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Is Yahweh’s Faithfulness Contingent Upon Human Obedience?

Three Psalms Respond to an Age-old Question

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The tension between Yahweh’s covenant faithfulness and man’s inherent propensity to rebel against his loving-kindness—via disobedience and apathetic attitudes to covenant obligations—is an age-old issue with which Christians still contend. These two opposing ideas frequently come to the forefront of our thinking when breaches in our relationship with God appear. When serious actions sever the connection between God and his covenant community, how can we, as humans, reconcile such breaches? Does God annul his oath to us because of our disobedience and rebellion? If so, our covenant relationship with him today is doomed because, “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”¹ (Gen. 6:5) Moreover, history has shown from the earliest days of the church that Christians, as a new covenant-keeping people, have repeatedly

¹ All quotes are taken from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) except where otherwise stated.

failed to conform to the behavior of a called people.² If his covenant faithfulness is contingent upon the church's obedience, we have little hope for a glorious eternal future. On the other hand, it is inconceivable to think that living in a covenant relationship requires faithfulness from Yahweh alone to preserve the bond. Such thinking suggests covenant members are permitted to behave with impunity, since a faithful and loving God binds only himself to the covenant.

Perhaps the era in biblical or modern history in which the most acute breach occurred between a covenant community and Yahweh took place in 586 BC, when the Babylonian army invaded the kingdom of Judah, and destroyed the entire city of Jerusalem, including the temple. The majority of Jerusalem's inhabitants were exiled to Babylon and forced to settle there. Readers of biblical literature should, under no circumstances, view this as a simple, albeit unbelievably disastrous event. The exile represents so much more than a human catastrophe; it plunged Israel into a deep theological crisis in which their relationship with Yahweh was fundamentally altered.³ The loss of the temple meant that Yahweh's dwelling on earth had been removed and that the Israelites had no means of worshipping Yahweh.⁴ Additionally, without Jerusalem, the king's palace, or a king, Yahweh's covenant with David—"I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom...I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:12-13)—was apparently voided. Further compounding the matter, being exiled to Babylon apparently annulled Yahweh's promise to grant Abraham's descendants the land of Canaan. At the heart of all these apparent dissolutions lies the burning possibility: ultimately Yahweh's faithfulness is entirely contingent upon human obedience. It would appear that when mankind rebels and fails to act in accordance with Yahweh's

² The Crusades are an obvious example of horrendous acts performed in the name of the church and Christianity.

³ In truth, it is almost impossible to overstate the exile's comprehensive impact on the kingdom of Judah. In an attempt to put this event into words, John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Chatham, Kent: SCM Press, 1998), 343, writes, "The state destroyed and the state cult perforce suspended, the old national-cultic community was broken, and Israel was left for the moment an agglomeration of uprooted and beaten individuals, by no external mark any longer a people."

⁴ Ezekiel 10 graphically depicts God's glory departing from the temple and away from Jerusalem during the exile.

expectations, he rescinds his covenantal faithfulness forever. The disobedience of Israel from the establishment of the monarchy, and culminating in the reign of Zedekiah seemingly proved too great a strain even on Yahweh's covenant faithfulness.

During and after the exile, Israel was forced to rethink and re-examine their covenant relationship with Yahweh.⁵ Their comprehension of Yahweh's faithfulness and its contingency upon their obedience demanded modifications, compelling them to reassess the extent to which Yahweh's covenant faithfulness covered their disobedience. Evidence of this theological struggle may be found in the book of Psalms,⁶ both with respect to individual psalms and the arrangement of the Psalter as a whole. Signs of this tension notably manifest themselves in three psalms, 105-107,⁷ which all, to varying degrees, relate to Yahweh's covenant of land given to Abraham in Genesis 15:7. As postexilic compositions, each of these works reflects views of individuals who wrestled to some degree with the tension between Yahweh's covenant faithfulness to his promise of land to Abraham's descendants and man's disobedience. Moreover, the editors of the Psalter, responsible for arranging these psalms additionally relate to the same issue. The present essay considers each individual psalm section by section to provide an overall flow as well as an appreciation of the compositions and how they interact

⁵ During the days of Jeremiah, certain individuals within Israelite society assumed the presence of God's temple in Jerusalem rendered the city indestructible, irrespective of Israel's behavior (see Jer 7:3-7). Catastrophic suppositions such as these were clearly reassessed after 586 BC.

⁶ Psalm 132 (especially v11-12), for example, alone reinterprets the Davidic covenant. As a reflection of 2 Samuel 7, the psalm adds a condition of obedience on David's descendants, suggesting that they must comply with God's laws for the covenant to be fulfilled. This modification suggests that a postexilic author had to rethink God's covenant with David.

⁷ Scholarly consensus dates each of these psalms to the postexilic era, with varying degrees of certainty. Psalm 106 is the most straightforward, due to the clear references to the exile in v47. Additionally, others such as Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary*, trans., Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 317, and Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, ed. David A. Hubbard, Glen W. Barker, and Bruce M. Metzger, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 21 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 2002), 67, view it as an exilic/postexilic work. The scholarly consensus additionally dates Psalm 105 after the exile; see for example, J. Clinton McCann, "Psalms," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 1104; Kraus, 309; and Allen, 54-55. Psalm 107's date presents a more complex problem due to its complicated historical development. Generally, scholars accept that the core of the psalm, v1, 4-32 are pre-exilic, and the remaining verses, 2-3, 33-43, constitute postexilic additions; see for example McCann, 117, and Kraus, 326-27. This being the case, the final completed form of the psalm must be located during the postexilic era when editors finally shaped the composition into its present form, and assigned to it the meaning and function it presently bears.

with the promise of land. Subsequently, all three psalms are examined together as a single narrative, reflecting the theology of the arranger and how he understood the relationship between Yahweh's promise of Canaan to Abraham and the fulfillment of that promise. After this analysis, the paper will summarize briefly what the psalms and their arrangement teaches those in a covenant relationship with Yahweh today. Before examining the first psalm, however a few words must be mentioned concerning the significance of the Psalter's overall arrangement.

Readers of the Psalter frequently look to individual psalms to expand their theological understanding, but few consider their arrangement. The layout of the individual psalms was organized quite specifically, and it is possible to gain both moral guidance and a theological understanding from this arrangement. Moreover, it is important to realize that the Psalter's compilation occurred after the exile, when the various editors had time for theological reflection, which ultimately influenced the final configuration of psalms. Therefore it is possible to gain some insight into the editors' theology by examining the arrangement of the psalms.

Concerning the Psalter's arrangement, two possible avenues of study are available: the overall composition⁸ and the smaller-scale juxtaposition of individual psalms. For the purposes of the present paper, the local juxtaposition of psalms bears a greater relevance.

⁸ Recent years have witnessed a resurgence in the study of the Psalter's organization. Recognizing that its editors did not haphazardly compile the book, scholars have sought to understand its organizational rationale from beginning to end. At the present time, the consensus of opinion holds that the Psalter was organized with the exile in mind, seeking to address Israel's post-monarchic religious continuity. Briefly stated, the first three books of the Psalter, with a high concentration of Davidic psalms, reflect the pre-exilic Davidic dynasty. At the end of this group, Psalm 89, a lament, expresses the grief of the exile and the failed monarchy. Book IV opens with Psalm 90, a song of Moses, which represents a new direction in God's relationship with Israel after the exile. Because the Davidic covenant was severely damaged, Israel sought a new model for kingship, and moved in the direction of the desert ideal, with Moses functioning as God's prophet and spokesman, and God himself ruling as their king, a situation reflected in the concentration of kingship psalms (Psalms 93, 95-99). Inculcating the desert ideal, Book IV reflects the desert motif more than any other (see, for example, Pss 95, 105, 106). Dominating the Psalter's final book (Book V), Psalm 119 is an extraordinarily long composition exalting God's law and its importance for correct living. This reflects the decline of the prophetic era, where interpretation of God's word develops into the prevalent means for knowing and understanding his will; see Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans., Moshe Greenberg (Jerusalem: Sefer Ve Sefel Publishing, 2003), 447. Within the suggested model, the Psalter's final five compositions function as a doxology, songs of praise closing and completing the work as a whole. For a more detailed rendition of the entire arrangement, see Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBL Dissertation Series, vol. 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

Numerous scholars have recognized that in certain instances, individual psalms were not arranged haphazardly, and they have observed a variety of organizational strategies, such as lexical and thematic associations,⁹ and interpretational juxtaposition. Positioning one psalm next to another frequently creates a subtle shift in meaning or emphasis. Just as specific aspects of photographs and paintings are highlighted according to their background colors, so too a psalm's neighboring compositions may serve as a literary frame accentuating specific aspects within. This principle influences numerous psalms, yielding at least two possible meanings: the individual reading of the psalm, and its rendering in a larger context.¹⁰ In their commentary on the psalms, Hossfeld and Zenger¹¹ recognize and devote significant attention to the important relationships between individual psalms, and levels of interpretation arising between them. Other

⁹ A modern work worth mentioning is a commentary by Karl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Psalms*, trans., James Martin, Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982). They recognize that individual psalms were purposefully juxtaposed according to various principles of association, including common keywords or themes. For example, they note that the relatively rare word "dove" (יונה) links Psalms 55:7 and 56:1 (see Keil and Delitzsch, 22), suggesting the editor(s) responsible for these compositions saw the keyword and placed the psalms side by side because of it. Similarly, they view the term "Angel of the Lord" (מלאך ה'יהוה) as another linking phrase governing the positioning of Psalms 34 and 35. They mention these principles of association at the start of their commentary and adhere to them as they discuss each of the psalms in their commentary. Additionally, these scholars recognize organization according to similarities in psalm titles, such as the "Songs of Ascent" opening Psalms 120-134. Concerning the titles, Psalms 105-107 comply with this organizational principle because they each begin with the phrase "give thanks" (הודו). Harry P. Nasuti in "The Interpretive Significance of Sequence and Selection in the Book of Psalms," in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, ed. Peter Flint and Patrick D. Miller, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 314, addresses the issue of local juxtaposition strategies, and raises the idea of a more spiritual development. With respect to the Songs of Ascent, he affirms Augustine's observations, stating, "Augustine sees the ascent of these psalms as a progression towards the understanding of things spiritual and the pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem." (Nasuti, 329)

¹⁰ Medieval Jewish scholars recognized this interpretive strategy, along with more modern scholars such as Yair Zakovitch in "Juxtaposition in the Abraham Cycle," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1995), who uncovers the principle in the arrangement of the Abraham narratives in Genesis.

¹¹ Concerning the relationship between Psalms 80 and 81, they state, "There are intense ties between Psalm 81 and its predecessor. In Psalm 80 Israel prays to God; in Psalm 80 God speaks to Israel. Israel's accusatory "why" question in 80:13 received its answer from God in 81:12-13. God's action remains, on the one hand, constant, and yet on the other hand it changes radically: while at one time his hand and right hand were active (80:16, 18), so it will remain in the future (81:15). While once he satisfied and filled them with bread and gave them tears to drink (80:6), so in the future he will satisfy them with fullness, if Israel follows him." (Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans., Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005], 325)

contemporary commentators¹² have also sought to expound upon the theological insight reflected in the Psalter's arrangement. Recognizing the value of this approach, the present essay re-evaluates the three selected psalms with local juxtaposition strategies in mind, following a survey of the individual psalms.

The first psalm in the series is Psalm 105, a hymn of praise¹³ thanking Yahweh for his covenant to Abraham, with specific regard to the land. One of the psalm's¹⁴ most notable features is its comprehensively positive portrayal of Israel's past, which excludes negative events and detrimental character traits of individuals as well as the nation of Israel. The psalm begins with a call for Israel to praise Yahweh for his wonderful acts and to remember all that he has done for them (v1-7). The second section (v8-11) introduces the idea of covenant, more specifically, the covenant Yahweh made with Abraham and his descendants. Four expressions in this short section, echo the promise Yahweh made to Israel's forefathers. In v8 he "remembered his covenant forever," and "the word which He commanded to a thousand generations." Following this in v9 the psalm recalls his "oath to Isaac," and in v10 it appears as an "everlasting covenant." The section closes in v11 with the specific aspect of the covenant with which the psalmist is concerned: the giving of land;¹⁵ it additionally portrays Yahweh's covenant as being given freely and of his sole volition. Neither Abraham nor his offspring have done anything to earn or deserve it. Yahweh has initiated the action, and it is incumbent upon him to fulfill it. For the remainder of the composition, the psalmist recounts instances in the patriarchs' lives and the nation of Israel in which external forces

¹² McCann, 693, similarly comments on the relationship between Psalms 1-2 and Psalm 3. He views their juxtaposition as illustrating the truth that biblical happiness does not necessarily equate to life without struggle or opposition. All of the aforementioned authors, Hossfeld, Zenger, and McCann, reject any notion of the relationships between individual psalms as being haphazard, but as intentional placements by an editor or arranger to further teach and instruct the reader.

¹³ See Allen, 53-54.

¹⁴ Although the present essay begins with Psalm 105, it is important to remember its role in a longer sequence of compositions. Preceding this work is Psalm 104, which lucidly connects with Psalm 105 from a historiographical perspective. Psalm 104 is a hymn celebrating God's work in creation, both the initial act and his work in sustaining it. Juxtaposing this work to Psalms 105 and 106 creates a historical continuum extending from the creation of the world through to the exile.

¹⁵ The Genesis account of God's covenant with Abraham also includes the blessings of progeny and fame (see Gen. 12:2-3), but the psalmist's sole concern is for the land.

threaten the covenant's completion. Other nations and portentous situations endanger the destruction of either Abraham or his chosen seed, Israel. Because the destruction of either one essentially equates to the elimination of the promise, Yahweh must directly intervene and deliver the recipients of his covenant if he is to be proven faithful.

The first narrative section of Psalm 105 recalls instances in which the patriarchs wandered the land of Canaan in the precarious position of sojourners, moving from "nation to nation," and "*one* kingdom to another people" (v13). As a relatively small family, "few men in number" (v12), they were susceptible to attacks and abuse by the peoples of Canaan who outnumbered them. This threat is realized towards the end of the section in v14-15, which specifically mention Yahweh's intervention—a verbal rebuke to protect the patriarchs and his promise. Following this, v16-22 recount the story of Joseph, whose life constitutes a bridge between Israel's founding forefathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and the birth of the nation itself. Here, the psalmist presents the approach of two threats rising to destroy the seed of Abraham: the first is a famine that afflicted the land, "And He called for a famine upon the land" (v16). To avert the impending devastation endangering the patriarchal family, God sends Joseph ahead of them to Egypt, where he is bound and imprisoned. This incarceration presents the second threat to the promise. Were Joseph left to rot in an Egyptian prison, Yahweh's plans for providing food for Jacob and his family would have been thwarted. At an appointed moment during his imprisonment, however, Yahweh takes the initiative to free Joseph and promote him to a position second only to Pharaoh.¹⁶ This too represents a demonstration of Yahweh's faithfulness to his promise. He initiated the promise to Abraham and his seed, and is faithful in keeping it.

The largest section of the psalm, v23-37, reports the expansion of Abraham's seed from a tribe to a people. In these verses, the threat to the promise manifests itself through the Egyptians, who enslave the Israelites. Left alone to cope with this situation, the Israelites would remain a subservient people captive in the land of Egypt, hindering

¹⁶ The Hebrew reading of this phrase is deliberately ambiguous, leaving room for the interpretation of either God or the king setting Joseph free. When translating the verse, it is important to recognize that the verb "sent" exclusively has God as the subject elsewhere in the psalm (see v17, 26, 28).

the realization of Yahweh's promise. However, Yahweh directly intervenes to free his people from Egyptian tyranny, first by appointing two chosen agents, Moses and Aaron (v26). In keeping with the rest of the psalm, no negative instances are recalled concerning the selection of these two individuals; they are simply portrayed as Yahweh's willing vessels. In spite of Moses and Aaron's specific mentioned by name, Yahweh is the sole executor¹⁷ of judgments in the plagues' narrative. He turns the waters into blood (v29), multiplies frogs in their land (v30), and summons swarms¹⁸ of lice into their borders (v31); similarly, he gives them "hail for rain" and sends "fire in their land" (v32), calls for a swarm of locust in the land (v34), and personally strikes the firstborn of the Egyptians (v39). By elevating Yahweh's role in the plagues' narrative, the psalmist accentuates Yahweh's faithfulness in keeping his promise. Nothing that man has done inspires him to act; he is faithful and consistent to the covenant he made and personally sees to it that Israel is preserved, permitting the covenant's fulfillment through them. Yahweh's loving-kindness is further emphasized in v37, which recalls the silver and gold Israel received when they left Egypt, a blessing far above and beyond the fundamental act of redemption.

A problem of a different kind threatens Abraham's seed in v38-41. Previously, nations and peoples posed a threat to them, but in the desert, the harshness and hostility of the environment endangers them. The newly emancipated Israelites wander about the desert lacking guidance and sustenance, without either of which they would perish, and the promise to Abraham with them. Yahweh once again intervenes miraculously via "a cloud for a covering, And fire to illumine by night" (v39). Additionally, he supplies them with meat, bread, and water to sustain them during their desert sojourn.

After all the potential disasters have been averted, the promise is finally fulfilled in v42-44 and the Israelites, the seed of Abraham,

¹⁷ On various occasions throughout this psalm, the psalmist attributes to God actions that are not ascribed to him in the Pentateuch. In v16 God called the famine that strikes the land, he similarly caused the Israelites to increase and multiply in v24, and he directly caused the Egyptians to hate his people in v25.

¹⁸ Although frequently translated as "flies," the Hebrew word ערב literally means "swarms" (see Francis Brown, Charles Briggs, and Samuel Driver, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907; reprint, 1974], 786). In the present context, the swarms should be attributed to lice, since each of the other plagues adopts no less than a single verse.

inherit the land of Canaan, in addition to the fruit of the Canaanites' labors. Yahweh made a promise, and was faithful to complete it in the face of threats and adverse circumstances. On the whole, the picture painted by the psalmist is a one-sided portrayal of events where Yahweh enters the covenant by himself, and then fulfills all of his own requirements. The patriarchs and Israel function simply as passive recipients of the Yahweh's loving-kindness. It would be easy to read this psalm simply as a celebration of Yahweh's faithfulness to his word in the face of extenuating circumstances; however, this view only tells a small part of the story. The real meaning of the psalm appears in its final verse, which states, "So that they might keep His statutes And observe His laws" (v45), and it is here that Israel's obligatory response to Yahweh's undeserved kindness towards them is specified.¹⁹ Because Yahweh demonstrated his faithfulness in promising the Israelites a land and protecting them so they could inherit it, they must obey the commands and injunctions he has set before them.²⁰ This connection of the promise of land with adherence to God's laws is not derived from the Genesis text, but aligns more closely with the psalmist's present reality as someone newly returned from exile.

Overall, a striking feature of the psalm is that the negative aspects from all Torah accounts, especially the desert narrative, were omitted by the psalmist. Although he would have been well aware of them, he chose to overlook them for the purpose of this composition. What matters for him is not the will, obedience, and faithfulness of man, but that of Yahweh. Verse 42 sums up the rationale well for God's adopted behavior throughout the psalm, "For He remembered His holy word *With* Abraham His servant."²¹ For the postexilic

¹⁹ In many ways this verse adds a degree of interpretation to the Genesis account. Although God hoped for a degree of obedience from the forthcoming generations, it is not explicitly stated in Genesis. With respect to the psalm, however, the giving of land unequivocally bears an expectation of obedience.

²⁰ Although not explicitly stated, failure to do so implies that the land would be taken from them, and they would return to the situation in which Abraham found himself at the beginning of the psalm: wandering from land to land and kingdom to kingdom.

²¹ Biblically, the idea of remembrance constitutes more than an intellectual activity. When God remembers, or is called to do so by an intercessor, the implication is that he will both recall and act according to the memory. Similarly, when God calls man to remember, he expects people to recall specific instances and act in accordance with memories brought to mind. For example, in Deuteronomy 24:17-18 the Israelites are commanded to remember that they were slaves in Egypt, but this memory serves as an impetus for them to act by treating the sojourners in their land well.

community, this psalm would have produced a profound sense of hope, knowing that, to a certain extent, Yahweh is capable of totally overlooking the sins of man as an expression of his covenant faithfulness.

Similar to Psalm 105, Psalm 106 is also a historiographic composition. Unlike its immediate predecessor, however, which is a hymn of praise, Psalm 106 is a lament²² that recognizes all of the wrongdoing that occurred during Israel's history. Although the community's sins and their need for forgiveness evidently dominate the composition, the words of the psalm for the most part are placed in the mouth of an individual who stands on behalf of the nation interceding for them. The psalm begins with a call to remember and recite the gracious deeds of the Lord (v1-5), and then moves on to an extended confession of Israel's sins against Yahweh and his appointed leadership (v6-46). The total historical period recited in this section can be split into two temporal settings: the exodus and desert wandering era (v6-33), and Israel's dwelling in the land (v34-46).

The desert narrative begins with v6-12, which depicts Israel's deliverance at the Sea of Reeds. Yahweh delivers the people from Egypt by splitting the sea so they can pass through, but uses it as a weapon to destroy Pharaoh and his army. This act of loving-kindness toward Israel²³ forms the foundation for the remaining incidents recounted in the psalm. Similar to the previous psalm, Yahweh's acts of mercy create a basis for which an appropriate response is required:

²² In general, the psalm fits the pattern of a lament, which includes a petition (v4-5), a description of grief in the main body of the psalm (v6-42), and a statement of trust (v44-46). The exact nature of the lament, whether community or individual, is somewhat difficult to determine. The entire composition constitutes a confessional prayer for the nation, but the main voice in the psalm belongs to an individual who attempts to stand in the gap and intercede for the nation. Consequently, the singular personal pronoun in v4 ("Remember me" and "visit me") contrasts with the plural first-person pronoun found in v6, ("we have sinned," "we have committed iniquity...we have acted wickedly").

²³ Psalm 106:1, 7, 45 uses the Hebrew word *hēsēd* (חֶסֶד), which is frequently translated "grace," but is perhaps better understood as "loving-kindness." Bellinger interprets the word as "unchanging love" (*Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises* [Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990], 78) and it frequently, but not exclusively, describes behaviour motivated by a covenant (see *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Edited by Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann [Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997], 460). Within the context of Psalms 106 and 107, it represents a single-sided love, resulting in action independent of man's behavior. It also implies physical acts of deliverance wrought by God, and should not be confused with a feeling. Although the word does not specifically appear in Psalm 105, it is clearly implied. God initiated his covenant with Abraham through his loving-kindness, and he preserved Abraham and his seed according to the covenant that he established.

trust and obedience. Within the rendition of Psalm 106, the immediate response of the Israelites is commendable, “Then they believed His words; They sang His praise” (v12). This section represents the only positive incident in the entire composition; unfortunately, however, the initial attitude of praise is short lived. Despite their witness of Yahweh’s saving power at the Sea of Reeds, the Israelites rebel against him, failing to trust him and lusting exceedingly for food in v13-15. The resulting response is both a mixture of mercy and grace. Yahweh hears their cry and provides them with meat, but disciplines them by sending a wasting disease. Further rebellion, though not on a national scale, is reported in v16-18, where a small group of rebels rise up against Yahweh’s appointed leader, Moses. Yahweh similarly judges the rebel leaders, causing the earth to swallow them while their co-conspirators are burned with fire.

Verses 19-23 see the recollection of another national rebellion: the idolatry at Horeb,²⁴ when the Israelites created and worshipped the image of a golden calf. Although Aaron led Israel in this sin, according to Exodus, he is not named in this psalm. In the psalm’s overall context, this act of idolatry took place because the Israelites forgot the works of Yahweh and the deeds he performed for them, specifically their deliverance at the Sea of Reeds. As a result, Yahweh is determined to destroy the Israelites, but relents and spares them when Moses stands in the gap²⁵ to intercede for them. However, even this act of mercy is soon forgotten, and when the Israelites are first offered the promised land in v24-27, they reject it. Although God responds by rejecting that generation, scattering their bodies across the desert, he is still faithful to his word via the subsequent generations. Immediately on the heels of this condemnation, the psalmist recalls further rebellion, when the Israelites yoked themselves to Baal Peor in v28-31.²⁶ Once again, Yahweh punishes the Israelites as a result, but in a manner similar to

²⁴ An alternate name for Mt. Sinai, where Moses received God’s laws and Israel entered into a covenant with Yahweh.

²⁵ This idea of one man standing in the gap to avert God’s judgment on the nation is crucial to the psalmist’s plea for God to spare the Israelites in captivity. Just as Moses and Phineas successfully averted a national disaster through intercession, it appears that the psalmist also hopes to avert a disaster by interceding for the people in captivity.

²⁶ See Numbers 25:1-18 for the expanded account of this event in the Pentateuch.

the incident at Horeb, the actions of an individual, Phineas, turn back Yahweh's wrath and avert his judgment. The final incident relating to the desert era appears in v32-33, which recalls the Israelites in a conflict with their leader Moses that induces him to sin at the waters of Meribah. At this point in the narrative material, recollection of the desert era ends, and the psalm continues to recount events after the Israelites entered into the promised land.

From the time the Israelites entered Canaan, they continued to forget the work Yahweh had done for them, or to appreciate his mercy and loving-kindness towards them. Verses 34-42 tell how the Israelites co-mingled with the other nations and learned their ways, ultimately leading them to sacrifice their children to demons. Naturally, this behavior led Yahweh to adopt further punitive measures by delivering them into the hands of the surrounding nations, who suppress and subdue them. Even this judgment is mingled with mercy; Yahweh eventually sees his people's misery and delivers them. Unfortunately, they still fall into a cycle of sin, punishment, and deliverance throughout their stay in the promised land. Yahweh constantly relents from his punishments, not because of the Israelites' deeds, but because "He remembered His covenant for their sake, And relented according to the greatness of His lovingkindness" (v45).²⁷

Yahweh's unconditional mercy towards his people while in their captor's hands constitutes the psalmist's last word concerning Israel's literary history. In v47, he turns directly to his situation. The context strongly suggests the psalmist himself speaks from a time when the Israelites were in the hands of their captors during the exile, "Save us, O LORD our God, And gather us from among the nations" (v47). He continues to plead for Yahweh to be faithful once again to his covenant and have mercy by freeing the Israelites from captivity.²⁸ Aware of the fact that Israel has done nothing to deserve it—since the psalm patently demonstrates their persistent unfaithfulness—all he

²⁷ The cycle of events recorded in v43-46 is almost certainly inspired by the book of Judges, which sees the Israelites undergoing exactly the same sequence of events.

²⁸ In all likelihood, the last verse constitutes a doxology added after the psalm's composition. Similar endings are apparent in Psalms 41:14; 72:19; 89:53, marking the divisions of the Psalter into five books. The majority of commentators—such as Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, Handbuch Zum Alten Testament (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck]), 1996, 418-20, and McCann, 1112—understand it as an addition, and not an integral part of the psalm.

can do is throw himself on the mercy of Yahweh's covenant faithfulness.

The final psalm in the sequence, Psalm 107, is generally considered a psalm of thanksgiving²⁹ used in expressing gratitude to Yahweh for deliverance from a variety of situations. The first part of the psalm, v1-32, recalls four situations in which individuals or groups are delivered from desperate, and sometimes life-threatening situations. After each section is a refrain imploring the audience to give thanks, "Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness, And for His wonders to the sons of men!"³⁰ The second part, v33-43, forms a more general summary of Yahweh's ability to bring life to a land and administer justice to the oppressed. With the composition both beginning and ending with the word *hesed*, the psalm has been, quite aptly, described as a sermon on Yahweh's everlasting loving-kindness and mercy³¹ revealing itself in his willingness to save.

The psalm begins with a call to the redeemed of the Lord to praise him (v1-3). In the immediate context, the redeemed are those listed in the body of the psalm who escape from life-threatening circumstances by Yahweh's grace. From this relatively brief introduction, the psalm depicts a situation in which travelers were lost, without food, and in danger of death.³² They cried out to God (v6), who subsequently heard them and delivered them from their distress by providing them with food, and as a result of his intervention they offered him thanks.³³ The following section (v10-16) indicates a situation in which individuals languished in prison for an indefinite time due to rebellion against the Lord. After an extended period of suffering, their cry is answered, and he frees them

²⁹ Authors generally accept this genre definition (see for example McCann, 1117), but some understand the latter part of the psalm, v33-43, as a "general hymn that includes wisdom elements" (Allen, 84). For the purposes of the present essay, however, the hypothetical developments are irrelevant because the final form of the psalm remains postexilic.

³⁰ See v8, 15, 21, 31.

³¹ McCann, 117 reads it this way, suggesting that it begins with an invitation for congregational response, and continues with four narrative illustrations, and then ends with a summary based on the four illustrations.

³² Possibly the reference here is to a caravan of merchants; see Allen, 89.

³³ Due to the psalm's proximity with Psalms 105 and 106, it is difficult not to associate those lost and without food with the desert generation. Both Psalms 105 and 106 recall Israel's plight in the desert without food and water, with God rescuing them from their plight.

from their captivity. Moving from incarceration, the psalm speaks of those who were physically afflicted with an undisclosed ailment, due to their own transgressions and poor moral choices (v17-22). These too cried out in their distress and were delivered by Yahweh through his healing. The fourth, and perhaps most unexpected, life-endangering situation is a deliverance at sea in v23-32.³⁴ The section describes sailors caught at sea during a violent storm that threatens to destroy them. At their wits end (v27), they cry unto Yahweh, who calms the storm, and brings them out of their distress. For each of the four cases cited above, the psalm provides no specific context.

From v33 onwards, the psalm turns to praising Yahweh for his general work in an unspecified land. As with the events mentioned in v6-29, the psalmist provides no immediate context, temporal or special, for when Yahweh performed the deeds recited. Verses 33-38 depict his abilities to transform a fertile land into desolation, and a desolate land into fertile pastures. A topic change occurs in v39-41, which recalls Yahweh's justice—his ability to bring down princes and raise up the oppressed. In closing, the psalmist calls for a time of moral reflection in v42-43. These verses invite the audience to consider the works of Yahweh listed in the psalm to better understand his loving-kindness. Naturally, such a request requires more than mere academic reflection, but a consideration of Yahweh's mercy that will inevitably lead to trusting him in the future.

With the surveys of the individual psalms complete, attention now turns to how the individual compositions are arranged as a single narrative, which adds an interpretive dimension to their individual purposes and reflects the theological understanding of the editors. From a historical perspective,³⁵ the psalms, grouped together in their

³⁴ This is unexpected because the Israelites, by and large, were not a sea-faring nation, so the need for thanksgiving and deliverance at sea constitutes a rare situation. Kraus, 329, suggests these individuals were merchants who sailed the sea—most likely from Phoenician ports—and had to overcome great dangers. Although the sea-faring exploits of the early Israelites rarely appear in the Old Testament, they are nevertheless present. In 1 Kings 9:26-28, for example, Solomon commissions ships to sail to Ophir for gold.

³⁵ In addition to both being historiographic psalms, they have strong thematic connections. Both predominantly concern the exodus: a recollection of events describing Israel's deliverance from Egypt, wandering through the desert, and entering Canaan. Repetition of the psalms' opening line, "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; For His lovingkindness is everlasting" in the first verses of each psalm, additionally creates a stronger relationship between the two. Similarly, Psalm 106 closes with a mention of the word "redeem," and the opening verses of Psalm 107 also use this word.

present order, recite Israel's history from the early patriarchal accounts found in Genesis through to the return of the exiles from Babylon. From a theological perspective, these accounts tell a story of Yahweh's faithfulness to his covenant of land to Abraham and his seed, in light of their persistent disobedience.

The greater context begins with Psalm 105 and the establishment of Yahweh's promise to Abraham to give to him the land of Canaan. In the psalm, this agreement is described as a "covenant," and an "oath," in v9, both referring to the same agreement with Yahweh as instigator. After establishing this covenant at the beginning of the psalm, an implicit challenge is set: Is Yahweh faithful to keep his covenant. Throughout the psalm, many situations arise that threaten the destruction of Abraham and his seed, but in spite of this, Yahweh is faithful in protecting them and consequently preserving his promise. The psalm ends in success, with the Israelites inheriting Canaan and possessing the land as their God had promised.

Although Yahweh established the covenant of his own volition, the psalm notes that Israel also had a part to play. Yahweh's faithfulness in making and keeping the promise came with the stipulation that Israel had to keep and obey his laws. With this stipulation set at the very end of the psalm, the reader is left with the question: How did the Israelites respond to Yahweh's goodness and faithfulness? Within the confines of this psalm, however, it is impossible to tell how the Israelites behaved while Yahweh was fulfilling his side of the promise, bringing them from Egypt through the desert to the promised land or after they entered the land. However, these two matters—Yahweh instigating the promise and Israel's response—apparently were on the mind of the Psalter's editors when they decided to juxtapose Psalm 106 next to Psalm 105. Psalm 106³⁶ sheds some light on the questions raised, and retells many of the accounts from man's perspective. In spite of Yahweh's clear and consistent covenantal love being evident in Psalm 105, the picture of that love is deepened and made more vibrant in light of the comparison of the desert events depicted in both psalms. When

³⁶ McCann similarly notices the juxtaposition between the two psalms and their contrasting themes: God's faithfulness and man's unfaithfulness. He states, "Of course the juxtaposition of the Psalms 105 and 106 makes the contrast particularly obvious, an effect apparently intended by the editors of the Psalter...Ps 106 makes God's grace look all the more amazing" (McCann, 1103-4).

compared, three specific events highlight the extent of Yahweh's faithfulness in light of Israelite rebellion. The first is Yahweh's selection of Moses and Aaron to lead the Israelites. They are both positively recalled in Psalm 105:26 as being chosen by God without objection from Israel. Psalm 106, however, tells of a faction that rose against them, requiring Yahweh's intervention; and also of the tension created by the Israelites that leads Moses to sin at the waters of Meribah. The second event, concerning the provision of food, recalls Yahweh waiting to oblige the Israelites request for subsistence in Psalm 105. They asked and he provided bread from heaven, meat, and water. Contrasting this image is the rendition in Psalm 106:14-15, which recalls the same event. In the latter rendition, Yahweh not only addressed the complaints and greed of the Israelites, but was forced to discipline them. The third, and perhaps most poignant, is the entry into the land. Psalm 105 records the event as a joyous occasion that succeeded after the first attempt. Psalm 106, in contrast, mentions the earlier unsuccessful attempt to enter the land, attributing it to Israelite unbelief. Overall, when combining these three events and looking back to the promise and its fulfillment as presented in Psalm 105, Yahweh's longsuffering and constant love in keeping his part of a covenant becomes far more acute. Israel was consistently unfaithful during the desert era, but he was faithful.

Another notable contrast between Yahweh's covenant faithfulness and Israel's response in Psalms 105 and 106 comes with the idea of remembering and forgetting. In Psalm 105:5, Israel is exhorted to remember Yahweh's acts of might, performed on their behalf to prompt an appropriate response. In portraying Yahweh's faithfulness to the seed of Abraham, Psalm 105:8 and 42 recount Yahweh as remembering his covenant, that is, being faithful to what he promised to do. As a stark contrast to this, the Israelites' response in Psalm 106 is to forget what Yahweh had done for them. They do not remember his kindness in v7, forget his deeds in v13, and forget the God who saves them in v21. Despite all of this, we see in v45 a profound expression of Yahweh's loving-kindness and covenant love overriding their unfaithful actions. According to the psalm, Israel rebelled against Yahweh from the time they were in Egypt, throughout their desert sojourn, and during their settlement in Canaan. However, the psalmist makes it known that Yahweh was willing to

forgive them; not because of any faithfulness found within them, but because he *remembered* his covenantal love and kindness.

At the end of Psalm 106, the Israelites—including the psalmist—find themselves exiled and being separated from the land that Yahweh had promised to Abraham, because they did not remember his laws as mentioned in Psalm 105:45. After recounting Israel’s obstinate past, the psalmist pleads for Yahweh to be faithful to his covenant and redeem them, “Save us, O LORD our God, And gather us from among the nations” (v47). As with most laments, any response from God to the psalmist’s plight is seldom forthcoming within the composition.³⁷ At best, his laments may express a statement of confidence or hope that Yahweh has indeed heard his plea, but this is not the case in Psalm 106. Consequently, at the end of the psalm, the reader is left with the gnawing question: Did Yahweh hear and answer the plea of the psalmist, or did his words fall on deaf ears—has he indeed cut his people off forever?³⁸ For the psalmists and Israel in exile, it would certainly appear that Yahweh’s covenant concerning the land was ultimately contingent upon Israelite obedience, and through their disobedience, the covenant was apparently annulled. However, the fact that the psalmist cries out for covenant faithfulness ultimately shows that he still hopes in Yahweh’s everlasting mercy.

Although Psalm 106 is somewhat lacking in terms of responses from God, the juxtaposition of Psalm 107 after 106 helps provide an answer to psalmist’s call. The opening verses of Psalm 107 specifically relate to the preceding psalm. In v2 we read, “Let the *redeemed* of the LORD say so, Whom He has *redeemed* from the hand of the adversary.” (italics mine) This root for redeemed, לָאֲלָפִים (gā’al), elsewhere in Psalm 107 described the people delivered from a series of threatening situations. On the heels of Psalm 106, however,

³⁷ There are five principle parts to a lament: an opening address, description of trouble, plea for God’s response (often accompanied by reasons for him to do so), a profession of trust, and a promise to praise God or offer a sacrifice; see McCann, 644-45. Because the lament only consists of a plea to God for deliverance and help, his reply or response is not forthcoming in this genre.

³⁸ Due to the present position of the psalm, Allen, 85, mentions the possibility of interpreting it in direct light of the Exodus tradition, “Yahweh found them in the wilderness and brought them to Canaan, vv 4-9. Then they were freed both from bondage in Egypt and from exile in Babylon and brought to the land, vv 10-16. When they were well-nigh perished as a nation (in exile), he brought virtually dead bones to life, v 17-22. The storm of vv 23-30 is like the allegory of Israel’s exile in the book of Jonah: the ‘great waters’ of v 23 are symbolic of the nations, as in Isa 17:12, 13.”

it is more suggestive of the community of exiles who returned from Babylon and were now living in the province of Judah.³⁹ Following this, Psalm 107:3 provides a more direct response to Psalm 106's call for deliverance, stating that the exiles have already been "gathered from the lands, From the east and from the west, From the north and from the south," discernibly depicting a return from exile. An extension of this nexus is apparent when we consider that the reason Psalm 106 argues for a return: "To give thanks to Your holy name And glory in Your praise" (v47). Corresponding to this, the two main themes in Psalm 107 are to give thanks to Yahweh for the good things he has done, and to praise him for his ability to restore. The return from exile, contextually, should not only be seen as a work of Yahweh, but more importantly, as an act of his unending loving-kindness. The Israelites did nothing to earn the right of return to the land. They failed to keep Yahweh's laws and instructions as requested in Psalm 105:45, and as evidenced by Psalm 106. It is simply because Yahweh was still faithful to his promise in Psalm 105 that they are ultimately returned to the land in Ps 107.⁴⁰

In summary, the arrangement of the psalms portrays a picture of Yahweh's covenant faithfulness and consistency throughout the ages—at least a thousand years with a conservative estimate.⁴¹ The promise of land was originally made to Abraham and his descendants, and it was fulfilled when the desert generation entered the land of Canaan. This covenant was still maintained even in the face of Israel's constant rebellion and disobedience. Although they were exiled for a relatively brief period because of their disobedience, the covenant was maintained when they were returned to the land after the exile, as recorded in Psalm 107.

³⁹ Psalm 107:2 uses the term גְּאֻלֵּי יְהוָה (*g'âlê Adonai*), "the redeemed of the Lord," to describe the audience. The word literally means "to buy back" or "to reclaim." Isaiah uses it to depict the exiles that God redeemed and brought back to Israel from captivity in Babylon. Isaiah 44:22, for example, reads, "I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud And your sins like a heavy mist. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you." Such an understanding of the word accords well with the present context, where the psalmist refers to the community as being redeemed by God from exile in Babylon.

⁴⁰ A significant number of keywords link Psalms 106 and 107. McCann, 1116, lists many, including "wonderful works" (106:7, 22; 107:8, 15, 21, 24, 31), "rebel" (106:7, 33, 43; 107:11), "counsel" (106:13; 107:11), "subjected" (106:42; 107:12), and "iniquity" (106:43; 107:17).

⁴¹ The exact era in which the patriarchs walked the earth is disputed, but they are commonly thought to have lived between the 20th and 17th century BC (see Bright, 83).

Although Yahweh proves totally faithful in maintaining his side of the covenants he establishes, and the covenants are not contingent upon the actions and behavior of man, it is clear that people still have a part to play within the covenant relationship. In Psalm 105 it is most apparent that Yahweh acted of his own volition and was faithful to the covenant's completion, but this required that Israel would obey his laws as an appropriate response. Because man has a part to play within the rubric of a covenant relationship, failure to act appropriately, although not necessarily catastrophic, does have consequences. This is well illustrated in Psalm 106 when Israel constantly disobeyed Yahweh and forgot what he did for them throughout the desert period and beyond. As a result, they were disciplined by him on numerous occasions. None of these acts of discipline, however, should be viewed as an absolute act of covenant revocation, but correction and consequences of inappropriate actions. The final two psalms in our sequence solidify this notion. Psalm 106 depicts a cycle of unfaithfulness, repentance, and restoration in v40-46, and finishes with a picture of exile. However, this sequence is not final; taking Psalm 107 into consideration, the exile is understood as a temporary punitive measure, because there Israel is returned to the land. Moreover, Psalm 107 itself recalls two instances in which either a group or an individual suffers due to their own waywardness,⁴² yet in spite of this, Yahweh hears their cry and delivers them from their distress.

Because the final form of the Psalter developed after the exile, it frequently reflects an ever-present need for affirmation that Yahweh is faithful and consistent with his nature, and not entirely dependent on man's actions and behavior. The postexilic community had to be sure of this fact if they were to successfully reconstruct their lives and religion after returning to the newly established district of Judah. If Yahweh had annulled the covenant entirely, there would have been little hope in continuing.

Although the psalms discussed in the present work represent a small and limited snapshot of Israelite literary history in relation to the issue of Yahweh's faithfulness verses man's disobedience, it should nevertheless be considered when addressing contemporary

⁴² See 107:11, 17.

situations when Yahweh's faithfulness appears to fail. In numerous circumstances today, individuals, local churches, and larger Christian communities find themselves in a similar situation to the exiles. Sin, rebellion, and apathy may have created a real and tangible rift between the believing community and God. Despite being in a covenant relationship with God,⁴³ believers may find him to be distant, or feel as though his covenant faithfulness has come to an end. Like the postexilic Israelite community, Christians today should be encouraged by the knowledge that such trials are more symptomatic of divine correction than they are of God breaking a covenant, because—as the witness of Psalms 105-107 attests—his faithfulness is more than enough to overcome our shortfalls.



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⁴³ This point warrants a degree of explanation. I am not suggesting that once a covenant is established it can never be annulled or broken. Unfortunately, situations exist in which the human recipient rejects the covenant and remains rebellious unto death. In such circumstances, although God remains faithful, man does not, resulting in eternal consequences.