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# **Psalms 90, 91 and 92 as a means of coping with trauma and adversity**

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## **Abstract**

Psychology has an interest in the ways in which religion can aid coping with life's adverse events, as most, perhaps all, individuals will face trauma or adversity at some point in life. The COVID19 pandemic has created adversity for individuals and societies globally and has for many been the cause of traumatic events. Religious coping in the face of crisis is not merely a contemporary phenomenon. This paper argues that several religious coping mechanisms can be found within the texts of Psalm 90, 91 and 92 of the Hebrew Bible. These psalms may represent a community's attempt to cope with the aftermath of a society-wide traumatic event, such as the 6th Century BCE Exile to Babylon. This paper reads these psalms through the lens of coping theory, explores how a traumatic event may have influenced their composition, and considers ways in which they might be used in pastoral situations today.

## **Introduction**

Past decades have seen an increasing recognition of the contribution of psychology in reading the Bible (see, for example, Ellens and Rollins, 2004), including the psychology of trauma (Joyce, 1993; Collicutt 2006; Boase & Frechette, 2016). The effects of trauma and ways to manage these are of particular importance as the world experiences a global health crisis. At the time of writing, the World Health Organization reports that COVID19 has resulted in over 3 million deaths with nearly 150 million confirmed cases worldwide (WHO, 2021). The traumatic impact of the pandemic at both individual and societal level cannot be denied. Effective means of coping with both the immediate and long-term effects of trauma are, therefore, essential. For religious individuals, faith-based means of coping may be particularly relevant.

There is substantial evidence that religious belief provides a means for coping with emotional distress (Koenig et al., 1988; Pargament, 1997; Park, 2005). Consequently, it may be possible to see some sacred texts as indicative of a faith community coping with a traumatic event or situation of long-term adversity in religious terms. Many of the psalms, for example, can reasonably be read in this way. The present paper offers a reading of Psalms 90, 91, and 92 as responses to adversity and trauma, and employs a contemporary approach from the discipline of psychology of religion as a hermeneutic framework. This group of psalms was selected because biblical scholarship has suggested a link with a specific traumatic event, and because both their individual composition and their overall construction as a trio expresses psychological coping processes with particular clarity.

**Why use psychology to interpret certain psalms?**

Is psychology an appropriate tool for biblical interpretation? Many think not. For example, Walter Brueggemann (2007, p. 4) has asserted, ‘the dialogue of faith’ taking place in the psalms is, ‘essentially theological, not psychological.’ Such assertions are not sufficient, however, to preclude the use of psychology in interpreting the psalms, which are deeply human documents (see Collicutt , 2012 for a full exploration of this argument).

A key question to be asked when interpreting biblical texts is, ‘How do we make sense of what we read?’ (Bellinger, 1995, p. 3). Admittedly, those who wrote the psalms and the communities that first made use of them would not have had a modern concept of psychology or the psychological; but this does not mean that a modern psychological framework cannot be applied to them, and to other biblical texts, to draw out valuable insights (Joyce, 2010). Ancient Judaism understood the human body and spirit to be an integrated unity that did not survive death (Wright, 2011), and thus practical and spiritual problems were interwoven, needing to be addressed and resolved in this life. Unsurprisingly, then, much of what is expressed in the psalms deals with both cognitive and emotional responses to situations in the life of the worshiper or faith community. Psychology, therefore, would seem to be one legitimate and useful resource for helping the interpreter to make sense of what is being read.

### **Theology and content of Psalms 90, 91 and 92**

In contemporary liturgical use or personal devotion psalms are often read individually and in isolation from one another, but this may not be the best means for interpreting their meaning. The psalms were originally used as part of communal religious rituals and were edited and grouped into five collections or books (Wilson, 1992), including an intentional ordering of psalms in a particular sequence (Bellinger,

1995, p. 65). That the psalms were carefully edited and compiled as they were makes it plausible that, within each of the five books, there may be groups of psalms meant to be read together and understood in relation to one another. This is not a new idea. A. F. Kirkpatrick (1921, p. 553) suggests that Psalms 90, 91 and 92 share a common strand of thought and language and should be seen as a set. Taken together, these three psalms can be read as a sequence of cry for help, assurance of help, and thanksgiving for help.

Psalm 90 has been described as a communal psalm of reflection and lament that would have been used in times of distress (Tate, 1990; Alter, 2007). The theological purpose of such a psalm would be to acknowledge the crisis, to consider its catastrophic implications (Tucker, 2007), and to ask God for help. The psalm also encourages the reader/hearer to look towards a time when they will again receive God's favour (Tucker, 2007).

Psalm 91 has been described as a psalm of trust, expressing assurance in the face of danger (Rogerson & McKay, 1977; Terrien, 2003). Terrien (2003) takes this further suggesting that the opening verses of this psalm refer to an awareness of 'psychological security.' In the first part of the 20th century, Kirkpatrick (1921) proposed that this psalm makes the most sense in the context of a crisis in national history. More recent scholarship agrees, although putting more emphasis on the individualistic nature of the psalm, supposing the one whose safety is assured being the king or a warrior-hero (Terrien, 2003). Psalm 92 completes the sequence, being a hymn of thanksgiving in which the psalmist (or worshiper) gives thanks for deliverance from affliction (Tate, 1990).

Whilst Psalm 90 is clearly a communal, or even national, prayer, and Psalm 91 might be addressed to either an individual or a community, Psalm 92 appears to focus on the individual. This does not, however, rule out communal or corporate use for

this psalm. Much biblical scholarship of the 19th and early 20th centuries emphasized the importance of the psalms in building and maintaining community, suggesting that the ‘I’ in individualistic psalms such as Psalm 92 is a personification of the whole community of Israel (Gillingham, 2008), and indeed the distinction between ‘I’ and ‘we’ is more blurred than has often been imagined (see, for example, Croasmun, 2017).

### **Responding to trauma**

Psychological trauma is a complex phenomenon which includes both an extraordinary adverse event and the associated response, whether individual or communal. Trauma involves an experience outside one’s normal experience that typically involves physical or psychological threat, shock, and feeling overwhelmed (American Psychological Association, 2016) and may also involve a perceived lack of control (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). The impact of a traumatic event is due, at least in part, to the, ‘extreme nature of the event and the ... effects of the physiological arousal that it evokes’ (Collicutt , 2006, p. 294). When an individual experiences a traumatic event, he or she cannot but engage deeply with the event and its potential meanings.

One way of understanding trauma is as an event that forces individuals and communities to deal with a reality that shatters previously held assumptions about the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Park, 2005). According to this theory, key among these assumptions, referred to as ‘schemas’, are that the world is benevolent, the world is meaningful, and that the self is worthy and able to control events. A traumatic event disrupts these assumptions because it is often sudden and unexpected, involves a perceived lack of control over the event in question, is probably something outside of ordinary experience, and may create long-lasting problems in some way (Tedeschi &

Calhoun, 1995). Brewin and Holmes (2003) have suggested that the more rigidly held the starting assumptions are, the more likely it is that one will have a serious negative response to a traumatic event.

Coming to terms with a traumatic event is a highly demanding task, intellectually, physically, and emotionally. The event has to be ordered into a narrative form of some sort. Alongside this, a variety of potentially conflicting new world-views and self-understanding need to be considered, manipulated and combined by the individual and the community, until a coherent and convincing account of the event and the world emerges.

Religion has been shown to be related to positive outcomes following trauma and in coping with stress, possibly because religion facilitates meaning making, both global ('Why do these things happen?') and personal ('What does this mean for my life now?') (Park, 2005). Narrative appears to be an important part of the process of coping with trauma. Trauma survivors have been observed to have, 'an urge to bear witness' to the event (Tal, 1996, p. 20), or as Crossley (2000, p. 51) has described them they are, 'story-tellers with a mission.' The stories that trauma-survivors tell do not simply describe the outcome of survival but are, in fact, part of the process of trauma survival. Through the telling and re-telling of the story, a new reality is constructed, and future possibilities imagined.

In a study of individuals diagnosed with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, 75% of whom indicated that they were religious, writing about traumatic events using religious framing was associated with a more positive mood compared with not using religious framing (Exline et al., 2005). Interpreting events within a religious framework can provide explanations and meaning in events that pose a threat and would otherwise seem incomprehensible (Krok, 2014). Writing may be helpful in coping with traumatic events because it helps people transfer highly emotional



memories into language, thus making them amenable to a narrative structure. This enables assimilation of the event and thereby reduces associated distress (Smyth et al., 2001). Although research in this area has focused on individuals and the act of writing, it is reasonable to suppose that once in written form the narrative could, particularly through liturgical or ritual use, benefit an entire community in processing, integrating, and recovering from a communally experienced traumatic event.

### **The fall of Jerusalem and Babylonian Exile as an example of trauma**

The period known as the Exile (or the Babylonian Exile) refers to the invasion of the Kingdom of Judah by Babylon and the subsequent deportations of the population of Judah to Babylon, which occurred between 598–587 BCE (see supplemental materials for further historical details). These events and their aftermath would constitute a large-scale national trauma, and they are certainly presented as such in the account given in 2 Kings chapters 24 and 25 (see Newsome, 1979 for a vivid imagining of both the Exile and the post-exilic return that conveys the scale of trauma involved). The people of ancient Judah would have been confronted with an event that called into question the authority, benevolence, and power of God, their identity as the chosen people, and their claims to their land. The loss of the Temple and religious leaders, as described in 2 Kings 25.8–21, would have led to a loss of cultural memory and tradition for those who remained, and the removal of king and courtiers, including craftsmen, as described in 2 Kings 24.11–16, would have resulted in a loss of leadership and skills among the population. Although it has been suggested that the deportation may have had a minimal impact on those who remained behind, the event certainly would have been traumatic for those who were removed from their homeland and sources of self-identity (McNutt, 1999).

In his psychological reading of the book of Lamentations (itself considered to be a reflection on the experience of the invasion and Exile), Joyce (1993) highlights the fact that in the loss of the Temple and its religious and cultural functions, the people of ancient Judah also lost the meaning and symbols by which they had understood and interpreted their world. Finding renewed meaning would therefore be central to coming to terms with the trauma.

The religious texts of the exiled Hebrew community can be seen as part of shared, communal discourses, helping to cement community identity and religious outlook in the face of adversity (Gerstenberger, 2007), and Psalms 90, 91 and 92 may have served to give voice to a community struggling to come to terms with a particular traumatic event of a national scale, possibly the Exile, and its aftermath.

### **Assessing religious coping**

Religion is an important part of coping with stressful situations, particularly when they are life-threatening (Pargament et al., 2000). In seeking to understand how individuals make use of their religion in dealing with stressful events or situations, Pargament and colleagues (2000) sought to go beyond general measures of religiosity, such as church attendance or frequency of prayer, and look instead at the psychological, behavioural, emotional, and social components of religious coping. Recognising that religious coping is multi-dimensional, they defined religious coping methods in terms of five basic religious functions: meaning, control, comfort/spirituality, intimacy/spirituality, and life transformation (Pargament et al., 2000). Within these, they identified passive, active, and collaborative coping mechanisms (Pargament et al., 2000). Religious coping strategies can be either positive or negative, based on associated long-term psychological outcomes. Positive coping strategies reflect a secure relationship with God, a sense of spiritual

connection, and a view of the world that is trusting, while negative strategies express a less secure relationship with God, spiritual struggle, and perception of the world as threatening (Pargament et al., 1998).

### **Coping processes reflected in the psalms of lament**

The psalms of lament, that is, those psalms that acknowledge suffering and pain, either of an individual or community (e.g. psalms 6, 13, 22, and 90), are replete with expressions of religious coping mechanisms. Although the original purpose of these psalms would have been religious, it could also be argued that enabling religious coping has come to be their primary *psychological* function. As W. P. Brown (2007, pp. 29–30) has observed, ‘One of the basic functions of psalmic language is to break the silencing power of pain.’ The converse may also be true: the language of the psalms provides a way of alleviating the pain caused by keeping silent.

It is possible that the poetic form of the psalms is itself of value in coping with trauma. Serene Jones (2003, p. 273) has suggested, ‘For the trauma survivor whose world is “out of kilter”, the cadence of poetry and its associative structure invite the voice of the shattered to unfold.’ In other words, the order inherent within the poetic structure of the psalms provides a sense of stability that is emotionally reassuring and which provides a framework for cognitive processing. The poetic form of the psalms also provides a sanctioned means of expressing the emotions accompanying the experience of trauma and the move towards resolution.

Bellinger (1990, p. 55) has seen in the language of the psalms a channel for the ‘therapeutic venting of anger’. This may be akin to what Pargament and colleagues (2000) describe as spiritual discontent. Several other dimensions of religious coping can also be identified in the psalms of lament. Brueggemann (2007) has described the sense of encounter between petitioner and God in the psalms as one that leads to

change both in the consciousness of the petitioner and in external events. This suggests an element of collaborative religious coping, in which the believer works with God to deal with the situation. The language of the psalms also helps to shape and reinforce community identity and solidarity (Brueggemann, 2007). The opening of Psalm 90, 'Lord you have been our dwelling place in all generations,' for example, is a reminder of shared identity as God's chosen people. A sense of shared communal identity is something that is increasingly recognised as vital to coming to terms with trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), as it enables one to access the support and additional psychological resources that are forthcoming from the faith community.

The psalms of communal lament include expressions that anticipate the return of God's protection and blessing (Bellinger, 1984), suggesting an element of passive deferral religious coping, in which one waits for God to intervene, while at the same time asserting a hopeful confidence that God will act. The very use of the psalms of lament is, 'an act that imagines social transactions in times to come will be ordered in this way and not some other', according to Brueggemann (2007, p. 22), through which one feels empowered. This would seem to have elements in common with Pargament and colleagues' (2000, p. 524) notion of seeking religious direction, in which one uses religion to envisage and effect change in life.

### ***Coping processes reflected in Psalms 90, 91 and 92***

The structure and order of Psalms 90, 91 and 92 can be described in terms of re-ordering of schemas – those mental structures and assumptions by which the world is viewed and represented. Psalm 90 reflects a disrupted or broken schema. The God who has been the refuge, the safe haven (see L. Kirkpatrick, 2005 and Bowlby, 1998) of the people is now the God whose anger consumes them and whose wrath overwhelms them. The expected world order has been turned upside down.

Nevertheless, there are already indications of both negative and positive religious coping taking place. A punishing God reappraisal is expressed in verses 7 to 8 and 11: 'For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance...Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.' Implicit within this is a sense of self-blame, that the disaster that has struck is punishment for some sin committed. Self-blame is a way of appraising events, establishing the 'locus of control' (Rotter, 1966) firmly within the self, and creates a possibility of hope that through changed or reparative behaviour further misfortune may be avoided (McGrath, 2004). An expression of hope is also seen in verses 13 to 17, which are pleading for direct intervention (construed by Pargament as a positive religious coping response): 'Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper the work of our hands – O prosper the work of our hands!' Additionally, a large proportion of Psalm 90 is a reflection on the brevity of human life (verses 3–6, 10). This in itself may facilitate coping and even post-traumatic growth, as it has been suggested that psychological growth can only result once one has faced and acknowledged the inevitability of death (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Alternatively, verses 3–6 may function to remind God that humans do not have forever to wait for divine action, and also serve to acknowledge the possibility that redemption may not be seen in the lifetime of those making the lament (Tucker, 2007), expanding the temporal perspective. This analysis is congruent with coping theory, as these purposes reflect the coping processes of passive religious deferral and pleading for direct intercession.

Psalm 91 reflects the re-ordering of schemas. The language suggests that the crisis has not yet passed, but there is hope for a favourable outcome. The crisis is given a new meaning – in Psalm 90 one can see only God’s disfavour, in Psalm 91 there is a sense that the crisis is an opportunity to trust in God and experience his salvation (‘A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only look with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.’[verses 7–10]), suggestive of benevolent religious reappraisal. The language of verses 11 to 16, assuring of eventual victory in partnership with God corresponds with the process of collaborative religious coping. Additionally, Psalm 91, with its many assurances of God’s protection and care, exhibits indications of seeking spiritual support.

In Psalm 92, the psalmist, and possibly the community, has settled into the new schema, and now affirms it through the use of the psalm. This type of psalm not only points to, but evokes and maintains, the world that it describes (Brueggemann, 2002). The new schema is affirmed and appropriated, and through embodied recital, made real. While arguing for the fundamentally theological nature of the psalm, Brueggemann (2002) suggests that it also serves a social function, enabling the community to live free from fear and anxiety. There appear to be no specific religious coping processes in this psalm because the process has been completed (for the present): reassertion of a belief in a just God reflects a re-appropriated belief in a meaningful world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Thus the expression of belief in ultimate punishment for evildoers (verses 7–9) and reward for the righteous (verses 12–15) may reflect a psychological reordering of the world to provide meaning (schema consolidation).

## **Exilic and Post-exilic Uses of Psalms 90, 91 and 92**

Although one must always be careful in applying modern psychological assumptions to ancient cultures, Joyce (1999) has suggested that current psychological understanding of how people respond to traumatic events can shed new light on how and why biblical texts emerged in ancient Hebrew culture.

Summerfield (1995, p. 21) has suggested that, 'Cultural bereavement may turn out to be a key determinant of longer-term psychosocial outcomes for whole societies.' Cultural bereavement refers to the loss of cultural memories (traditions, rituals, etc) through displacement, usually as the result of war. While Summerfield is looking at modern instances of war and displacement, it is reasonable to infer that this would also have been true of ancient societies, such as Judah. Psalm 137, verse 4, for example, appears to be an expression of cultural bereavement following the Exile, with its cry of, 'How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?' Psalms 90, 91 and 92 may have served to ameliorate or manage the loss that would lead to cultural bereavement. Maintaining at least some of one's cultural traditions following displacement appears to aid post-traumatic coping (Summerfield, 1995), and thus prevent or alleviate mental defeat. With the Jerusalem Temple, the centre of Jewish religious ritual and the locus of YHWH, destroyed, Psalm 92 particularly may have provided a means of maintaining tradition that assisted coping. Verses 1–4 may have been intended to encourage people to maintain a regular pattern of worship, even in the absence of the Temple.

Negative feelings about the self and a sense of betrayal have been found to lead to post-traumatic stress and poor recovery after trauma (Brewin & Holmes, 2003), while participation in religious activities is, for believers, associated with well-being, possibly because it provides a sense of meaning in life (Krok, 2014). Consequently, by maintaining religious practices, restoring a sense of collective

identity and belief in God's ability and willingness to protect and defend God's people, these psalms may have aided post-traumatic recovery for the exiled community.

### **Can Psalms 90, 91 and 92 aid coping today?**

Engaging in religious activities and behaviours can help people come to terms with a traumatic event (Exline et al., 2005), and spiritual, or religious, meditation may offer a therapeutic source for coping with trauma (Pargament et al., 2005). Together, Psalms 90, 91 and 92 offer a means for voicing distress, opportunity for shared reflection on the brevity of human life, comfort and assurance of God's protection, and an affirmation of ultimate justice, making them particularly well suited for use in supporting those experiencing trauma or distress.

Hasidic Judaism encourages the use of some psalms, including Psalm 90, therapeutically (Gillingham, 2008). In fact, field research with Hasidic communities has shown that the reading of psalms accompanies prayer when healing is sought for serious illness (Dein, 2002). While the practice described by Dein appears to refer to physical healing, the use of the psalms in this way itself demonstrates coping activities. If the psalms are used in times of illness as a form of prayer seeking healing and relief from God, this suggests a pleading for direct intervention. Alternatively, if the psalms are understood to be a channel through which healing occurs, this could be an example of collaborative coping, that is, using the psalms to work with God to effect healing. Both the Anglican and Methodist churches still recommend the use of Psalm 90 (among others) for funerals (Gillingham, 2008). This psalm may be especially useful in helping individuals face the reality and inevitability of death, given its reflections on the transience of human life, especially in relation to God's eternal perspective. Facing the inevitability of death may be necessary for post-



traumatic coping and growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), and this may be particularly important in the context of the current pandemic. Consequently, pastoral and liturgical use of this particular psalm may provide a way in which churches, pastors, or spiritual directors might aid individuals recovering from trauma or coming to terms with the circumstances of COVID19.

Biblical texts are seen by many as being able to represent symbolically contemporary human problems (Anderson, 2005). If one's own situation can be identified in the language used in Psalms 90 and 91, this might offer a way to begin to confront the issues raised by a traumatic event or chronic adversity, such as prolonged illness. It is not difficult to find such symbolic resonances. Symbolic representations of the journey from trauma to recovery have been identified within the text of Psalm 91 (Knight, 2001). In addition, if the use of Psalm 91 can help an individual to appropriate the positive religious coping strategies contained within it as his or her own, this presents an additional pastoral use of this psalm. It should be noted, however, that certain readings of this psalm have the potential to lead to negative religious coping in the form of denial, for example using verses 5 and 6, 'You will not fear ... the pestilence that stalks in darkness ...' as justification for denying the threat of COVID19.

The emphasis in Psalm 92 on praise and thanksgiving may help minimize an individual's focus on the negative outcomes of the situation and call to mind those things for which one remains thankful ('count your blessings'). By drawing attention to the positive, one may be helped to find continued meaning in life following trauma or in adversity, which aids coping and may even improve psychological outcomes (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

Anderson (2005, p. 203) has suggested that, 'people discover new purpose and freedom when they begin to see their story in a larger narrative.' Psalms 90, 91 and

92, used in a pastoral context, may provide such a narrative. As these psalms show, God's people have a history of seeking God in times of trouble, receiving support from God, and recognising God's goodness and justice even in an apparently unjust world. Being able to place oneself and one's own situation in that larger context can offer hope and may alleviate a potential sense of isolation or having been singled out to be a victim.

To firmly establish the value of Psalms 90, 91 and 92 as an aid to coping, however, research would have to be done with individuals in the Judeo-Christian tradition (for whom these psalms would be most relevant) recovering from trauma or living with chronic adversity, such as illness, disability, or the effects of the COVID19 pandemic, to examine whether use of these psalms do, indeed, promote the use of the various coping methods that this paper has identified as being present within them. In fact, the use of the psalms in this way is already being explored. The Psalms for Self-reflection project run by Oxford University (<https://www.theology.ox.ac.uk/article/psalms-for-self-reflection>), offered participants workshops in using the psalms as tools for supporting mental health. Controlled trials are also possible. Comparisons of religious experience when reading a psalm compared with a non-religious piece of writing have already been carried out in the context of functional neuroimaging (Azari et al., 2001). To assess the use of certain psalms in facilitating coping, before and after measures of anxiety and coping could be administered to a group asked to read and reflect on a selected psalm compared with a group asked to read and reflect on an equivalent non-religious piece of writing (e.g. a poem) or a psalm that did not contain obvious expressions of religious coping. The results of such studies could inform psychotherapeutic and pastoral interventions for individuals from the Abrahamic faith traditions responding to trauma or long-term adversity.

## **Conclusion**

Psalms 90, 91 and 92 appear to reflect several known coping methods. The available body of research suggests that religious coping resources may be valuable tools for helping those struggling with stress or trauma (Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al., 2005; Park, 2005). Psalms 90, 91 and 92 could provide the framework for acknowledging the loss of previously held schemas and the acquisition of new schemas. This may be especially relevant to pastors, counsellors, and others as societies move through the COVID19 pandemic and begin to come to terms with the loss and inevitable post-pandemic changes that will occur.

Some theologians have proposed Exile as the focus of Psalms 90, 91 and 92 (Rogerson & McKay, 1977; Tucker, 2007). The content of these psalms certainly provides some evidence suggesting that their composition during or shortly after an acute traumatic event is plausible. The words of the middle verses of Psalm 90 convey the types of feelings that might be associated with such a trauma: despair, confusion, regret, and guilt. To deal with those types of thoughts and feelings, they must be expressed, and there must also be hope and thanksgiving to avoid remaining in despair (Jones, 2007). These latter find expression in Psalms 91 and 92.

Evaluating these psalms within a psychological framework can provide insights into their creation, meaning, and use that may not be available using other, more traditional types of biblical interpretation. This use of psychology in interpreting and understanding biblical texts, by revealing psychological processes such as those described in Pargament and colleagues' (2000) religious coping model, may also be useful in assessing their value for pastoral use today, providing insight into how the scriptures can be employed to promote wellbeing. In the case of these psalms, a psychological evaluation suggests that they have their origins in a traumatic

experience and may have been used to facilitate coping with that experience, as well as maintaining community and religious identity in a period of displacement, such as the Exile, or a time of societal breakdown. In the 21st century, the concept of exile is a useful way of framing the psychological ‘lostness’ of individuals who find themselves isolated or detached, either from those around them or from a personal identity and way of being that is no longer accessible to them. Such personal exile may occur through physical isolation, bereavement, illness, loss of work, alienating technology or a host of other reasons, including displacement due to war.

Understanding the psychological processes present in texts like the psalms can make available new ways of using these texts to help enable those experiencing a sense of exile to find ways of coping with their own situations.

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## **Historical context of the Babylonian Exile and Psalms 90 to 92**

The period known as the Exile (or the Babylonian Exile) began with the first siege of Jerusalem in 598 BCE, with the first deportation of its population in 597 BCE. This was followed by a second siege and deportation in 589 and 587 BCE (Albertz, 2003). It has been suggested that Book IV of the Psalms, which begins with Psalm 90, was compiled around 450 BC, at the end of the Babylonian Exile (Hinson, 1974). Tucker (2007) suggests that the Exile, together with the downfall of the Davidic dynasty, constitutes the specific crisis referred to in Psalm 90.