though the refrain that appears in verses 42:5–6a, 42:11, and 43:5, which differentiate three sections, each of which combine complaint and trust.

The first section (42:1–6a) introduces the metaphor of the thirsty deer as the psalmist describes longing for God while being taunted by those around them, with the question, "Where is your God?" Beginning at verse 4, the psalmist nostalgically remembers leading processions to the temple, with joyful song and thanksgiving, and the state of his soul on those occasions is the antithesis of its current state: sunk down and turbulent. Still, this description comes in the form of a question, directed to the soul, as if his disposition is unwarranted.

After the first refrain, the psalmist reflects on his downcast soul, and because of this, he writes, "Therefore I remember you." The stanza concludes with the declaration that by day, the Lord commands steadfast love over the psalmist, who, by night, offers the Lord's song as a prayer "to the God of my life" (v. 8). The first complaint to God is offered in verse 9, with the questions, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?" Verse 10 echoes verse 3 with its reference to the taunters asking a different question, "Where is your God?"

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The third section (43:1–5) begins with petitions for vindication, defense, and deliverance from faithless, deceitful, and unjust people before voicing questions that echo 42:9, "Why have you cast me off? Why must I walk about mournfully?" This leads to a more positive petition: that God would send God's light and truth to lead the psalmist into God's presence ("to your holy hill and to your dwelling," v. 3) where the psalmist will offer praise at the altar (v. 4). The psalmist is not only asking for his life to be preserved; he is asking to be preserved in truth, justice, and

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Augustine's "Expositions on the Psalms"

From the above discussion, it should be clear that at least Psalms 89, 27 and 42–43 exhibit movement from complaint to praise as well as from praise to complaint, at times interweaving statements of trust with petitions. Memory of the transcendent power and love of God and pursuit of the presence of God spark both praise and complaint in these psalms. Augustine of Hippo's sermons on the Psalms develop these motifs within the context of Christian life.

Experience of a partial vision of God draws attention to the weaknesses the sufferer endures in the present, and it cultivates desire for wholeness and rest in God.

Longing for and pursuit of the presence of God are central elements of Augustine's exhortations on the Psalms, as he invites his hearers to groan with the psalms and, in so doing, to order their groaning toward the end of the pilgrim's journey. "The dominant 'voice'" in Augustine's expositions on the psalms is that of groaning.[14] This groaning follows from spiritual movements akin to praise, as the psalmist and reader or hearer see God partially, but not fully, in this life. Experience of a partial vision of God draws attention to the weaknesses the sufferer endures in the present, and it cultivates desire for wholeness and rest in God. "The psalms help to make the sufferer a pilgrim," an exile longing for their home with God.[15]

For example, in Psalm 42, Augustine writes of the metaphors of thirst and water: "I am thirsty on my pilgrimage, parched in my running, but I will be totally satisfied when I arrive."[16] The consumed tears of the pilgrim do not satisfy but rather intensify longing for water. Augustine describes

14 Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, "Groaning with the Psalms: The Cultivation of World-Weariness in Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*," *Studia Patristica* 98 (2017): 81–90. Cf. McCarthy, "Ecclesiology of Groaning," 23–48.

15 Stewart-Kroeker, "Groaning with the Psalms," 86.

16 *Enarrat. Ps.* 41.5. Maria Boulding, OSB, trans., *Expositions of the Psalms 33–50*, vol. II/16 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, OSA (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000).

several stages of contemplation: from the beauty of creation, in which something of the artist can be seen, but not fully; to interior sight, which can consider justice and beauty abstractly, but the mind is weak, remembering and forgetting, fickle in its desires. Ultimately, God is "above" the soul (cf. Ps. 42:5 [Gr. 41:4], "I poured out my soul above myself"), unreachable by the mind.[17] As the psalmist turns his attention to the presence of God (cf. Ps. 43:3–4), so Augustine reflects on God's presence among the faithful, who are God's tent on earth. The pilgrim is drawn from God's tent to God's "house"—the highest heaven and the deer's ultimate goal—by the sounds of celebration and praise. Describing the movement from praise to lament for the people of God, Augustine writes, "As we have found there a cause for joy, so here there is no shortage of things to groan about."[18] The psalmists' soul disquiets him even though he hears the sound of delightful music drawing him homeward in love—thus the question, "Why do you disquiet me?" "Hope in God," he commands, meaning, "Dwell in hope for this in-between time."[19]

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Conclusion

The movement of lament psalms is not only from complaint to "certainty of a hearing" but also from praise to acknowledgement of the weaknesses of our mortal lives and within the pilgrim church on earth. I have suggested that the concept of pilgrimage may be a helpful way to orient our lives in uncertain times and that this concept follows from a close reading of Psalms 27 and 42–43, in which memory of and longing for worship in the temple engender both lament and trust in God, who will ultimately lead the psalmist into life, praise, and communion with God. The contemplation of our end in God *should* spur both complaint *and* trust within us, and the community of the faithful remains a reliable locus of the presence

17 *Enarrat. Ps.* 41.7–8; Gerald P. Boersma, "Augustine's Deer Visits the Ophthalmologist: Exercising the Eyes of Faith in *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 41," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 10, no. 2 (2016): 217.

18 *Enarrat. Ps.* 41.10. Boulding, trans.

19 *Enarrat. Ps.* 41.10. Boulding, trans.

of God on earth, even as it remains the community of the weak and broken on their way home.

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