

## Psalm 85: Yearning for the Restoration of the Whole Body

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### ABSTRACT

*In this paper Psalm 85 is approached from the angle of embodied language. The embodied experiences of the poet are verbalised and metaphorised in terms of the societal body, the people of Israel in distress after their return from the Babylonian exile. The societal body of Israel, the role of "land" in the psalm, and the three-dimensional relationship between God, the people, and the land are analyzed in terms of the embodied rhetoric implemented by the poet in order to indicate how the embodied language expresses the yearning for whole-bodiedness by the returned exiles.*

### A INTRODUCTION

There are a number of different points of view on the dating of Psalm 85, namely pre-exilic, exilic and post-exilic.<sup>1</sup> However, Kraus's (1972:590) argument seems to me the most appropriate, namely that Psalms 85 and 126 both reflect the spirit of a post-exilic community relating to Isaiah 56-66 (Fohrer 1993:128), a community struggling to cope with the obstructions that hampered the realisation of the promises of salvation of exilic prophets such as Deutero-Isaiah.<sup>2</sup> The historical reality experienced by the people is in stark contrast to the salvation proclaimed by Deutero-Isaiah. Against this historical context of the psalm I shall deal with Psalm 85 as a community complaint<sup>3</sup> from a bodily point of view in this article.

The close relationship between the individual human body and the societal body forms the point of departure for the analysis of the psalm.<sup>4</sup> Yearning

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion of various interpretation by P. R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration. A Study of Hebrew Thought of the Sixth Century B. C.* (London: SCM, 1968), 225-226.

<sup>2</sup> See the relationship between Psalm 85:3 and Isaiah 40:2, and Psalm 85:12 and Isaiah 45:8.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as S. Terrien (*The Psalms. Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary*. [Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003], 605) and R. J. Tournay (*Seeing and Hearing God with the Psalms. The Prophetic Liturgy of the Second Temple in Jerusalem*. JSOT Suppl. Ser. 118. Translated by J. E. Crowley. [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991], 188) are of the opinion that the psalm presents a *Gattung* close to prophetic liturgies.

<sup>4</sup> It is evident that an individual is acting as mediator on behalf of the lamenting community in this psalm (see R. L. Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III (Psalms 73-89)*. JSOT Suppl Ser 307. [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000], 127).

ing, craving, longing for restoration is a bodily-based emotion. The poet puts into words the yearning of the returned exiles for final and complete restoration. Language as such is embodied, based on bodily experience and metaphorically expressed. This is also true of the language of this psalm in which the poet conveys the collective complaints of the people of Yahweh immediately after their return from the exile. Because language is bodily-based, it can be analysed by means of various theories about the human body. In this essay, Israel's idea of the whole body as the ideal body is taken seriously and it is argued that Israel's yearning for restoration is about restoration towards wholeness. Because "land" plays such an important role in the psalm, theory on bodily experience of space and place helps us to understand this concept.

In what follows, the societal body of Israel, the concept "land," and the relationship between people, God, and land will be explored by means of the embodied language reflected in the psalm. The aim of the paper is to indicate how the experiences of the societal body, as metaphorised by the poet, relate to Israel's ideal body as the whole body.

## **B THE SOCIETAL BODY OF ISRAEL**

Embodied existence is the most important characteristic of human experience; therefore, all human beings participate in body discourse (Berquist 2002:5). Cultures define what their ideal societal body is to which individuals are expected to relate. Israel's culturally and socially constructed ideal body was the "whole body" (Berquist 2002:19). For a body to be whole it must contain all its parts and functions, and it must be contained within fixed boundaries in order to separate itself from other bodies that are different. This means that not only should the body be physically intact but it should also act within fixed boundaries. This is why land plays such an important role in the embodied thinking of Israel and why the boundaries of the land are of great importance. Breaching of those boundaries immediately breaks up the wholeness of the corporate body, as was the case during the Babylonian exilic experience.

It is important to note that the household as basic social structure is parallel to the human body. On a larger scale the household forms the basis for the clan and eventually for the entire nation, which is the household of the king. In this sense the body relates to all these social structures. Both the individual body and the societal body were important to Israel (Berquist 2002:43). Damage to the individual body or to the societal body would destroy the whole.

When the human body is in pain, it finds itself in a state of dys-function. It is in times of pain, illness, and broken boundaries, that a person becomes more aware of his or her body (Leder 1990:130). The same applies to the corporate or societal body. In Psalm 85 the returned exiles still experience brokenness, "unwholeness" of the body shortly after their arrival in their land. They interpret the dys-functional land as still part of God's anger; that is why they

yearn for complete restoration of the broken relationships between themselves, God and their land. In a state of dys-function the mind usually inclines toward virtue, goodness, and God (Leder 1990:127), a typical reaction of the body. And this is exactly what is portrayed in Psalm 85. It is the painfulness of their situation that brings about this telic demand for restoration (Leder 1990:77). How the individual body works is also mirrored by the societal body.

To be whole physically, psychologically, and emotionally was a prerequisite for full participation in relationships within the community, including the relationship with God. To be whole also implied a reciprocal relationship with the land. On the one hand, “unwholeness” or brokenness manifests itself in situations such as physical illness, bodily difference, sinful conduct, separation from the society, dispersion from the land, separation from God. On the other hand, God’s salvation manifests itself in physical healing, forgiveness of sin, reparation of family and social ties, restoration from exile, restoration of the land as contained space in which the people live, and restoration of the God-human relationship. In the Hebrew Bible, God’s salvation for his people always includes the restoration of the land as well. The close relation between the restoration of the land and the reviving<sup>5</sup> of the societal body of Israel is conspicuous in this psalm.

In Psalm 85 we come across various reasons for the “unwholeness” experienced by the societal body of Israel: The people’s folly of the past to which they should not return is mentioned twice (vv. 3 [2] and 9 [8]). Clearly this aspect is still a threat in the current situation of the returned exiles (v. 9 [8]). The anger of Yahweh towards his people in the past (v. 4 [3]) also serves as a cause for “unwholeness”; the delayed complete salvation in the present (vv. 5-8 [4-7]) is a cause; Yahweh’s withdrawal of his glory from the land (v. 4 [3]), which the author hopes will soon return is a cause; the land that does not produce enough supplies for the family and the societal body at large to live a sustainable life (v. 13 [12]) is a great concern and a threat to the experience of wholeness of the body.

The primary reason for the psalmist’s expression of “unwholeness” experienced by the societal body after returning from exile seems to be *ecological* in nature, namely the lack of sustainability of the land (v. 13 [12]).<sup>6</sup> This is the

<sup>5</sup> The Piel verb *תחינו* (v. 7a)(revive) is much more comprehensive than physical (bodily) revival. It refers to the fact that “all of life is a gift and a trust from Yahweh” (M. E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*. Word Biblical Commentary 20. [Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1990], 373), including the revival of the land.

<sup>6</sup> The expression *יתן הטוב* (v. 13) occurs elsewhere in the Bible referring to Yahweh giving rain to the land (Deut 28:12) but it can also mean prosperity in general (Deut 30:15; 1 Sam 15:9, cf. Ps 25:13). M. Dahood (*Psalms II: 51-100*. The Anchor Bible 17. [Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1986], 286) calls the

theme with which the psalm commences (v. 2a [1b]) and with which it closes (v. 13 [12]).<sup>7</sup> Of course, the lack of sustainability of the land relates to God's anger (vv. 2[1]-4[3]), the removal of his glory from the land, while the abundance or prosperity of the land (v. 13[12]) depicts salvation, the return of his glory to the land (v.10[9]). The *moral* reason, the sinfulness of the people, is something of the past but is still a possible threat to the experience of wholeness (vv. 9-10 [8-9]).

## C YOUR LAND, OUR LAND

The concept "land" in relation to salvation plays an important role in Psalm 85.<sup>8</sup> The words אֶרֶץ (v. 2[1]) and אֶרְצֵנוּ (vv. 10 [9], 12 [11]) bear the connotation of "land," meaning the land promised and given to the people of Israel by God himself. The expressions "your land" and "our land" imply that the land remains Yahweh's property, which Israel inherited and which they must preserve and cultivate.

We also come across the same word in verse 12 [11] but there it seemingly bears the meaning of "earth." Although there is no evidence in the rest of the Hebrew Bible that the word אֶרֶץ in parallel combination with שָׁמַיִם in verse 12 [11] might carry the meaning of "land of Israel," this possibility cannot be ignored. I will return to this idea in the last section of the paper.

One can ask the question, what does the concept "land" mean? In general terms "land" can be seen as *space* and *place*. The human body is the measure of direction, location, and distance, that is, of space and place. Therefore, the notion of land is also an embodied category. Human spaces are the metaphorical products of bodily senses and imagination. The mind is able to extrapolate beyond sensory evidence (Tuan 1977:16). That is why the psalmist can draw a direct link between heaven and earth (Ps 85:12). And this is also the reason why the people of Yahweh, while still in exile, can imagine a wonderful place to which they are about to return. Space is a common symbol for freedom (Tuan 1977:54) because space lies open and suggests the future and invites action. Space can, however, also be a threat because of its openness and the fact that one is exposed in the open. "Compared to space, place is a calm centre of established values," (Tuan 1977:54) a place where one can feel "at home." Every human being needs space in a biological, psychological, social, and

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psalm "a prayer for rain" and that יִתֵּן יְהוָה יָתֵן הַטּוֹב refers to Yahweh giving rain to the land.

<sup>7</sup> See also Cole, *Shape and Message*, 134, who makes mention of an *inclusio* consisting of two elements, namely "land" and the divine name in verses 2 and 13.

<sup>8</sup> The productive land features in salvation prophecies in Amos 9:13; Hos 2:21-23; Isa 30:23-25; Jer 21:12, as well as in Lev 26:3-6 – J. L. Mays, *Psalms. Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (Louisville: John Knox, 1994[1989]. (1994[1989]), 277.

spiritual sense (Tuan 1977:58). In Israel's culture physical spaciousness carried the connotation of "a good and a broad land" (e.g. Exod 3:8). Psychological space means to be rescued (Ps 18:19). Homeland is an important type of space because it is large enough for a whole nation to live in meaningfully (Tuan 1977:149). The author of Psalm 85 converts the geographical space of the land into place where they feel at home, namely "our land."

For Israel, the Promised Land was imagined as flowing with milk and honey (e.g. Ex 3:8), the most beautiful of all lands (e.g. Ezech 20:6). In reality this is construed space based on hyperbolic promises mixed with emotions of hope and fear, but on very few sensory evidence (Exod 3:8, 17; Num 13:16-33).

Tuan (1977:17) distinguishes between three types of construed space, that is mythical space, pragmatic space, and abstract space, of which the former two are of importance to us in this discussion. *Mythical space* can relate to a world view or cosmology of a people (Tuan 1977:88). Israel's cosmology was anthropocentric. Their notions of personal cleanness, separation, purity, and wholeness connect with an understanding of God's presence and holiness throughout life (Berquist 2002:11), and this also applies to the land. "[T]hey saw how the world functioned akin to how the body should function" (Berquist 2002:11). This means that the functional basis at the centre of both their anthropology and their cosmology is the notion of the "whole body". That is why the land is called "our land" (Ps 85:10, 13), promised and given to them by Yahweh. That is why they experience God as living amongst their societal body. That is why many nations of the world will go up to Zion (Jerusalem), the "centre" of the world (1 Kgs 8:41-43; Isa 2:3; Mic 4:2; Ps 102:21-22). Israel experienced destruction of and dispersion from "their land" because this was the mythical space they had created for themselves. Tuan (1977:149) puts it this way:

Human groups nearly everywhere tend to regard their own homeland as the center of the world. Home is at the center of an astronomically determined spatial system. A vertical axis, linking heaven to the underworld, passes through it. The stars are perceived to move around one's abode; home is the focal point of a cosmic structure. Should destruction occur we may reasonably conclude that the people would be thoroughly demoralized, since the ruin of their settlement implies the ruin of their cosmos.

This oriented mythical space, defined by the cardinal points and putting the human being at the centre of the world (Tuan 1977:91), transforms space into place through personification.

Mythical space can overlap with pragmatic space in that it can incorporate practical activities such as planting and harvesting of crops. In order to live a proper life, human relationship with the earth and the cosmos requires that

nature and society should be an orderly whole displaying a harmonious relationship. In Psalm 85, Yahweh showed favour to his land in the past (v. 2 [1]); Yahweh's glory is supposed to dwell in his land, which means salvation and healing for his people (v. 10 [9]). A very close relationship exists between "heaven" and "earth" (land) in verse 12 [11]), and verse 13 [12] sketches a similar relationship between God, land, and the people. Especially in verse 13 [12] mythical space and pragmatic space fuse to express the physical and other needs of the people in their homeland. They have an intense desire for their place to be restored, for the land to start producing again in order for them to become a whole body again. The construction of this mythical realm satisfies their intellectual and psychological needs (Tuan 1977:92) and forms the basis for the satisfaction of their physical and social needs as well.

In religions that bind people firmly to place, such people find security in a historical sense of continuity (Tuan 1977:153). Especially in troubling times their homeland (place) is a source of fond memories, which are re-enacted or recalled to acquire a sense of self and of identity (Tuan 1977:186). That is why the psalmist reflects on past deliverance by Yahweh in verses 2-4 [1-3] in order to retain their self-respect and identity as a whole people of Yahweh.

It is clear from the above that the returned exiles again find themselves in "our land," the space that has once again become "place" to them. However, the disruptive situation experienced during the early post-exilic period urges them to create mythical space in combination with pragmatic space in order to satisfy their yearning for whole-bodiedness. Whole-bodiedness is only possible when Yahweh turns away from his wrath against them, when he returns to the land, when they as a people refrain from sinning again, and when Yahweh restores the land so that it can sustain the needs of the people.

## **D THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEOPLE, GOD, AND LAND**

Verse 2 [1] introduces the relationship between God, his land, and Jacob<sup>9</sup> (the people of Israel). It is of significance that the term אֶרֶץְךָ (your land) is used in v. 2 [1] instead of אֶרֶץ־נוֹנוּ (our land), which occurs in verses 10 [9] and 12 [11]). This alludes to texts such as 1 Kgs 8:36; 2 Chr 6:27; Jer 5:7; 16:18 and Joel 3:2 where the possessive case refers to Yahweh as the subject and where the cove-

<sup>9</sup> The designation "Jacob" for Israel in the post-exilic period carries, according to G. Wanke (*Die Zionstheologie der Korachiten in ihrem Traditionsgeschichtlichen Zusammenhang*. BZAW 97. [Berlin: Verlag Alfred Töpelman, 1966], 57), a theological rather than a political connotation. He is of the opinion that the occurrence of this term in Psalm 85:2[1] is one of the examples in the Psalms where it refers to "das aus dem Exil hervorgegangene Israel, das sich später um Jerusalem als eine Kultgemeinde sammelte." The parallel combination of "land" and "Jacob" in this verse refers to the close relationship between the two, a relationship in which they are almost mutually identified with each other.

nantal promise and giving of Yahweh's land to his people play a primary role. The land terminology is, therefore, covenant terminology. The relationship between God and Israel in the entire Old Testament is non-existent if the land does not feature in that relationship. It is Yahweh's land, which he gave to the people of Israel. This healthy, undamaged, three-dimensional relationship eventually forms the ultimate notion of wholeness for Israel.<sup>10</sup>

The dynamic in Psalm 85 reflects a struggle towards restoration and maintenance of this three-dimensional relationship. In this regard the term שׁוּב (return, turn) occurs five times (vv. 2b, 4b, 5a, 7a, 9c) in the psalm and plays a primary role in expressing the societal body's yearning for restoration. In one instance (v. 4 [3]) שׁוּב refers to a turn that Yahweh has made in himself in the past by turning away from his fierce anger against his people. In another instance (v. 9c [8c]) שׁוּב refers to the possibility of Israel returning to wickedness again in future. The other three occurrences (vv. 2, 5, 7 [1, 4, 6]) express Yahweh's acts of restoration of the people's fate and the three-dimensional relationship. All three dimensions of time, namely past, present, and future, are covered by the dynamics of the term שׁוּב. The people's experience of past deliverance (vv. 2-4 [1-3]) is introduced as motivation for present salvation (vv. 5-8 [4-7]). It is only Yahweh who can restore the three-dimensional relationship because he is the owner of his people and of his land. However, refraining from possible returning to wickedness remains the people's own responsibility as part of the covenantal relationship.

In verses 11 [10] and 12 [11] this three-dimensional relationship is personified in a highly sophisticated manner, namely that of a love affair. Normally the personified attributes חַסֵּד, אֱמֶת, צֶדֶק, and שְׁלוֹם, used by the poet in this context, are interpreted as attributes of Yahweh.<sup>11</sup> In the context in which these

<sup>10</sup> G. Fohrer (*Psalmen*. De Gruyter Studienbuch. [Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993], 131) is correct when he states that the "Grundlage des Heils" is "[d]aß Gott wieder in das Land zurückkehrt und in ihm wohnt, nachdem er es einst mit dem Fall Jerusalems verlassen hat." However, this implies that the healing of the three-dimensional relationship between God, land, and people is the only way in which the people can experience complete wholeness again.

<sup>11</sup> E. S. Gerstenberger (*Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*. The Forms of the Old Testament Literature XV. K., [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001], 130) speaks of "four different entities...as if they were divine impersonations", but then calls them "life-preserving powers," which sometimes occur in the Psalms as autonomous, almost mythical figures. Kraus, *Psalmen*, 593 and Mays, *Psalms*, 277 interpret these entities as eschatological powers of salvation. R. Davidson (*The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*. [Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998], 282) refers to these four terms as personified "attendants round the king of glory, ready to act in God's service to fulfill his purposes." Tournay, *Seeing and Hearing God*, 191 calls verses 11-14 "the implicit oracle of peace and salvation."

four attributes are used in Psalm 85 it might, however, also be possible to interpret these two verses as follows:

11[10] **Yahweh's love** (חַסֵּד) and the **people's faithfulness** (אֱמֻנָה) meet together; **Yahweh's righteousness** (צְדָקָה) and the **people's peace** (שְׁלוֹמִים) kiss each other.

12[11] The **people's faithfulness** (אֱמֻנָה) springs forth from the land, and **Yahweh's righteousness** (צְדָקָה) looks down from heaven.<sup>12</sup>

This interpretation links the heavenly abode of God directly with the earthly abode of the people of God, namely the land, if the expression אֱמֻנָה מֵאֶרֶץ תִּצְמָח (v. 12a [11a]) is translated as, “faithfulness springs forth from the land,” instead of “from the earth.” This is in correlation with Israel’s anthropocentric cosmology. In personifying אֶרֶץ as “faithful land,” meaning faithful people, and linking this with God in heaven, the vertical axis of their cosmological structure is implemented as a function of the vertical axis of the human body. It is also strengthened by combining God’s salvation with the indwelling of his glory in the land (v. 10), which links both God’s heavenly abode and his “land” dwelling.

To further underscore my argument, both the concepts שְׁלוֹמִים and אֱמֻנָה in relation to God’s people occur elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible within the context of God’s provision for the people in terms of harvesting or in terms of destruction of the crop (see Jer 6:14; 8:11, and Hos 4:1 respectively). In both cases the land is at stake. If this interpretation is viable, then these verses intend to sketch a situation in the *near* future, as if it is happening at present, when Yahweh will finally turn the tide positively in favour of the people and the land. This makes it unnecessary to interpret these verses as eschatological as is often done.<sup>13</sup> The aim of the poet with these two verses can then be interpreted as personification of attributes both of God and of his people, with the land metaphor referring to the people, envisaging a state of wholeness and a relationship of love. The act of kissing (נָשַׁק – v. 11b [10b]) depicts deep affection between two persons (bodies), a relationship of unity and wholeness.

When we read verse 13 [12] in combination with verses 11-12 [10-11] this interpretation makes even more sense. The faithfulness of the people and the righteousness of God (vv. 11-12 [10-11]) will have the effect that “Yahweh will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest” (v. 13 [12]).

<sup>12</sup> Terrien, *The Psalms*, 608 states that with reference to Psalm 85 “[s]uch keywords as ‘mercy,’ ‘truth,’ and ‘trust’ appear as mouthpieces for living realities that apply to both the character of God and the hoped-for behavior of renewed man.” This is confirmed by H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms*. (London: Evangelical Press, 1972<sup>2</sup>), 614.

<sup>13</sup> See for instance F-L. Hossfeld and E. Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*. Hermeia. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 362. My point is underscored by Leupold (1972<sup>2</sup>:614).

This spells complete wholeness, a complete three-dimensional relationship yearned for by the returned exiles during a very difficult period of adaption, healing, and living a sustainable life as Yahweh's covenant people.

## E CONCLUSION

By reading Psalm 85 from the angle of embodied language, the close relationship between the individual body and the societal body is highlighted. The depiction of the yearning of the returned exiles for full restoration relates to the poet's own bodily experiences, which are interwoven with those of the societal body. The experience of dys-function of the societal body triggered their yearning for complete restoration as verbalised by the poet. The reasons for experiencing their societal body as "unwhole" or broken relate to themselves, to God, and to the land they live in. The geographical space, namely the land, is turned into mythological and pragmatic space and place (homeland) in the mind of the poet in order to meet the bodily, psychological, and social needs of the distressed people.

The lack of sustainability of the land forms the basis for the yearning for restoration. However, eventually it boils down to the three-dimensional covenantal relationship between the people, God, and the land that should be restored in order for the people to experience whole-bodiedness again.

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