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Ways of reflecting on trauma and adversity: reading Psalm 90 through the lenses of feeling and thinking

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of biblical trauma scholarship that identifies how traumatic experience has shaped biblical literatures and the Psalms in particular, interest has emerged in the potential therapeutic role of Psalm 90 in Christian-framed trauma therapies. Drawing on the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics, the present study tests the extent to which feeling types and thinking types read Psalm 90 differently. These two readings present different challenges working with this Psalm in trauma therapy.

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Introduction

Within biblical scholarship the collection of 150 Psalms within the accepted canon has been variously interpreted and categorised. Recently growing attention has been given to the connections between a category of Psalms and the experience of trauma (see, for example, Frechette, 2014; Groenewald, 2018; Hays, 2016; Strawn, 2016; Verde, 2020, 2022). With the rise of biblical trauma studies, biblical scholarship has examined how traumatic experiences have shaped biblical literatures and how the Psalms in particular may have been therapeutic for their authors and for the communities within which their Psalms were employed. Verde (2022) summarised this perspective in the following way:

It is certainly sensible to assume that being texts of prayer, the psalms helped the former readers to cope with and recover from disruptive experiences in many ways, for instance by providing words or thoughts to make trauma thinkable and 'speaking'; by nourishing the people's faith, trust and hope in divine salvation; and by providing a horizon of sense for suffering. (Verde, 2022, pp. 345–346)

It is this understanding of trauma Psalms, as advanced within biblical scholarship, that opens a potentially fruitful conversation between biblical criticism and current psychological discourses on trauma and trauma therapies. For example, Brown and Collicutt (2022) identified two ways in which reading trauma Psalms through the psychological lens of coping theory may be productive: exploring how experiencing a traumatic

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event may have influenced the composition of these Psalms, and considering ways in which these Psalms may be used in contemporary pastoral situations. Brown and Collicutt (2022) draw particular attention to a set of three Psalms (90, 91 and 92) that can be seen as offering a connected progression through trauma. Psalm 90 is seen as a communal Psalm of reflection and lamentation that would have been used in times of distress. Psalm 91 is seen as a Psalm of trust, expressing assurance in the face of danger. Psalm 92 is seen as completing the sequence with a hymn of thanksgiving for deliverance from stress.

Among these three Psalms, it is Psalm 90 that focuses most clearly the disruptive power of trauma. Here are people whose worldview has been disrupted, indeed torn apart. Here are people who are struggling to make sense of their shattered confidence in the future and who have not as yet consolidated a single and settled narrative that comprehends the disruptive event. The God who has been their refuge and safe haven is now the God whose anger consumes them, whose wrath overwhelms them. For Brown and Collicutt (2022) here are signs of negative religious coping (Pargament, 1997). God's anger is seen as the consequence of sin and the recognition of sin embraces self-blame. At the same time, however, self-blame can entail self-empowerment through which changed behaviour and reparative behaviour may lead to more positive outcomes. Further on Psalm 90 expresses hope consequent on pleading for divine intervention. Again, following Pargament (1997), Brown and Collicutt (2022) see here signs of positive religious coping.

In terms of the application of Psalm 90 in pastoral situations, Brown and Collicutt (2022) draw on Anderson (2005) to argue that people today may benefit from seeing their story within the larger narrative context afforded by the Psalms. They argue, however, that empirical research "done with individuals in the Judeo-Christian tradition (for whom these psalms could be most relevant)" (p. 284) is now needed to test the extent to which this theory actually translates into practice. In particular they argue for experimental studies among such people recovering from trauma or living with chronic adversity. The present study arose as a preliminary response to this suggestion regarding the need for empirical research on the application of Psalm 90. Before assessing the relevance and application of Psalm 90 in trauma therapy the present study explores how Psalm 90 may be read differently through the lenses of feeling and thinking since potential differences in reading this Psalm may impact its effects on feeling types and thinking types. The research question is nested within the growing body of literature examining the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics in relation to passages from the Gospels and from the Psalms.

Introducing the SIFT approach

The seeds for connecting psychological type theory and biblical hermeneutics were sown in an insightful paper by Stiefel (1992) concerned with preaching. These connections were subsequently explored from a conceptual perspective in a series of books by Francis (1997), Francis and Atkins (2000, 2001, 2002) and Francis and Village (2008). At its heart psychological type theory, as proposed by Jung (1971) and developed in connection with empirical measures of type preferences, like the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey & Bates, 1978), and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005; Francis et al., 2017) distinguishes between two cognitive processes, styled perceiving and judging. The perceiving process

that is concerned with gathering information is described by Jung as the irrational process since it *is not* concerned with evaluation. The judging process that *is* concerned with evaluation is described by Jung as the rational process. Psychological type theory suggests that each of these processes is expressed through two contrasting functions. Perceiving is expressed through sensing (S) and intuition (I). Judging is expressed through feeling (F) and thinking (T). According to psychological type theory, within each process individuals prefer (and therefore develop) one function over the other. The SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics proposes that sensing types and intuitive types may perceive the same passage of scripture in distinctive ways, and that feeling types and thinking types may evaluate the same passage of scripture in distinctive ways.

In terms of the perceiving functions, sensing types focus on the given evidence of the present situation as perceived by the senses. They tend to be concerned with specific details, rather than the overall picture. They are concerned with the actual, the real and the practical. They tend to be down to earth and matter of fact. Intuitive types focus on the possibilities of the situation, perceiving meanings and relationships. They tend to concentrate on associations, intuitions and the wider themes that go well beyond the sense perceptions. They tend to focus on the bigger picture and on the future possibilities, rather than on specific facts and details. Given these differences, it is reasonable to hypothesise that sensing types may take a closer interest in the text of scripture and that intuitive types may see beyond the text to a bigger and wider canvas.

In terms of the judging functions, feeling types form evaluations based on subjective personal and interpersonal values. They emphasise compassion and mercy. They are known for their tactfulness and for their desire for peace. They are more concerned to provide harmony, than to adhere to abstract principles. Thinking types form evaluations based on objective, impersonal logic; they emphasise integrity and justice. They are known for their truthfulness and for their desire for fairness. They consider conforming to principles to be more important than cultivating harmony. Given these differences, it is reasonable to hypothesise that feeling types may show greater concern for the impact of the text on human lives and that thinking types may be more concerned for the theological issues raised by the passages.

Building on these theoretical foundations, a rigorous programme of empirical research has set out to test and to document the ways in which preferences for sensing, for intuition, for feeling, and for thinking are reflected in distinctive readings of scripture. This programme invites participants to work in “type-alike” groups that constitute distinctive hermeneutical communities. Freed from the distraction of intuitive types, sensing types are free to hone their concern on the details. Freed from the distraction of sensing types, intuitive types are free to let their imagination roam. Freed from the distraction of thinking types, feeling types can follow the lead from their hearts. Freed from the distraction of feeling types, thinking types can pursue the logic of their quest.

This research programme began with a focus on passages from the four Gospels, as illustrated for example by the two initial studies, one focusing on the feeding of the five thousand reported in Mark 6: 34–44 (Francis, 2010) and the other focussing on the resurrection narrative reported in Mark 16: 1–8 and in Matthew 28: 1–15 (Francis & Jones, 2011). More recently this programme has given attention to the Psalms: Psalm 1 (Francis et al., 2018a; Francis & Smith, 2018), Psalm 73 (Francis et al., 2020a, 2020b), Psalm 93 (Francis et al., 2021) and Psalm 139 (Francis et al., 2018b).

Research question

Against this background, the aim of the present study was to work with a group of participants who were well-versed in psychological type theory, members of the Network for Psychological Type and Christian Faith, during their annual residential conference. The passage of scripture identified for consideration was Psalm 90 and the decision was taken to examine this passage through the two lenses of the judging process (feeling and thinking). The judging process was identified because this Psalm raises issues that touch the heart and that stretch the mind. The hypothesis was advanced that feeling types would be more aware of the power of this Psalm to evoke compassion and hope for the traumatised, and that thinking types would be more aware of the profound issues raised about the nature of God and the problem of human suffering.

Method

Procedure

The hermeneutical communities were formed within the annual seminar convened in 2022 by the Network for Psychological Type and Christian Faith. Participants were given a printed copy of Psalm 90 from the New Revised Standard Version, together with the invitation to address the following two issues: What in this Psalm touches your heart? What in this Psalm stretches your mind?

Participants

Among the 14 participants there were six thinking types and eight feeling types. The six thinking types were all men, one extravert (ESTJ) and five introverts (one ISTJ, two INTJs, and two INTPs). The eight feeling types comprised four women (one ESFJ, one INTJ, and two ENFPs) and four men (one ENFJ, one INFJ, and two INFPs).

Analysis

The discussion with the two groups was recorded. These recordings were analysed and documented by the first author and then critiqued by the second author. Pseudonyms have been attributed to the participants.

Results

Thinking

The six thinking types in the group were all men, one extravert (ESTJ) and five introverts (one ISTJ, two INTJs, and two INTPs). The group opened in an organised way with the two INTJs setting the process in motion. Fraser read the Psalm in a thoughtful and reflective manner. Fraser read out the task: What in this Psalm touches your heart, what in this Psalm stretches your mind? Members of the group quickly began to hone in on the issues that stretch the mind.

Fraser (INTJ) was the first to speak, linking the Psalm with the Anglican funeral liturgy with which he was so familiar. The concept of the grass flourishing in the morning and

withering and fading in the evening captured for him the traumatic experience facing the bereaved family when someone had been suddenly cut down.

Following Fraser's lead, Albert (ESTJ) began to analyse the lessons about mortality within the Psalm. At the time when the Psalm was written 60 would have been close to the end of life expectancy. Now that may have moved on to 80 or even 100, but the brutal fact of mortality remains. No one can escape it.

Following Fraser and Albert, Adrian (INTP) had been struck by the transitory nature of life. For the Psalmist life was hard; we just have to struggle through until we die and that is the end for us all. Adrian began to dialogue that view of life and death with the Christian view of hope for the future, of faith in life beyond the grave. Read against the Christian faith, Adrian began to question the relevance of the message carried by the Psalm. He saw it as offering no hope in the face of the trauma of death. For him the Psalm was clearly saying that this life is all there is. The best we can do is to plead with God to help us through the really tough bits before we die, and then it is all over.

Norman (ISTJ) had been struck by the comparison between a thousand years in God's sight and the ephemeral watch in the night. For him this gave perspective to the 70 years of the human span alongside the big picture of a God-sized length of time. For him it is salutary to appreciate the insignificance of a human life. For him it is important that we should make the most of this short time on earth and make that meaningful by seeing our short life as part of something bigger.

Henry (INTP) analysed the structure of the Psalm and distinguished between the different messages of the two parts. Henry saw both the beginning and the end as offering some hope and comfort. For him naming God as our dwelling place in the first stanza offered a sense of safety, and of escape from trauma. The key concepts in the last stanza (compassion, satisfy us, make us glad) also made him feel safe, secure and settled. But he found the stuff in between unsettling, and theologically problematic. The God of anger fitted badly with Henry's dominant theological worldview.

Meanwhile, Fraser had been trying to develop the theological significance of describing God as our dwelling place, and he did so by linking this idea with the Prologue to John's Gospel where the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. He recalled that the language used by John could be translated as the Word pitched his tent among us.

Henry returned to explore why he found the notion of an angry God as theologically problematic. This time Fraser tried to address the problem by recalling that much of the Old Testament conceptualised how the struggles experienced by God's people were attributed to God's displeasure with them. But for Henry this did not solve his theological problem. In a polytheistic religion, he retorted, it was possible to ascribe bad things to one God and good things to another God, but in a monotheistic religion you have to assign everything to the same God. In the Judaic Christian tradition God is responsible for everything (good and bad alike) and that is really challenging.

Now it was Albert's turn to defend the Psalmist's view of God. Albert gave close attention to the text "You have set our iniquities before you" and interpreted this as meaning that God was not rubbing our noses in our sins and punishing us for them, but had taken them from us.

Albert's theological gloss on this line of the Psalm caused Adrian to spark into life. He saw Albert's interpretation as reading a New Testament theology of atonement into an Old Testament text that simply could not sustain such a reading. At this point Fraser,

too, wanted to preserve the theological integrity of the Psalm, and reminded the group that the New Testament had changed our understanding of God.

Henry was keen to press another line of the Psalm for clarity. What then is meant by the line “Who considers the power of your anger”? Could this mean that nobody considers the power of God’s anger because it is so great? Or could it mean that we are really fortunate not to have been afflicted by the power of God’s anger, that we are really lucky to have the life that we do, although it is so short and so full of challenges?

The group had no further energy to contemplate the anger of God, but turned its attention to how this Psalm could be helpful in times of trauma. Adrian had been struggling with how this Psalm could offer any solace to the traumatised – there was little hope in the Psalm. Norman surmised that it would not bring a great deal of solace and suggested that it might even make the situation worse. But then Adrian and Henry offered alternative perspectives.

Henry reflected that the word *trauma* means an open wound. As human beings we all carry the open wound of being human. The job of the Psalmist is to capture the common human experience and to express it on behalf of the whole community. The fact that this Psalm has survived 3000 years is testimony to how it has captured and expressed common human experience. Trauma is easier to bear if shared within community.

Drawing back to a common human situation, Adrian reflected that this honesty about the human situation may be so much more helpful than saying to people that we will pray for their healing when it is often evident that healing does not follow. It is better to be honest about the nature of the human condition, even if it is tough.

Fraser then pointed to the hope in the penultimate stanza: “So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart”. Fraser linked this line with the wisdom tradition, with the fear of the Lord that shapes our commitment to life, and with the prayer of Solomon for wisdom. Henry then brought this line of thought to its conclusion by affirming how the job of the priest today is both to teach people to pray and to let others know that we are praying for them.

Now time was running out and no thought had yet been given to preparing feedback for the plenary session. Throughout the discussion little seems really to have touched the heart, but a great deal had stretched the mind.

Feeling

The eight feeling types comprised four women (one ESFJ, one INFJ, and two ENFPs) and four men (one ENFJ, one INFJ, and two INFPs). Mark (INFP) introduced the task by inviting the group to read the passage silently. They did so for two whole minutes before Mark suggested that they should take turns in reading a verse each. Ruth (ENFP) began the process, followed by Susan (INFJ), James (INFJ), Peter (INFP), Linda (ESFJ), Jean (ENFP), Richard (ENFJ), and Mark (INFP). Then Mark suggested that they should begin by addressing their feeling function, “What in this Psalm touches your heart?”.

After a significant pause, James stepped in first. What touched his heart was the verse “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations”. James said that he can now look back on what has been a really long life. That verse gives him really warm thoughts on the way in which he has walked with God, in one way or another, throughout these decades. The idea of dwelling place (and home) matters much to James. Susan

affirmed James' position, and added the importance for her of the reference to "all generations". It is incredibly helpful to know that God has been there present across the generations. Life can seem so transient for so many people, but the reality of that sentence is so incredibly strong.

For Ruth, her heart was touched by the lines, "So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart". Now, in the late afternoon of her own life, Ruth was very conscious that time is short. As she makes this point, the pain of such recognition is reflected in her voice.

Responding to Ruth's pain, Linda jumps in quickly. For Linda, her heart was touched by the idea of renewal, "like grass that is renewed in the morning". Linda can really feel that sense of renewal when the Psalm is read. But then, as Linda reflected on the next line she recognised how the Psalm touched her heart in a very different way, "in the evening it fades and withers".

At this point, Jean draws in a wider perspective on the Psalm. For her, the opening verse spoke out her confidence in God, but the following line then made it clear that things did not always feel as good as that. It was this recognition that led into the concluding prayer, "Lord, have compassion on your servants".

For Mark, there was a tension between the constancy of God and the ephemeral nature of life. God was always constant, but here the Psalmist was calling on God to change. Now that touched his heart.

Drawing on her dominant intuitive function, Jean suddenly linked this reference to God being our dwelling place with the promise in John 14 that "in my father's house there are many mansions". That warmed her heart.

James stepped in again, this time with a personal narrative. He had been startled that the group would be looking at this Psalm. Over the past six months, since his wife had been diagnosed with bowel cancer, this Psalm had been very important to him. His wife had now recovered from the operation and it was found to have been totally successful. However, during that anxious period, he and his wife had gone through a range of emotions, and counting their days was something that they did. More recently, James had accompanied the husband of a dear friend during his final six days of life. That man had struggled with faith over the years. During those last days, James had begun with conversation, but when that man could no longer engage in conversation, James had used this Psalm (and other Psalms from Compline) over and over again. He was there, alongside the man's wife, when he died. That was only six weeks ago. So today's reading of that Psalm remained emotionally charged for James. James had been aware both of the fragility of life and of God's strength throughout it all.

A long pause followed, as the group empathised with James, before Mark posed a new approach to the passage. Mark suggested that they had got now a good sense of how people were feeling in response to the Psalm, but did we have any sense of how God felt? Peter attempted to address Mark's question by drawing on his own recent experience – a sense of bereavement of having to leave a ministry in which he felt comfortable, and now not knowing what the future held for him. The Psalm reminded him that he could offer this up to God, "O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servant!".

For Jean, the Psalm put her individual life into a broader perspective. She was feeling upset about the things that she hadn't done. When she had been reminded that for God a

thousand years passed like yesterday, that really touched her heart. Susan agreed that that verse is a great release, setting our fragility alongside God's stability.

What touched Ruth's heart was the Psalmist saying that "our years come to an end like a sigh". Ruth reflected that it really is with a sigh, the last breath out that signals the end of one life and the beginning of the next. For Ruth a sigh could never be an in-breath it was always an out-breath, "Here is my life given back to you, O Lord".

Richard read the sigh in a different way. The sigh was a signal of powerlessness, a sign of resignation. It was the way in which the day ends when you have watched the news and know that there was nothing you could do to change the state of the world. After 40 years in ministry, now in retirement, Richard had been planning to reflect on his experience, but he was now struggling to do that, when there is so much to sigh about.

For Mark the sigh was a sign of release, a sign of relief from being under the wrath of God. This observation stimulated a new strand of reflection. Ruth did not understand, did not want to know about the wrath of God. Susan drew attention to the line "Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us". For Susan affliction was a harsh word, a word that she would never use herself.

Still dwelling on the theme and feeling the pain, Peter drew attention to the line "for as many years as we have seen evil". If we have felt worn down by seeing evil, we need to recall how much God has seen. God's view is bigger than ours.

In response to this Psalm, Mark put himself in the shoes of the people in Ukraine, where their homes had been bombed and their lives wrecked. People living under such trauma surely wanted to cry out to God asking what have they done to deserve such treatment, and why have they been abandoned by God.

Jean stepped in to say she accepted that pain and tragedy are part of life, but she was not comfortable with the idea that God had been angry with people. James intervened that he would be unhappy with a God who was not angry with what is going on in the world.

Richard, too, acknowledged that he felt uncomfortable speaking about the wrath of God, but then he drew on his thinking function and suggested that the Psalm needed to be read against the covenant theology between God and Israel. Behind the covenant theology was the promise of blessing or lack of blessing, depending on the faithfulness of Israel. The Psalmist seemed to be implying that the people had let God down and that God had a right to be angry with them.

Responding to Richard's change of direction, Mark recalled that the second question with which the group had been asked to work was "What stretches your mind?". Right on target, just as the second question had been focused, the group noted that time was running out. As a shortcut James tried to summarise the problem of theodicy. When we look at the world we see good and we see evil. We see so much evil that God cannot be in control. Then we see so much good we must believe God is in control. In the end we have to allow Jesus' teaching to settle the problem for us. Jesus taught that God is love.

Jean affirmed that approach and summed it up in her own words. We know bad things happen. We know that there isn't an answer. But we do hold to God as our dwelling place. Richard acknowledged that those with a preference for feeling may be comfortable living with problems that cannot be solved. Today they may not have offered an answer to the problem of theodicy, but they remain committed to standing alongside and to holding the hand of those who are suffering. But now time had run out, and no thought had been given to preparing feedback.

Conclusion

Drawing on the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics, the present study tested the hypothesis that feeling types and thinking types would read this Psalm through different lenses and that these two lenses could present different challenges in working with this Psalm in Christian-framed trauma therapy.

The hypothesis was advanced that feeling types would be more aware of the power of this Psalm to evoke compassion and hope for the traumatised. The reading offered by the eight individuals who comprised the hermeneutical community of feeling types illustrated this point. There was so much in Psalm 90 that warmed the heart of feeling types. James found hope in the notion of God as “our dwelling place in all generations”. For James there was *stabilitas* in this notion. Linda had found hope in the image of grass that is renewed in the morning.

In recent days James had faced the trauma of his wife’s bowel cancer, and the trauma of accompanying the husband of a dear friend during his final six days of life. He was there with the man’s wife when he died. James had been sustained by Psalm 90 through both traumatic events. In recent days Peter had faced the bereavement of having to leave a ministry in which he had felt comfortable, and he no longer knew what the future held for him. The cry of the Psalm “Have compassion on your servant” was sustaining for him.

This group of feeling types felt uncomfortable thinking about and speaking about the wrath of God. They recognised that they needed to confront the problem of theodicy but were also content to live with a problem that cannot be solved. Accepting that there is no answer to such a tough question, feeling types were holding on to God as their dwelling place. For feeling types, Psalm 90 worked well to offer them a narrative that proposed compassion and held out signs of hope for use in trauma therapy.

The hypothesis was advanced that thinking types would be more aware of the profound issues raised by Psalm 90 about the nature of God and about the problem of human suffering. The reading offered by the six individuals who comprised the hermeneutical community of thinking types illustrated this point. There was so much in Psalm 90 that stretched and unsettled the mind. For Fraser this was a Psalm about the traumatic experience of human mortality. He focused on the grass withering and fading in the evening. Albert focused on the brutal fact of mortality. Adrian focused on the idea that the best we can do is to plead with God to help us through the really tough bits of life before we die, and then it is all over. Norman focused on the insignificance of human life. Henry found Psalm 90 unsettling and theologically problematic. In a monotheistic tradition God is responsible for everything, good and bad alike.

Although Albert wanted to re-read psalm 90 through the lens of the New Testament, both Adrian and Fraser ruled that approach out of court. Psalm 90 needed to be accepted on its own terms, and this means confronting consideration of the power of God’s anger. This line of argument caused Adrian to admit that he had been struggling with how Psalm 90 could offer any solace to the traumatised. For thinking types, Psalm 90 did not work well to offer a narrative of compassion and hope for use in trauma therapy.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from this study. The first conclusion concerns the validity of the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics. Alongside earlier studies that have applied the SIFT approach to Psalm 1 (Francis et al., 2018a; Francis & Smith, 2018), Psalm 73 (Francis et al., 2020a, 2020b), Psalm 93 (Francis et al., 2021) and Psalm 139 (Francis et al.,

2018b), the present study demonstrates how hermeneutical communities formed on the basis of type-alike groups of participants can enrich the interpretation of scripture.

The second conclusion concerns the careful assessment of scriptural passages integrated into Christian-framed therapies. Passages that may work well with some psychological types, may work less well with others. This recognition is a salutary reminder of the value of introducing psychological type awareness more fully into the range of Christian pastoral ministries, as advocated, for example by Baab (1998), Duncan (1993) Francis (2005), Goldsmith and Wharton (1993) and McGuiness (2009).

The limitation with the present study includes the restriction to one trauma Psalm and the exploration among one group of participants. These limitations need addressing by replication and extension studies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval

This study received ethical approval from the School of Humanities, York St John University (Ethical approval code: HUM-RS-AV-08-21-01).

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