

Psalm 89 and the Fourth Gospel

By Paul Wyns

Introduction

Psalm 89 is generally not recognised as contributing to the theology of the Fourth Gospel. The following article will act as a corrective by demonstrating the multiple allusions and echoes of the Psalm throughout the Fourth Gospel and particularly to John 12:34. It will also demonstrate the important Christological contribution that the Psalm makes by uniting “Son of Man” theology with that of Davidic messianic hope.

Psalm 89 in the Fourth Gospel

"The people answered Him, "We have heard from the law that the Christ (or, Messiah) remains forever; and how can you say, "The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this Son of Man?" (John 12:34)

Psalm 89 is not treated as a source for John 12:34 by R. Longenecker¹, probably because it is neither a direct quote, nor is it attributable to Jesus by the Evangelist, but rather it is an allusive question directed to Him by the people. It begins with the introductory formula; *“We have heard in our law”* which indicates that we are not dealing with a citation but with an impression obtained by the people “from the law.” It was inconceivable in the popular view that the Messiah could be crucified – moreover, in the people’s mind, Jesus confused matters with his “Son of Man” circumlocution. Who was this “Son of Man?” The “lifting up” (crucifixion) of the Messiah did not fit the popular theology. There are a number of possible Old Testament sources that

¹ Although it is not a citation one would expect a discussion on the possible sources of John 12:34 in his section on the quotations of John, instead it is entirely omitted. Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis In the Apostolic Period*, (Paternoster Press ,1975),152-157

underpin the generalised belief in an everlasting Davidic monarchy (i.e. Ezek 37:25; Ps 110:4);² why then is Psalm 89 to be preferred as a source for John 12:34? Psalm 89 is to be preferred because of the original *Sitz im Leben* of the Psalm which has the imminent demise of Hezekiah as background.³ It is a royal Psalm of lament that reflects on Yahweh's past acts of deliverance (The Song of Moses in Exodus 15) and is set against the imminent failure of the Davidic covenant (with allusions to 2 Sam 7).

Van Unnik holds that 89:37 was the source for John 12:34; "If it was said that the 'seed of David' would remain forever, it did apply *a fortiori* to the 'Son of David' which is a well-known name for the Messiah." Then the author relates this to **ὁ Χριστός** in John 12:34. Speaking of the psalm passage (89:37), Van Unnik concludes: " At any rate this text is far more suitable as the source for John 12:34 and could more easily be adopted than any of the others adduced so far. It has the advantage of . . . being a specific text and not a vague reminiscence . . . offering parallels to the most important part of the text. . . . " ⁴

The objection is sometimes made that Psalm 89 does not qualify as "law" (*we have heard in our law*), but elsewhere the Fourth Evangelist has Jesus refer to Psalm 82 as "*your law*" (10:34). The proximity of Psalm 82 to Psalm 89 cannot be coincidental, especially as both Psalms contain a similar motif, namely: God among the *'ēlohîm* or divine council. (Ps 82:1 as judge, Ps 89:6 as incomparable). Moreover, the triumphal entry in John 12:13-15 with the antiphonal acclamation

² See the discussion by Richard Bauckham: he considers the merits of the *Ps. of Sol.* 17:4 and also suggests Genesis 49:9-12 as source/background for John 12:34 in *Messianism According to the Gospel of John* in (Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John, ed., J. Lierman, Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 65-66

³ See H. A. Whittaker, *Isaiah* (Biblia: Cannock, U.K., 1st edition 1988), George Booker and H.A. Whittaker, *Hezekiah the Great: The Songs of Degrees*, (Maycock Whitehead: Wolverhampton, 1985, ISBN 0 85189 116 0). All the Korah Psalms are from the same period: See Psalms volume 1-4 by G. Booker available online @ <http://www.christadelphianbooks.org/booker/index.html> [cited May 2008]

⁴ W. C. Van Unnik, "The Quotation from the Old Testament in John 12:34," *Novum Testamentum*, 111:3 (July, 1959), 178-179

of “*Hosanna*” has connections with Passover deliverance - also a feature of Psalm 89.⁵ The following table demonstrates that allusions to Psalm 89 are not confined to John 12:34;

Psalm 89	The Fourth Gospel (4G)
9. You rule the raging of the sea; When its waves rise, You still them.	6:18-21 The disciples in a boat on the stormy sea – Jesus joins them and the boat immediately reaches land.
26. He shall cry to Me, 'You <i>are</i> my Father, My God, and the rock of my salvation.'	Father is distinctive of the 4G
35-37. Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David: His seed shall endure forever , And his throne as the sun before Me; It shall be established forever like the moon, Even <i>like</i> the faithful witness in the sky." Selah	12:34 The people answered Him, "We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever ; and how <i>can</i> You say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this Son of Man?"
19. I have exalted one chosen from the people.	12:23. The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified.
15. They walk, O LORD, in the light of Your countenance. 46. How long, LORD? Will You hide Yourself forever?	12:35. Walk while ye have the light , that darkness may not overtake you. 12:36 While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." These things Jesus spoke, and departed, and was hidden from them.
48. What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his life from the power of the grave? Selah	8:51 "Most assuredly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death. "

⁵ The name Jesus (“Saviour”) derives from **yš’** (Matt 1:21; cf. Luke 2:30), as does the loanword *bōsanna*, “Save now!” the term features in the festal Passover Hallel Psalms (Ps 118:25-26 [117:25-26 LXX]; cf. *Midr. Ps.118*§22; *m.Sukk.3:9*; 4:1, 5, 8; *b.Sukk.27b*; *b. Pesah.119a*; *Tg. Ps 118:22-29*). Psalm 89 has parallels with the Song of Moses [Song of the Sea] in Exodus 15 – Hubbard comments; “Not surprisingly, forms of **yš’** bracket the report of the OT paradigmatic salvation-event, the Exodus (Exod 14)...The Song of the Sea invokes the same nom.[**yš’**] to praise Yahweh as Israel’s “salvation” (15:2). Here emerges a pattern prominent later: divine deliverance follows Israel’s cry for help (14:10-12)”. R. Hubbard Jr., *NIDOTTE*,(ed., VanGemeren, Paternoster Press,1997), 556-562

Particularly notable is the use of “Father” in Psalm 89. J.A.T. Robinson (drawing on Jeremias) observes; “That it was also Jesus’ most distinctive way of talking about God is further drawn out by the characteristic use of ‘Father’ for God on his lips (Mark 3, Q4, special Luke 4, special Matthew 31, John 100) and even more when he speaks absolutely of ‘the Father’ (Mark 1, special Matthew 1, special Luke 2, John 73)”.⁶ Scholars see in this the “*ipsissima vox* of the Master” and it is ubiquitous in the Fourth Gospel. Also prominent in Psalm 89 are the Hebrew word forms related to another distinctive usage by Jesus – “amen.”⁷ When Jesus used it to preface his own words, his usage was entirely unprecedented and formed an important element of the unique authority with which he spoke.⁸ The different forms of the root are all encountered in Psalm 89 (in relation to the Davidic covenant -as faithfulness v. 1, 2, 5, 8, 24, 33, and as truth v.14, 49) the Psalm ends with ‘*amen and amen*’ – essentially the verily, verily used by Jesus.. However, the importance of Psalm 89 goes beyond lexical connections with the Gospel and lies in the historical background of the Psalm.

The historical background of Psalm 89

Mowinckel’s view of the setting is fairly typical of an approach adopted in certain circles of modern scholarship – he accepts Psalm 89 as one of the Royal Psalms, but then says: “They contain therefore no realistic description of the individual historical king and his particular situation. They present the royal ideal, the typical king as he exists in religious theory and in the

⁶ J. A. T. Robinson, *The priority of John*, (SCM Press,1985),308-9 using statistics from Joachim Jeremias, *Prayers of Jesus*, (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1978), 30,36

⁷ There are five forms of the **‘mn** root that are of theological significance: the two related nouns **’ēmet** (truth often used in combination with mercy [*hesed*]) and **’ēmûnâ**, (similar in meaning to truth –associated with the character of Yahweh, (e.g., Ps 33:4;92:2[3];143:1) the adverb **’āmēn**, (similar to NT amen) and the two forms of the verb **ne’emān** (ni.) and **he’emîn** (hi). For a full discussion see R.W.L. Moberly, *NIDOTTE*,(ed., VanGemeren, Paternoster Press,1997),427-433

⁸ The formula is translated as, “Verily (*’āmēn*), verily (*’āmēn*), I say unto you”(AV) - in the following places in the Fourth Gospel: 1:51; 3:3, 5, 11; 5:19, 24f; 6:26, 32, 47, 53; 8:34, 51, 58; 10:1, 7; 12:24; 13:16, 20f, 38; 14:12; 16:20, 23; 21:18

people's mind and imagination, and as he should be when he appears before God in the cult. The psalms presuppose and describe typical, constantly recurring situations, e.g. the situation at the death of the old king who is represented as a universal king. Before the enthronement of his successor, the vassals might be preparing insurrection (Ps. 2) or the enemies have overrun the country (Ps.89), but the deity arises to save his royal son (Ps.18), etc.”⁹

Such generic approaches prevent the Psalms having any specific historic relevance whatsoever, however, scholars such as Moll and Delitzsch place it during the reign of Rehoboam, a position also adopted by Wayne Knife in his dissertation on Psalm 89; this is mainly influenced by the Psalm title attributed to Ethan who lived during David's reign and possibly into that of Rehoboam.¹⁰ However, Sarna argues for the days of Ahaz and the anti-Assyrian coalition which desired to dispose of Ahaz in favor of a non-Davidic king (Isa. 7): He states, “Bearing in mind all the foregoing, it is possible to reconstruct the nature of the events which produced the lament. This latter must reflect an invasion of Judea, but it must have been one that did not have as its primary goal the conquest of Jerusalem or the Temple. The real target was the reigning monarch, whom the invaders wished to depose and replace by an outsider, not of Davidic descent”.¹¹ This would date the Psalm to 735-4 BC, and comes very close to the setting that this article proposes. However, there is one, in our view considerable objection to this setting – and **that is the faithlessness of Ahaz**. The Psalm was written by someone who was distressed but faithful. Interestingly, it is said of both David (1 Kings 3:6) and Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:3//2 Chron 31:20; Isa 38:3) that they were **faithful** before Yahweh - the niphal form of **'mn** can also mean “established” (similar to *'āmēn* = so be it, of a truth) and is employed by Isaiah (7:2) as a

⁹ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004),75

¹⁰ C.B., Moll, *The Psalms*, (John Peter Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, Vol. IX,1870),482; Franz Delitzsch, Franz, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, Vol. III, (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1968), 34: D. Wayne Knife, *Psalm 89 in the Ancient Near East*, Grace Theological Seminary, (1973),57-58 [available online cited May 2008]

http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/19-Psalms/Text/Books/Knife-Ps89Diss/Knife-Ps89.doc.

¹¹ N. M. Sarna, "Psalm 89: A Study in Inner Biblical Exegesis," in *Biblical and Other Studies*,(ed. A. Altmann, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963),43

reprimand to Ahaz with an invitation to ask for a sign: *"If you will not believe, Surely you shall not be established."* It is no coincidence that Psalm 89 abounds with forms of *'mn*, that these are applied to both David and Hezekiah and that Ahaz is the complete opposite of (truth/faithfulness/stability etc) because he refused to believe the covenant.

The most natural setting for this Psalm is the reign of Hezekiah, the reader is referred to the exegesis offered by G. Booker for a verse by verse exposition¹² – suffice to say that the Hezekiah *Sitz im Leben* explains all the difficulties; The faithful king had attempted to reform the cult but became mortally ill and was about to die childless. He is the primary reference in the Messianic Isaiah oracles and the suffering servant passages. His imminent death would have disannulled the Davidic covenant. Yahweh heard his cry for help and delivered him from his sickbed and also from the hand of his enemies (both internal and external). The Assyrians were supernaturally defeated outside Jerusalem **on the Passover**.¹³

The Passover

The Passover deliverance from Egypt was celebrated with the Song of Moses, (Song of the Sea) recorded in Exodus 15. Psalm 89 parallels the deliverance from Egypt (6-10) with the Passover deliverance of Judea from the hand of Assyria. The Passover featured large in Hezekiah's reformation (2 Chron 30:2; 13-27) and Jerusalem was probably swollen with faithful celebrants from the northern tribes when it was besieged by Sennacherib. The Passover also features large in John 12 (cf.12:1) – as Longenecker (1975:153) notes, "Nonetheless, the emphasis upon the festal observances –particularly upon Passover – is an important feature in the Evangelist's

¹² The mention of Ethan (i.e. Jeduthan) in the title is not considered a problem by Booker/Whittaker as Jeduthan is also contemporary with Hezekiah (cf. 2 Chron.29:14; 35:15), suggesting that his name became attached to a guild or temple office (like Asaph cf. Neh 11:17). George Booker, *Psalms Studies: Psalms 73 through 150*, (Vol 2 Christadelphian Office) online at: <http://www.christadelphianbooks.org/booker/psalms3/psabkc17.html> [cited May 2008]

¹³ Several allusions in Isaiah indicate that the siege of Jerusalem took place at Passover (26:20, 21; 30:29; 31:5; 33:19, 20).

portrayal of Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel’s messianic hope and the substance of Israel’s ritual symbolism”. Unlike the Synoptists (Mtt 26:36-46; Mk 14:32-42; Lk 22:30-46) the Fourth Gospel does not present us with an account of the wrestling in Gethsemane, instead it presents a stylized account in 12:24-33 – **“Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say?”** (v.27) which is a composite allusion to the previous Psalm (88:3); **“For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to the grave”**, and also to the Hezekiah Psalm recorded in Isa 38:15: **“What shall I say? He has both spoken to me, and He Himself has done it. I shall walk carefully all my years in the bitterness of my soul”**.

The “lifting up” of Christ was at the same time his “glorification” – a reference to the suffering servant of the Isaiah oracle; “Behold, my servant shall cause to understand, and be exalted, and glorified exceedingly (LXX)... So shall He sprinkle (cleanse) **many nations**”¹⁴ (Isa 52:13, 15). Interestingly, the word glorified **ἐνδοξάζω** (*endoxazō*) occurs for the first time in the Septuagint version of the Exodus account and the Song of the Sea(14:4,17,18; 15:1,6,11,21) and similarly glorify **δοξάζω** (*doxazō*) is also used for the first time in the Song of the Sea (15:2). Glory/glorification is thus associated with the salvic act of the Passover in John 12 (v.12, 16, 23, 28) and also in Exodus 15 (and by association Psalm 89). The suffering servant (Hezekiah) had undeservedly been afflicted with the “botch of Egypt” (Deut 28:27) this despite the promise by *yhwh rōp’ēkā s* (the healer in Exodus 15:26) that he would not afflict the Israelites with the diseases of Egypt if they *“do things pleasing before him”* (LXX) the same phrase is used in Hezekiah’s Psalm when he appeals in Isaiah 38:3, **καὶ τὰ ἀρεστὰ ἐνώπιόν σου** (LXX): Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before thee in truth, with a true heart, and have done **that which was pleasing in thy sight**. And Ezekias [Hezekiah] wept bitterly (LXE). The Isaiah oracle (with Hezekiah as the backdrop) is extensively quoted and alluded to in John 12.¹⁵

¹⁴ Another motif that links John 12 with Isaiah is the Gentiles. In John 12:20-23 the Greeks request an audience with Christ, who points out the universality of his sacrifice (will draw all men to me v.32). The Isaiah oracle also develops the theme of Gentile inclusiveness.

¹⁵ Apart from the obvious quotes from Isaiah (John 12:38, 39, 41) there are copious allusions; see Harry A .Whittaker, *Studies in the Gospels*, (Biblia, 1989), 594-595

Who is this Son of Man?

The twin motif of **Gentiles/glor**y is also found in the Son of Man prophecy in Daniel 7:13, 14; “I beheld in the night vision, and, lo, *one* coming with the clouds of heaven as the Son of man, and he came on to the Ancient of days, and was brought near to him... And to him was given the dominion, and **the glory**, and the kingdom; and **all nations**, tribes, and languages, shall serve him”.¹⁶ It is significant that the scholar Paul Mosca has suggested that Ugaritic material was mediated to the author of Dan 7 via Ps 89.¹⁷ He lists 16 points at which Daniel 7 has “a demonstrably biblical pedigree”(500-501). Psalm 89 shares many points of contact with Daniel 7; The Psalm celebrates the incomparability of Yahweh in the “assembly of holy ones” and grounds his primacy in his control over “the raging of the sea” (v. 10) and slaughter of Rahab (v.11). It proceeds to describe his throne (v. 15) and proclaim his kingship (v.19). Mosca construes Psalm 89:37-38 to mean that the Davidic throne is “in the skies” (c.f. Dan7:9).¹⁸ If Mosca’s observations are correct, then Psalm 89 is referred to in John 12:34 because it contains both the “royal” Davidic ideology (Messiah) **and** the (basis of) Danielic (priestly?) ideology (“Son of Man”). The problem of diarchic restoration is resolved by uniting the function of king and priest in the person of Christ.

Conclusion

Psalm 89 forms the basis of the crowd's question in John 12:34. It suits the Evangelist's sense of irony that the crowd's question concerning the “*Christ abiding forever*” should come from a psalm that contemplates the complete failure of the Davidic covenant. Once the psalm is contextualized against its correct “Hezekiah” background its relevance becomes even more obvious, as does its setting in the Fourth Gospel – with the imminent Passover demise

¹⁶ Compare Psalm 2:8 and Psalm 89:27 which refers to Psalm 2:7.

¹⁷ P.G. Mosca, "Ugarit and Daniel 7: A Missing Link", *Bib* 67 (1986), 508-515

¹⁸ P. G. Mosca, "Once again the heavenly witness of Psalm 89:38", *JBL* 105(1986),27-37

(paradoxically deliverance) of Christ. The contextualization of the Psalm is reinforced by the Evangelist use of the Isaiah oracle, which refers to the same background. Importantly, this Psalm also resonates with Danielic themes – the Christ does abide forever – and he returns as the vindicated Son of Man.

