



NORWEGIAN  
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# “As Far as the East is from the West”

A study of the motif “divine forgiveness” in Psalm 103.

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## Forord

Jeg vil gjerne rette en stor takk til min veileder Kristin, for forståelse, entusiasme og hjelp i en krevende skriveprosess. Du gikk den ekstra mila for meg, noe jeg er svært takknemlig for. Takk også til MF for god tilrettelegging, og til min mann for all støtte og hjelp.

## Abstract

In this thesis, I will study Psalm 103, using the motif “divine forgiveness” as a focal point. I will take an in-the-text approach, focusing on what the psalm conveys in its present literary form. My reading is conducted as a motif study, borrowing from Freedman’s definition of “motif” as a recurrent theme or verbal pattern, which may also consist of a family or associational cluster of concepts.

I will divide Ps 103 into three stanzas, each with a distinct perspective: individual, communal, and universal. I will examine how the divine forgiveness motif is presented in each of these stanzas, and discuss how other concepts are included in the associational cluster of the motif, in order to answer my thesis question: *How is divine forgiveness portrayed in Psalm 103?*

I will conclude that Ps 103 portrays forgiveness as flowing from the Lord’s character, especially from his compassion and steadfast love, but also from his knowledge of human frailty. God’s character is outlined in the grace formula (Ps 103:8), borrowed from Ex 34:6–7. I will argue that the psalmist reinterprets this text, pointing us away from God’s avenging justice. He concentrates instead on the seeming limitlessness of the Lord’s mercy toward those who fear him. While the psalm presents a comprehensive view of God’s forgiveness, the purpose of the psalm is not to describe of forgiveness. The main thrust of the psalm is instead to praise the Lord who forgives.

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## List of Abbreviations

B2011	<i>Bibel 2011</i>
BDB	<i>The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
HALOT	<i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
KJV	<i>King James Version</i>
LXX	<i>Septuaginta</i>
NASB	<i>New American Standard Bible</i>
NETS	<i>New English Translation of the Septuagint</i>
NRSV	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i>
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
TLOT	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND METHOD

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Psalm 103 is one of the most cherished psalms in the Christian tradition. Through the centuries, it has influenced hymns and liturgies in the worldwide church.<sup>1</sup> In my own tradition, the Church of Norway, many congregations use Ps 103:11–12 as the words of absolution after the confession of sins.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the psalm may be familiar to a wider circle than the regular churchgoers, as an excerpt (103:13–17) is read in many Church of Norway funerals.<sup>3</sup>

The psalm also appears to be a favorite of many scholars, and the psalm has a curious ability to bring out the superlatives from commentators. “How many a pious man, in a joyous hour, has expressed his thanks to God with these lofty verses!”, Gunkel exclaims, before proceeding to extol the psalm as a “forecast of the New Testament in the Old”.<sup>4</sup> Weiser, on the other hand, has called it “one of the purest blossoms on the tree of biblical faith”.<sup>5</sup> The psalm’s popularity has undoubtedly contributed to the large number of articles and studies that comment upon the psalm.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stek, 2007, 23.

<sup>2</sup> The two alternatives listed for words of absolution are Ps 103:11–12 and 1 John 1:9. One may also choose another suitable text (Kirkerådet, 2011, 2.38).

<sup>3</sup> Ps 103:13–17 is one of the suggested texts for the Old Testament reading.

[https://kirken.no/globalassets/kirken.no/om-troen/gudstjeneste---liturgi/liturgi\\_gravferd\\_03\\_bokmaal.pdf](https://kirken.no/globalassets/kirken.no/om-troen/gudstjeneste---liturgi/liturgi_gravferd_03_bokmaal.pdf), 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> Gunkel, 1903, 215.

<sup>5</sup> Weiser, quoted from Willis, 1991, 525.

<sup>6</sup> The vast variety in approaches to psalms studies, both newer and more traditional, have influenced studies of the 103<sup>rd</sup> psalm. For this thesis, therefore, I have read secondary literature with widely different aims and pre-understandings (see Bibliography). This is instructive, as each scholar provides a distinct angle from which to view the text. However, the differences between them – in methods, aims, and pre-understanding – must be kept in mind. While for instance Mays and Hossfeld both have interesting insights into the text, the differences between them should be recognized.



### 1.1.1 MOTIVATION AND APPROACH

As the psalm has been paid so much scholarly attention – why should yet another treatment be attempted? One reason is that though there are many studies of Ps 103, fewer of these are motif studies. Reading the psalm through a certain lens may provide fresh insight into its message. My reading will focus on one of the most central motifs of the psalm: “divine forgiveness”. This motif, in addition to being explicitly mentioned in 103:3, 10, 12, forms a backdrop to the entire section 103:3–14.

Another motivation is the mentioned use of Ps 103:11–12 as words of absolution in the Church of Norway. The Christian church considers Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross as God’s ultimate dealing with the sin of humankind, making forgiveness available to the church. Considering this, the choice of an Old Testament text as words of absolution seems surprising. It is not my intention to denounce or defend the use of Ps 103 in the Church of Norway liturgy. But the use of this psalm in the words of absolution inspired the study of how Ps 103 portrays divine forgiveness in its Hebrew Bible context.

### 1.1.2 THESIS QUESTION

In this thesis, I will perform a reading of Ps 103, focusing on the motif “divine forgiveness”, in order to answer the following thesis question: *How is divine forgiveness portrayed in Psalm 103?*

## 1.2 METHOD

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### 1.2.1 IN-THE-TEXT APPROACH

Around 1970, the field of biblical studies experienced a paradigm shift. Scholars started to read the biblical texts “as texts” – as coherent literary entities and as canonical wholes. In Psalms studies, this has expressed itself in a variety of structural and literary approaches, especially in studies of Hebrew poetry, as well as attention to the Psalter as a coherent whole, i.e. as a book.<sup>7</sup>

In line with these trends, my primary interest has been in what Ps 103 communicates in its present literary form in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>8</sup> I have chosen an “in-the-text” approach. I am therefore primarily concerned with what the present text communicates, rather than searching for something “behind” the text (e.g. clues to what the psalm can tell us about ancient Israelite religion).

Another tendency in current Psalms studies is to emphasize the literary features of the texts, treating them as works of art. I will attempt to discover some of the literary devices the poet uses in Ps 103. In the search for the psalm’s structural division, I will discuss the various structural markers the poet utilizes. I will also try to show how the poet intertwines certain concepts, and weaves the psalm together into a coherent whole by repetitions. I will also point to the powerful imagery the psalmist uses to get his<sup>9</sup> message across.

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<sup>7</sup> Howard, 1999, 329.

<sup>8</sup> Rather than the LXX, for instance. However, other witnesses to the text are of course consulted on text critical issues.

<sup>9</sup> For the sake of simplicity, and on balance of probability, I refer to the poet as “he”. I will use “psalmist” and “poet” interchangeably, and have not entered into the discussion of who the “I” of the psalm is in distinction to the author of the psalm.

Interest into the shaping and arrangement of the Psalter, which is so much in vogue, has also influenced this study to some extent. I will make some observations on how Ps 103 includes motifs that are key motifs to Book IV of the Psalter (Pss 90–106), the book to which Ps 103 belongs.

However, I will also employ some of the more traditional approaches to psalms studies. While form criticism no longer holds the dominant position gained for it by Gunkel and Mowinckel, it continues to be a central approach to the interpretation of psalms. As Bellinger points out, literary types are a great help to readers, as they cause the reader to expect certain movements in the psalm's progression. "The key to interpretation is how the text meets and changes those expectations."<sup>10</sup> I will therefore discuss what form elements Ps 103 contains. The search for forms, however, must not become a straightjacket into which the texts are forced.<sup>11</sup> Ps 103 does not fall easily into a single category, and I find it more useful to examine what form elements the psalm displays than to define precisely what category the psalm belongs to.

As my focus is on the message of the extant text, I will not prioritize searching for a "more original" form of the text. However, I will have cause to discuss with redactional criticism in the course of my exegesis. Hossfeld, for instance, sets up a "basic psalm" against a "redactional reinterpretation".<sup>12</sup> I find it much more conducive to examine what the psalm may tell us as a coherent piece of literature. I will use Hossfeld's claims in an

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<sup>10</sup> Bellinger, 2014, 323.

<sup>11</sup> "Occasionally one can get the impression from commentaries that what is important in the understanding and reconstruction of psalms is not so much the semantics as the 'type'." (Zenger, 1994, 41)

<sup>12</sup> Hossfeld/Zenger, 2011, 36.

attempt to show that – even should he be correct – it makes sense to read the psalm as a coherent literary entity.

### 1.2.2 MOTIF STUDY

The most distinct methodological choice I have made, however, is to conduct my reading of Ps 103 as a study of the motif “divine forgiveness”. Freedman defines a literary motif as

a recurrent theme, character, or verbal pattern, but it may also be a family or associational cluster of literal or figurative references to a given class of concepts or objects, [...]. It is generally symbolic – that is, it can be seen to carry a meaning beyond the literal one immediately apparent [...].<sup>13</sup>

I have chosen to characterize divine forgiveness as a “motif”, even though it does not fit the definition perfectly. Divine forgiveness fits the first part of the definition well, however, as it is indeed a recurrent theme in Ps 103, as well as in the Psalter and the Hebrew Bible as a whole. However, it is questionable whether one may say that divine forgiveness has a symbolic function.<sup>14</sup> Further, considering how pervasive it is in the psalm, it would perhaps be better to see it as a theme, or the subject matter, of the poem.

I have chosen to employ the term, however, despite these difficulties. There are several reasons for this: Firstly, being symbolic does not seem to be a necessary trait of the

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<sup>13</sup> Freedman, 1971, 127-128. His full definition is considerably longer, but the quoted section is sufficient for our discussion. While Freedman’s article is meant for the study of modern literature, it is used by several biblical scholars as they aim to define “motif”. It is important to keep in mind, however, the difference between the modern novel and the poems of the Psalter.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, the divine kingship motif that we will encounter in chapter 5, fits this part of the definition better.

motif.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, by seeing it as a motif instead of as a theme, it is easier to see how divine forgiveness is one of several important motifs – not the only theme of the psalm. As we will see in the conclusion, divine forgiveness is *not* the subject of Ps 103. Thirdly, Freedman points out that the motif may take the form of an “associational cluster”, rather than only a single, unchanging element.<sup>16</sup>

This final point is especially relevant to our discussion of divine forgiveness in Ps 103. Divine forgiveness does not only come to expression in explicit terms (as e.g. in Ps 103:3a: “who forgives all your iniquities”<sup>17</sup>), but is also presented more indirectly. An important part of my discussion will be to discover what other elements are included in the associational cluster of the forgiveness motif in Ps 103, and how this impacts our understanding of the psalm.

Therefore, while “divine forgiveness” in Ps 103 does not adhere strictly to the definition of a motif, I find it to be a useful term for understanding the psalm.

I will use the forgiveness motif as a lens through which to see the psalm. However, while I will pay greater attention to this motif and its related concepts, I also wish to respect the integrity of the psalm. Though forgiveness is important, it should not overshadow all other topics. I will therefore discuss other important topics of the psalm as well. This is particularly relevant in the third section of the psalm, where the forgiveness motif relinquishes the central position it holds in the first two sections.

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<sup>15</sup> Freedman (1971, 125) asserts that it may also be literal.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 124.

<sup>17</sup> Where nothing else is specified, translations provided in this thesis are my own. I have been greatly helped, however, by the NRSV, NASB, and B2011.

### 1.3 OUTLINE

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The outline of this thesis is quite straight-forward. In the next chapter, chapter 2, I will discuss the psalm's structure, unity, genre, and dating. The three-part structure I will present there will form the basis for the three following chapters. In each of these chapters, I will discuss one section – one stanza – of the psalm. In chapter 3, I will treat stanza 1, which has an individual focus, and considers forgiveness as one of the “benefits” that the Lord gives. The second stanza, which I will discuss in chapter 4, has a communal focus, and revisits the history of Israel. The poet marvels at God's seemingly limitless will to forgive. The third stanza has an even wider focus, as it extols God's kingly rule, and calls upon God's works to bless their heavenly ruler. This will be the subject of chapter 5. In the final chapter, chapter 6, I will attempt to integrate my findings and answer the thesis question.

## CHAPTER 2: STRUCTURE, GENRE, AND DATING

Before we can move on to the exegesis proper, several questions about the psalm's structure, unity, genre, and dating need to be addressed. These questions will be the subject of this chapter. The main part of the chapter will be devoted to determining the psalm's structure, as this question most clearly impacts my interpretation. After this, I will address the other questions in turn. I will discuss whether the psalm can be read as a unified composition, before moving on to examining the form elements of the psalm. I will conclude the chapter with a short discussion of the psalm's dating, before summarizing.

### 2.1 STRUCTURE

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Psalm 103 is an elaborate composition, clearly the work of a skilled poet. The poet has left several structural markers, indicating the psalm's division. However, these are not equally clear throughout the psalm, and neither are they interpreted in the same way by different commentators.<sup>18</sup> While certain smaller sub-units seem to be rather broadly accepted, there is little consensus regarding the overall structure of Ps 103.<sup>19</sup> This alone justifies a thorough discussion of the psalm's structure. Further, one's division of the psalm guides one's interpretation. Stek, for instance, reads 103:7–12 and 13–18 as two panels commenting on 103:3a and 3b respectively, giving a quite different interpretation of these verses than the one I will present in this thesis.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Stek, 2007, 29.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, 103:1–5 and 19–22 are often, though not universally, considered units. See Stek, 2007, 23–25 for an extensive list of differing structural divisions.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 34.

In this section, I will attempt identify some of the structural markers of the psalm, and align these observations with shifts in the psalm's content. I will divide the psalm into three stanzas, which again can be sub-divided into two or more strophes.<sup>21</sup>

### 2.1.1 METER AND VERSES

The psalm consists of 22 verses, equal to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. While this may be taken as an attempt at alphabetizing, Anderson thinks there is “no real reason” to assume that the number of verses was supposed to correspond to the alphabet.<sup>22</sup> With Mays, I see the number of verses as a clue to the psalmist's attempt to be comprehensive.<sup>23</sup>

The meter is mainly 3+3, but “becomes quite irregular as the psalm progresses toward its end.”<sup>24</sup>

### 2.1.2 FIRST STANZA

The psalm starts with a title, לְדָוִד, marking it as a psalm of (or to) David. After this, the first two verses naturally group together, due to their similar construction: The A-cola of both verses consist of identical imperatives to the psalmist's self<sup>25</sup>, his נַפְשִׁי, to bless the Lord (בְּרַכֵּי נַפְשִׁי אֶת־יְהוָה).

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<sup>21</sup> I'm influenced by Fokkelman's (2001, 159-173) terminology, as well as his division of Ps 103. However, the structure presented here is not identical to his.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson, 1972, 712.

<sup>23</sup> Mays, 1994a, 326.

<sup>24</sup> Terrien, 2003, 702.

<sup>25</sup> While the traditional translation “Bless the Lord, O my soul” (KJV, NRSV, NASB) is poetic, it can be misleading. In some texts, “soul” can be an adequate translation of נַפְשִׁי, designating the seat of spiritual experiences and emotions. However, it does not signify “an indestructible core of being, in contradistinction to the physical life” (Wolff, 1974, 20). The basic meaning for נַפְשִׁי is probably “throat”, but it can designate the entire person.



Further, 103:3–5 are clearly linked: They all begin with definite participles describing the Lord. The B-cola of 103:3–4 also begin with definite participles, but the pattern is broken in 103:5, which instead has an imperfect verb. This may indicate an end to the unit. The argument for a break between 103:5 and 6 is strengthened by the use of an indefinite participle in 103:6 instead of the definite participles of 103:3–5.

We see a close relationship between the content of 103:1–2 and 103:3–5: 103:3–5 provide reasons for the exhortation to bless the Lord in 103:1–2. The rare form of the pronominal suffix for 2.f.sg., **נִי**–, in 103:3–5 is probably used to create assonance with **בִּרְכֵי** in 103:1–2.<sup>26</sup> This “serves to bind together the call to praise and its motivation.”<sup>27</sup> These two sub-units – strophes – are therefore closely connected, and together they form the first stanza.

This first stanza has a personal focus, as the psalmist converses with his **נַפְשׁוֹ**, his self. This is most pronounced in 103:1b–2, where the psalmist addresses his **נַפְשׁוֹ** directly, with volitional forms in 2.f.sg. In 103:3–5, this address continues with the use of the pronominal suffix in 2.f.sg. From 103:6 onwards, however, the use of pronominal suffixes ceases, and the lack of a clear addressee gives the section a more general, less personal, character.

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<sup>26</sup> It is probably an Aramaizing form (Joüon/Muraoka, 1991, §94h, i).

<sup>27</sup> Allen, 2002, 26.

## 2.1.3 SECOND STANZA

103:6, therefore, opens the next stanza in the psalm. This stanza consists of three strophes. The first of these, 103:6–8, is connected by content rather than any clear structural markers. Using well-known phrases from the vocabulary of the Hebrew Bible salvation history, the psalmist now praises the Lord in more general terms. 103:6 describes the Lord as doing **מְשַׁפְּטִים** and **צְדָקוֹת**. 103:7 alludes to Ex 33:13 with its assertion that the Lord made his ways known to Moses. It thus functions as an introduction to 103:8, which echoes the grace formula of Ex 34:6.<sup>28</sup>

The two following strophes have clearer structural markers. 103:9–10 form a clear unit, as both verses start with **לֵא**, and the B-colons of both verses starts with **וְלֵא**.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, 103:11–14 form a group, as 103:11 and 103:14 both starts with **כִּי**, enveloping two verses (103:12–13) starting with the comparative particle **כִּי**. This gives an alliterative effect, as all four verses start with the letter **כ**.

One could argue that the section should end in 103:13, as the phrase **עַל-יִרְאַיוֹ**, “toward those who fear him”, is used at the end of both 103:11 and 103:13. However, the alliteration in 103:11–14 indicates that 103:14 should be included in the unit. We will also note the reappearance of pronominal suffixes in 103:10–14, this time in 1.pl. The use of pronominal suffixes ends in 103:15, which instead introduces a new subject, **אֲנֹכִי**.

<sup>28</sup> See sections 4.1.1 and 4.1.2.2.1.

<sup>29</sup> Peshitta reads the equivalent to **כִּי** in the beginning of the verse (in assimilation with Isa 57:16? Cf. BHS). Considering the deliberate construction of 103:9–10 (the alternation of **לֵא** ... **וְלֵא**), I follow MT.

The focus thus shifts from “us” to “humankind”. This, too, signals a break between two units.

The second stanza forms a coherent unit: First, it is tied together by its focus on the community of “us”, and the history of Israel. This stands in contrast to the focus on the individual in the first stanza. Second, the three strophes have a common focus in terms of content. The first strophe introduces the grace formula (103:8), and the following two strophes expound upon this central formula. 103:9–10 focus on negatives: what the Lord does *not* do, i.e. he does not deal with “us” according to our sins. 103:11–14 expound on the formula in positives, using similes to describe God’s great **דָּוָה**, his willingness to forgive, and his compassion.<sup>30</sup> 103:14 rounds off this section, by offering an explanation for (**כִּי**) why the Lord is so merciful: He knows our “form” and remembers that we are dust.

#### 2.1.4 THIRD STANZA

As we saw, there is a break between 103:14 and 15. 103:15 introduces a new subject, **אֲנוֹשׁ**, humankind. The use of *casus pendens* draws attention to this shift in subject. A simile is again employed, likening humankind to grass. The motif of human frailty continues from 103:14, giving this verse a bridge function between the second and third stanzas. Here, however, the focus has shifted: These verses do not continue explaining God’s mercy. Instead, they describe the transience of humankind, preparing for a

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<sup>30</sup> Note also the wordplay in this section: “For as high as (**כַּגְּבוֹהַ**)... so mighty is (**גְּבוּרָה**)” (103:11). This is more pronounced in 103:12–13, which also have an alliterative effect: “As far as (**כַּרְחֹק**) ... so far removes he (**הַרְחִיק**)”. “As a father has compassion (**כַּרְחֹם**) ... so the Lord has compassion (**רַחֲמִים**)”. (cf. Allen, 2002, 29).

contrast with the enduring character of the Lord's **דָּקָד** and righteousness in 103:17–18.

Contrary to the impermanence of humanity, the **דָּקָד** of the Lord is from everlasting and to everlasting toward those who fear him, and his righteousness for children's children.

The verses 15–18 thus form one strophe.

103:19 introduces another subject, **יְהוָה**, with *casus pendens*. 103:19 also introduces a new motif in the psalm: God's all-pervading kingly rule. The affirmation of God's rule as king in 103:19 prepares the ground for the call to bless him in 103:20–22b, an exhortation mirroring the exhortation to the psalmist's self in 103:1–2. 103:20–22b are linked by the thrice-repeated imperative **בָּרְכוּ יְהוָה**. These imperatives (now in 2.m.pl.), are directed to an increasingly universal audience, culminating in 103:22a–b: “Bless the Lord, all his works, in all the places of his rule (**בְּכָל־מְקוֹמוֹת מְשַׁלְתּוֹ**).” This call answers to 103:19's affirmation that his dominion rules over all (**וּמְלֹכוֹתוֹ בְּכָל מְשַׁלָּה**).

The repetition of **כָּל** (with the preposition **בְּ**) and **משל** creates an *inclusio* tying 103:19–22 together into one strophe.<sup>31</sup>

The psalm ends with another *inclusio*, now with the opening of the psalm: 103:22c repeats the call **בָּרְכֵי יְהוָה אֱתֵיְהוָה**. (This simultaneously links Ps 103 with Ps 104, which begins with identical wording).

In the third stanza, the talk of “we” has ceased. This, together with the introduction of the more general **אֲנִי**, indicates that the psalm takes an even broader perspective than

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<sup>31</sup> Dion, 1990, 23.

the focus on community in stanza 2.<sup>32</sup> In the final strophe, this universal perspective comes to the fore in the call to all God's works to bless him.

#### 2.1.5 EXPANDING PERSPECTIVE

The three stanzas should of course not be read as far separated from each other.

However, it is interesting to note how each of the stanzas has a distinct perspective, and how the psalmist expands his vision in a step-wise fashion in each stanza. While the first stanza concentrates on the experience of the individual, the second stanza concerns itself with the history of Israel and experience of the community of those fearing the Lord. The third stanza has an even broader vision, as it introduces humankind and calls upon all God's works to praise their king. The individual is not forgotten in this universal perspective, however. The final colon (103:22c) takes up the call to the psalmist self with which the psalm started, thus bringing the psalm full circle.

This step-wise expansion of the psalmist's perspective gives a comprehensive air to the psalm, as it describes God's influence on all levels: from the micro- to the macro-level. God's work brings change to the individual person, and carries significance to the whole of creation.

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<sup>32</sup> The repetition of "עַל־יְרֵאָיו" from 103:11, 13, is, as I see it, the strongest argument for extending the second stanza to 103:18, as does Allen (2002, 29) (though he uses different terms). In 103:10–14 the group of "those who fear him" is connected with "we" (see section 4.4.1). One could therefore argue that the communal focus persists through 103:18. However, the explicit mention of "we" ends in 103:14. I believe, on balance, that it makes better sense to start the third stanza in 103:15.

### 2.1.6 SUMMARY

In this section, I have examined the structure of Ps 103. By discussing a combination of structural markers and movement in content, I found three stanzas.

The first stanza takes the perspective of the individual, and consists of two strophes, 103:1–2 and 3–5. The second stanza has a communal focus and consists of three strophes: 103:6–8, 9–10, and 11–14. 103:8 holds a prominent position in this stanza. 103:6–7 function almost as an introduction to 103:8, and 103:9–10 and 11–14 expound upon the grace formula in that verse.

The third stanza takes a universal perspective and consists of two strophes, 103:15–18 and 19–22. The first form a contrast between the ephemeral humanity and the enduring  $\text{טֹדָה}$  and righteousness of the Lord. The second establishes the Lord’s kingly reign, and encourages all his subjects to bless him.

The structure of Ps 103 can be summarized thus:

#### FIRST STANZA: INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Heading		To David
Strophe 1	1–2	Exhortation to bless the Lord directed at the psalmist’s self
Strophe 2	3–5	Hymnic participles: Reasons for blessing the Lord

SECOND STANZA: COMMUNITY LEVEL

- Strophe 3    6–8    History of the people: The Lord’s great works  
(103:8: The grace formula forms the basis for 103:9–14)
- Strophe 4    9–10    Interpretation of the grace formula in negatives:  
The Lord does not treat “us” as we deserve
- Strophe 5    11–14    Interpretation of the grace formula in positives:  
God’s mercy described in similes  
(103:14 forming a bridge towards stanza 3: God knows we are dust)

THIRD STANZA: UNIVERSAL LEVEL

- Strophe 6    15–18    Human transience compared to the Lord’s eternal  $\text{דָּוָד}$ .
- Strophe 7    19–22    God’s kingly rule and exhortation to bless the Lord directed at all  
creation  
(103:22c *Inclusio*: Exhortation to bless the Lord directed at the  
psalmist’s self)

## 2.2 TEXTUAL UNITY

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Hossfeld (following Spieckermann) argues for the redactional character of 103:15–18 and 19–22a, i.e. almost the entire third stanza.<sup>33</sup> As we have seen, both these sections start with a *casus pendens* construction (103:15, 19). He also argues that both sections abandon the “we” language, and both “interrupt the *parallelismus membrorum* in the tricola (vv. 17, 20, 22).”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Hossfeld/Zenger, 2011, 36.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* Leuenberger judges that 103:5 is redactional, but this has been ably contested by Hossfeld, see *ibid.* 32.

Additional arguments may be added. These sections both concern themselves with topics that are common to Book IV of the Psalter: the impermanence of humanity versus the eternal **דְּוָךְ** of God (103:15–18) and the kingship of the Lord (103:19–22b).<sup>35</sup> They may thus have been added by the redactor(s) who gathered Book IV, or by redactor(s) with a similar theological perspective. However, this is highly hypothetical. The redactor(s) may have placed Ps 103 in Book IV *because* of these topics. Further, the psalm also has other topics in common with Book IV, for instance the focus on Moses and Exodus (especially 103:7–8). The commonality of topics thus proves nothing.

In chapter 5, we will see how closely the third stanza is connected to the rest of the psalm, as the stanza takes up and expands upon concepts and terms from stanzas 1–2.<sup>36</sup> This interconnectedness will show that the psalm is best understood as a unified composition. The noted correspondence between the number of verses and the letters of the alphabet may also indicate the coherent work of a single poet.

In any case, setting a “basic psalm” up against a “redactional reinterpretation”, as Hossfeld does, is quite unhelpful for understanding the psalm as a piece of literature. Regardless of how the psalm may have once looked, I will treat it as a unified whole.

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<sup>35</sup> See sections 5.2.1 and 5.3.1.

<sup>36</sup> See section 5.1.



## 2.3 FORM/GENRE

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The psalm's genre has been variously identified. Allen names three main contestants:<sup>37</sup>

(1) individual thanksgiving marked by hymnic features. This seems to be the majority position, here represented by Anderson<sup>38</sup> and Kraus<sup>39</sup> (though they use different terminology).

(2) individual hymn (Gunkel, Crüsemann).

(3) congregational hymn (Eaton<sup>40</sup>).

These disagreements are understandable, as the psalm shows traits from both the individual song of thanksgiving and the hymn. It also combines elements of the individual and the communal, as we have seen: Each of the three stanzas has its distinct perspective; individual, communal, and universal.

The call to bless the Lord in 103:1b–2 functions as a summons to praise.<sup>41</sup> The plural imperative of בָּרַךְ piel sometimes appears as the introy of a hymn.<sup>42</sup> In the opening of the psalm, the imperatives of בָּרַךְ are in the singular, but they return in the plural in 103:20–22.

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<sup>37</sup> This section is based on Allen, 2002, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Anderson (1972, 712) calls it an "individual thanksgiving in the form of a hymn".

<sup>39</sup> Kraus (1993, 290) calls it a "a hymn of thanksgiving".

<sup>40</sup> Eaton, 2003, 358.

<sup>41</sup> Gerstenberger, 2001, 216.

<sup>42</sup> Keller/Wehmeier, "בָּרַךְ", TLOT 1:282. Blessing the Lord is in this context a call to praise or give thanks to the Lord (ibid., 1:272). It does not mean that humans can in some way intensify God's power. Cf. the discussion sparked by Hans Kvalbein after the release of the new Norwegian Bible translation, B2011. He feared that by translating "בָּרַךְ" with "velsigne", "bless", one would encroach on God's position as source of all blessing ([http://www.dagen.no/Innenriks/Kan\\_vi\\_mennesker\\_velsigne\\_Gud-857](http://www.dagen.no/Innenriks/Kan_vi_mennesker_velsigne_Gud-857)).

The so-called hymnic participles of 103:3–5 are also typical of hymns. However, the same verses simultaneously point toward an individual thanksgiving, as they describe the Lord’s “acts of rescue on behalf of the petitioner in distress”.<sup>43</sup>

Also in favor of the (communal) hymn is the praise of the Lord’s character beginning in 103:6, and the 1.pl. pronominal suffixes of 103:10, 12, 14.<sup>44</sup> There is thus a strong communal aspect to the psalm, that should not be underrated. However, the personal character of the psalm should not be downplayed to the degree that Eaton does. According to him, the individual form of the beginning is merely a variation on the regular calls to praise.<sup>45</sup>

Allen claims that “[t]he various form-critical elements used in the different parts of the psalm are not difficult to recognize, but identifying which one is determinative for the role of the entire psalm is a matter of dispute.”<sup>46</sup> However, perhaps it is not necessary to decide precisely which genre is determinative. In modern studies of psalms, says Bellinger, “decisions about literary types in the Psalms are held more tentatively. The lines between categories are dotted rather than solid lines, and more than one answer to the question of genre is possible.”<sup>47</sup> I think that in this case we should not constrain the psalm to one category, but observe the how the poet uses elements from both the thanksgiving and hymn to enrich his message, and how he includes both individual and communal elements. The combination of different perspectives and form elements is not a flaw, nor a puzzle to be solved. Rather, it contributes to the richness of the psalm.

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<sup>43</sup> Hossfeld/Zenger, 2011, 31.

<sup>44</sup> Allen, 2002, 27.

<sup>45</sup> Eaton, 2003, 358.

<sup>46</sup> Allen, 2002, 27.

<sup>47</sup> Bellinger, 2014, 322.

By combining these perspectives and genres, the poet blends the individual's experience of healing and forgiveness into the community's experience of salvation in its history. Thus, the two experiences interact with each other, each complementing the other. The Lord of Israel's historic past is thus drawn near in an individual account of how the poet was forgiven and healed. The individual account is in turn expanded and enriched by drawing on familiar words from the salvation history of Israel, about the **דָּוָה** of the Lord. At the end of the psalm, the individual and communal perspectives are further expanded by the inclusion of the universal audience who are now summoned to praise (103:20–22).

## 2.4 DATING

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While some commentators, e.g. Dahood<sup>48</sup>, argue for an early dating of Ps 103, most scholars contend for a post-exilic dating, e.g. Kraus<sup>49</sup> and Allen<sup>50</sup>. The arguments for a late date are compelling: the Aramaisms found in the language (e.g. the unusual **כִּי**-suffix of 103:3–5, and **זָכוֹר** of 103:14<sup>51</sup>), as well as the affiliations with the vocabulary and theology of Deutero-Isaiah point to a late dating.<sup>52</sup> As we will see in chapter 4, the psalmist alludes to Ex 34:6–7 in its present literary context. It is thus safe to assume, at least, that Ps 103 is later than Ex 34. With the majority of scholars, I assume a post-exilic dating for this psalm.

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<sup>48</sup> Dahood, 1970, 24.

<sup>49</sup> Kraus, 1993, 290.

<sup>50</sup> Allen, 2002, 28.

<sup>51</sup> Joüon/Muraoka, 1991, §50e.

<sup>52</sup> See section 5.2.1

## 2.5 SUMMARY

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In this chapter, I have discussed the psalm's structure, unity, genre, and dating. I found that Ps 103 is a late psalm, which should be read as a coherent literary unit. I divided the psalm into three stanzas, each of these containing either two or three strophes. Each of the stanzas also has a specific perspective: individual, communal, and universal. I found that the psalm includes form elements of both the individual thanksgiving and the hymn, as well as incorporating individual and communal elements. I argued that it is not necessary to determine which of these genres are decisive for the psalm as a whole, but that the combination of different form elements contributes to the richness of the psalm.

## CHAPTER 3: STANZA 1 – FORGET NOT HIS BENEFITS

In this chapter, I will discuss the forgiveness motif as it comes to expression in the first stanza, 103:1–5. The main part of this chapter will focus on strophe 2 (103:3–5), as it contains the first clear-cut mention of forgiveness in Ps 103. However, strophe 1 (103:1–2) contains some hints anticipating the forgiveness motif. We will therefore have a short look at this strophe before moving on to our main subject in strophe 2.

Strophe 2 contains a list of connected, while diverse, benefits causing the psalmist to bless the Lord. I will start my discussion by looking at the explicit mention of forgiveness in 103:3a. The parallel statement in 103:3b concerns healing, which I will examine next. I will also take a short look at other psalms showing a relationship between forgiveness and healing. I will discuss the other aspects of the psalmist’s salvation experience in turn. However, I will focus especially upon 103:4b, where the psalmist is crowned with steadfast love and compassion, which are keywords in the psalm. At the end of the chapter, I will discuss how much in this strophe can be related to the forgiveness motif, before summarizing.

### 3.1 STROPHE 1: FORGET NOT HIS BENEFITS (103:1–2)

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Ps 103 opens with a double imperative to the psalmist’s self to bless the Lord (and his holy name). While the background for this call is not revealed until the next strophe, we receive a hint in 103:2b. This verse consists of an exhortation (אל + jussive) not to forget “all his benefits” (כָּל-גְּמוּלוֹיָיו). The other occurrences of the word גְּמוּל indicate either “dealing” or “recompense”. According to BDB, it is only here and in 2 Chron 32:25 that

this word should be translated “benefits”.<sup>53</sup> Boda points out that “benefits” is connected to the healing work of the Lord also in 2 Chron.<sup>54</sup> There Hezekiah fails to respond according to the benefit done to him, when the Lord heals him from a mortal illness.

In Ps 103, גָּמוּל can also be connected to forgiveness as the same root (גַּמַּל) returns as a verb in 103:10. The subject here is forgiveness: God does not reward “our” sins as deserved. And while this is a rather tenuous link to forgiveness, Ps 103 invites seeking such connections by its extensive use of repetitions and wordplay. By the use of גָּמוּל in 103:2 the forgiveness motif is anticipated already in the first strophe, and this term may be said to belong to the associational cluster of the motif.

### 3.2 STROPHE 2: REASONS FOR BLESSING (103:3–5)

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In strophe 2 we are presented with the “benefits” that cause the psalmist to bless the Lord. This section is constructed of so-called hymnic participles, all describing the Lord for a number of connected, though rather diverse, benefits. We will look at each of them in turn.

#### 3.2.1 THE ONE WHO FORGIVES ALL YOUR INIQUITY (103:3A)

103:3a heads the section of participles by claiming the Lord is הַסֵּלֶחַ לְכָל-עֲוֹנוֹתָי, “[the one] who forgives all your iniquity”. The verse paints a comprehensive view of God’s

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<sup>53</sup> BDB, “גָּמוּל”, 168.

<sup>54</sup> Boda, 2009, 435.

forgiveness, claiming God forgives “all your iniquities” (כָּל-עֲוֹנוֹתַי). In this context, the term עֲוֹן probably comprehends the totality of all transgressions.<sup>55</sup>

103:3a describes God with a definite participle of the verb סָלַח, the basic term for forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>56</sup> This term is not used to indicate forgiveness among humans – the one who grants סָלַח is always the Lord.<sup>57</sup> According to Stamm, it appears “much less often than appropriate for the significance of the message of forgiveness in the OT”.<sup>58</sup> This may be illustrated by the fact that one can only find four instances of the root סָלַח in the Psalms, including Ps 103:3.<sup>59</sup> The verb is found in Ps 25:11, the adjective of habit סָלִיחַ, “ready to forgive,” is found in Ps 86:5, and the abstract substantive, סְלִיחָה, “forgiveness,” is found in Ps 130:4. All three of these psalms can be categorized as laments (though Ps 130 is sometimes categorized as an individual thanksgiving<sup>60</sup>).

According to Hausmann, Ps 86:5; 103:3; and 130:4 focus on forgiveness as a characteristic feature of the Lord.<sup>61</sup> In Ps 86:5, the poet reminds the Lord that he is good and ready to forgive (טוֹב וְסָלִיחַ). The verbal adjective implies that being ready to forgive is a divine attribute, not only a mode of action.<sup>62</sup> In Ps 130, psalmist recognizes that if

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<sup>55</sup> Knierim, “עֲוֹן”, in TLOT 2:864.

<sup>56</sup> Kselman, 1992, 2:831.

<sup>57</sup> Hausmann, “סָלַח”, in TDOT 10:259-260. Though this is merely implied where niph'al is used.

<sup>58</sup> Stamm, “סָלַח”, in TLOT 2:798. The verb סָלַח only appears 46 times. The noun appears three times and the adjective once.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, 2:798-800.

<sup>60</sup> Allen, 2002, 252-253. However, it is reckoned among the seven “penitential psalms” (Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) (*ibid.*, 255).

<sup>61</sup> Hausmann, “סָלַח”, in TDOT 10:262. Only Ps 25:11 actually pleads for forgiveness.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*

God kept a full record of human’s sins, no one would stand (130:3). Yet he “derives comfort from the known character of Yahweh as a God who forgives (cf. Ps 86:15): this divine quality transcends human sinfulness.”<sup>63</sup> 130:4 insists that “But with you is forgiveness (כִּי־עִמָּךְ הַסְּלִיחָה), so that you may be feared”.

We saw above that Hausmann includes Ps 103:3 among the passages presenting forgiveness as a characteristic feature of the Lord. While 103:3–5 may be read as a thanksgiving for a certain event, the section simultaneously transcends those particular circumstances. The section is dominated by participles. Participles share something of the nature of adjectives, and represent actions as durative in aspect.<sup>64</sup> The individual thanksgiving of 103:3–5 is also blended with the community’s experience in the second stanza, where willingness to forgive is presented as an important characteristic of the Lord.

### 3.2.2 FORGIVENESS AND HEALING (103:3B)

In 103:3b the Lord is described as לְכֹל־תַּחֲלֵאֲיָכִי, “[the one] who heals all your diseases”. God is thus described with a definite participle of רפא, “to heal”.<sup>65</sup> The concepts of forgiveness in 103:3a and healing in 103:3b are clearly meant to influence each other, as they stand in an unmistakable parallelism.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Allen, 2002, 256.

<sup>64</sup> Joüon/Muraoka, 1991, §121c.

<sup>65</sup> “Healing in the Old Testament is God’s privilege, as Exod 15:26 testifies; the physician as a recognized healer appears very late, in Sirach 38.” (Hossfeld/Zenger, 2011, 34).

<sup>66</sup> Underlined by the identical grammatical construction: A definite participle + לְכֹל + an indefinite plural noun with 2.f.sg. suffix.



This parallel illustrates the close relationship between forgiveness and healing in the language of the Psalter. A pertinent example of this phenomenon is Ps 41:5b: “heal me (רַפְּאֵה נַפְשִׁי), for I have sinned against you”.<sup>67</sup> Stamm actually includes רַפָּא in his list of “roughly synonymous expressions” to סָלַח, since it “often refers to a comprehensive restoration of the person that includes guilt (e.g., Isa 57:18; Jer 3:22; Hos 7:1; Psa 41:5; 107:20; 147:3; ni. Isa 53:5 [...])”.<sup>68</sup> Other psalms also exhibit a relationship between forgiveness and healing. We will take a short look at some examples of this phenomenon.

### 3.2.2.1 Excursus: Forgiveness and healing in the language of the Psalter

In Ps 107, a hymn,<sup>69</sup> the section 107:17–22 recounts how some of “them” (the redeemed of the Lord from 107:2) were saved from their distress, and healed by the Lord (107:19–20). Forgiveness is not mentioned, but the healing and saving work of the Lord implies that they had been forgiven, because their “sinful ways” and their iniquities are listed as the cause of their affliction (107:17).

In Ps 38, a lament, the psalmist’s manifold bodily afflictions can be traced back to God’s indignation for the psalmist’s sin. “There is no soundness in my flesh, because of your indignation; there is no welfare in my bones, because of my sin” (38:4). The psalmist asks for neither forgiveness nor healing in this psalm, but he does confess his iniquity and sin (38:19). The psalm ends on a prayer that the Lord must not abandon the psalmist, and that he must make haste to help him (38:22–23). It is safe to assume that

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<sup>67</sup> Ps 41 has been categorized as both an individual thanksgiving and an individual lament. (Craigie/Tate, 2004, 319.)

<sup>68</sup> Stamm, “סָלַח” in TLOT 2:798-799.

<sup>69</sup> According to Allen (2002, 84), it has been variously categorized. He places it within two subgenres, calling 107:1–32 an imperatival thanksgiving hymn and 107:33–43 a general hymn that includes wisdom elements.

the help will include healing from the ailments caused by sin. In the start of the psalm, the psalmist also pleads for a reprieve from God's reprove and discipline, caused by God's wrath (38:2). The prayer of 38:2 is very similar to Ps 6:2.<sup>70</sup> In Ps 6, the cry is followed by a cry for healing (רַפְּאֵנִי יְהוָה) in 6:3b. In Ps 6, however, the psalmist does not explicitly ask for forgiveness, nor confess to sinning, which makes it a more ambiguous case.

Ps 32, another penitential psalm, is an interesting example, because the psalmist has obviously suffered due to his unconfessed sins.<sup>71</sup> While he stayed silent, his bones wore away, the Lord's hand lay heavy on him, and his "life juices" withered away (32:3–4). But when he confessed his sins, the Lord forgave him (32:5). It is unclear, however, how concretely these symptoms should be understood: Are they symptoms of actual illness (perhaps psychosomatic symptoms) or mere poetic metaphor?<sup>72</sup> The psalm gives no clear answer.

### 3.2.2.2 Forgiveness, healing, and metaphor

After this brief review of the connection between forgiveness and healing in the language of the Psalter, we now return to Ps 103. We have seen that the connection between forgiveness and healing is not unique to our psalm, though these concepts seldom stand in such clear parallel as they do in Ps 103.<sup>73</sup> We also take with us the insight from Ps 32, that the sickness experienced by the psalmist may be poetic metaphor for suffering due

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<sup>70</sup> Craigie/Tate, 2004, 92. Ps 6 is a lament counted among the penitential psalms (*ibid.*, 91).

<sup>71</sup> Ps 32 carries traits from the individual thanksgiving and the wisdom psalm (*ibid.*, 265).

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, 266–267.

<sup>73</sup> It is also important to note that while these psalms list sickness and sin as reasons for lamenting, all their problems cannot be subsumed under this heading. Several of these psalms also list trouble caused by enemies: Ps 6:8–9, 11; 38:13, 20–21; 41:6–10.

to sin. The psalmist’s praise of the Lord in 103:3–5 may be caused by healing of actual sickness, which is experienced as a series of life-renewing gifts. But the praise for healing etc. may also be a metaphorical expression of the joy of being forgiven.

### 3.2.3 REDEMPTION FROM DEATH (103:4A)

In Ps 103:3, we saw the interaction between forgiveness and healing. In 103:4, we see the concept of healing is extended into “redemption from death”, as God is described as

הַגּוֹאֵל מִשְׁחַת חַיֵּיכִי, “[the one] who redeems your life from the Pit<sup>74</sup>”.

While the concrete meaning of שְׁחַת is “pit”, meaning a trap (often for wild game), שְׁחַת is also a frequent metaphor for the grave or underworld, as a synonym for שְׂאוֹל.<sup>75</sup>

In the language of the Psalter, to be sick was to be already within the sphere of death. “[W]hat for us would be a weak form of life (illness, various kinds of distress) could be spoken of by the Israelites as a form of death.”<sup>76</sup> This close relationship between sickness and death is evident in some of the psalms discussed in the previous section. In Ps 6 the psalmist cries for healing (6:3). In 6:6 he provides a motivation for God to help him: He reminds God that none remember him in death, and asks rhetorically “who praises you in Sheol?”. The enemies of the psalmist in Ps 41 seem to assume that the psalmist will (or should) promptly die (41:6, 9). In Ps 107:18, “they” came all the way to the gates of

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<sup>74</sup> LXX reads ἐκ φθορᾶς, “from corruption” (NETS).

<sup>75</sup> Wächter, “שְׁחַת” in TDOT 14:597; Wächter, “שְׂאוֹל” in TDOT 14:243.

<sup>76</sup> Day, 1990, 131.

death before they called out to the Lord. When he healed them, he saved them from destruction (107:20).<sup>77</sup>

In 103:4, the psalmist refers to the Lord as the redeemer (הַגֹּאֲלֵל). The term גֹּאֵל originated in family law.<sup>78</sup> According to Lev 25:25–28, 47–49, Israelites had the responsibility of redeeming (גָּאֵל) one's relatives, in the event that they were forced to sell property or themselves to a stranger or sojourner. In the definition of Koch, גֹּאֵל signifies “to redeem that which belongs to the family from outside jurisdiction”.<sup>79</sup> The term thus has a salvific character, suggesting the reestablishment of a totality presently lost. However, according to Stamm (following Jepsen), in Ps 103:4 the meaning is not so much reconstitution of a previous status as it is liberation from an opposing power (fatal illness) (shown by the use of the preposition מִן).<sup>80</sup>

In any case, the use of a term from family law, gives an impression that the Lord is a near relation of the psalmist – an impression strengthened in 103:13 where the Lord's compassion is likened to a father's. “As employed of God, therefore, the term had warm personal overtones.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Or “from the Pit”: BHS suggests reading מִשְׁחַת הַיָּתֵם for מִשְׁחַת הַיָּתֵם, with a reference to 103:4.

<sup>78</sup> Stamm, “גֹּאֵל” in TLOT 1:289-291.

<sup>79</sup> Koch, cited from Stamm, “גֹּאֵל” in TLOT 1:291.

<sup>80</sup> Stamm, “גֹּאֵל” in TLOT 1:295.

<sup>81</sup> Day, 1990, 127.

3.2.4 CROWNING WITH STEADFAST LOVE AND COMPASSION (103:4B)

In 103:4b, the Lord is described as **הַמְעִטֵּרְכִי חֶסֶד וְרַחֲמִים**, “[the one] who crowns you with steadfast love and compassion”. Crowning (**עטר**, piel) is an action associated with royalty. In Ps 21:4, the Lord places a crown (**עֲטָרָה**) of gold on the king’s head. In Ps 8:5, humankind (**בְּן־אָדָם / אָנוּשׁ**) is crowned with glory and dignity.<sup>82</sup>

In 103:4, the psalmist is crowned with **חֶסֶד וְרַחֲמִים**, steadfast love and compassion, two key concepts in Ps 103. Both terms occur four times in the psalm, (**חֶסֶד** in 103:4, 8, 11, 17 and variants of the root **רחם** occur in 103:4 [noun], 8 [adjective], 13 [verb, piel, x2]). The terms are thus woven into the fabric of the psalm. The terms are related also in 103:8 and 11–13. In 103:8 they appear on either end of the grace formula, while in 103:11–13 the terms take part in a series of similes, concerning **חֶסֶד**, forgiveness, and **רחם**. As we shall see, the combination of these images contributes to linking the concepts closely together.<sup>83</sup>

While these terms are related in Ps 103, however, they are not synonymous. I will take a look at each in turn.

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<sup>82</sup> **אָנוּשׁ**, humankind, is here considered from quite a different angle than in Ps 103:15–16, where the humankind’s impermanence is emphasized.

<sup>83</sup> See section 4.3.1.3.

## 3.2.4.1 דִּקְוָה

דִּקְוָה, apart from being a key term in Ps 103, is also a key term in the Psalter as a whole.

Out of 245 occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, 127 are in the psalms.<sup>84</sup> The term has a wide range of meanings, but for the sake of simplicity I have chosen to translate with a single term, “steadfast love”, where translation is needed. This term conveys the enduring character of דִּקְוָה, which is lost when translating merely “kindness”, “grace” or “goodness”.<sup>85</sup> This enduring character is often expressed by pairing דִּקְוָה with אֱמֶת or אֱמוּנָה, which Clark has found to be essential components of דִּקְוָה.<sup>86</sup>

In most instances, however, I will use דִּקְוָה without translation, to heed Sakenfeld’s warning against the difficulty and danger of selecting even a single phrase for conveying the concept: It is a highly flexible term, remarkably rich in theological meaning.<sup>87</sup> She summarizes the term’s meaning as “deliverance or protection as a responsible keeping of faith with another with whom one is in a relationship.”<sup>88</sup> Even this, she cautions, does not cover its full spectrum of meaning, particularly as it omits forgiveness as an aspect of דִּקְוָה in theological usage.

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<sup>84</sup> Zobel, “דִּקְוָה”, in TDOT 5:45.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Zobel, “דִּקְוָה” in TDOT 5:51.

<sup>86</sup> Clark, 1993, 259. In our psalm, this enduring character of דִּקְוָה is expressed in 103:17: **וְחֶסֶד יְהוָה | מֵעוֹלָם וְעַד-עוֹלָם**.

<sup>87</sup> Sakenfeld, 1978, 233, 238.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, 233.

Precisely this aspect of  $\text{רָחַם}$ , i.e. forgiveness, is of great importance for Ps 103, especially in 103:8. Here in 103:4 this meaning is not particularly pronounced.<sup>89</sup> However, the crown of  $\text{רָחַם}$  and compassion that the psalmist receives in 103:4 is part of a section enumerating God's "benefits". These benefits all stand under the headline of forgiveness which inaugurates the list (see below).

There is another aspect of Sakenfeld's definition that is important for understanding  $\text{רָחַם}$  in Ps 103: the relational aspect. While there is some discussion about how closely the term  $\text{רָחַם}$  can be connected to the covenant, most scholars agree that the term  $\text{רָחַם}$  belongs in the realm of committed relationships.<sup>90</sup> God's deep commitment to his covenant people was expressed with this term.<sup>91</sup>

This relational aspect is not particularly clear here in 103:4, but takes on greater importance in the other occurrences of  $\text{רָחַם}$  in the psalm. 103:8 echoes the grace formula from Ex 34:6–7. As we shall see, this formula expresses God's commitment toward his people, which is so great that he is willing to even overlook their breach of their covenant responsibilities.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Sakenfeld (1978, 215) includes this verse among "uninstructive passages", where  $\text{רָחַם}$  is used without "any clue as to the content of the word", and can carry a variety of nuances.

<sup>90</sup> Glueck sees  $\text{רָחַם}$  as the real essence of covenant (Routledge, 1995, 180). His view that there is a legal obligation contained in the term has been rightly challenged by Stoebe. However, Stoebe goes too far in the other direction, seeing  $\text{רָחַם}$  as "goodness or kindness which goes beyond what one may expect or deserve, and which has its sole basis in a willing generosity towards others" (Stoebe, cited from Routledge, 1995, 180). This disregards the relational aspect of term. See discussion in Routledge, 1995, 179-196.

<sup>91</sup> Sakenfeld, 1978, 238.

<sup>92</sup> See section 4.1.2.

While the commitment between God and his people could withstand breach, it was not a one-sided commitment. The theological use of **דָּקָה** lacks the element of rigid mutuality that can be seen in secular use of the term.<sup>93</sup> Still, the people of God were expected to respond to him in obedience and devotion.<sup>94</sup> We can see this in our psalm in 103:11, 17–18. In 103:11, God’s **דָּקָה** is for “those who fear him”, i.e. those who belong to the community that worship the Lord. In 103:17–18, clearer demands are placed upon this group, as “those who fear him” stand in parallel with “those who keep his covenant”.<sup>95</sup>

In 103:4, **דָּקָה** is connected with **רַחֲמִים**. There is some disagreement in the scholarly literature whether the phrase **דָּקָה וְרַחֲמִים** should be read as two distinct concepts, or whether they together express a single concept. Zobel, for instance, contends that the phrase expresses “merciful kindness”.<sup>96</sup> According to Clark, 103:4 belongs in a group of texts that accent the connection between the terms, and where it is difficult to distinguish between the terms’ semantic area.<sup>97</sup> In other texts, he finds distinctions between the terms: **רַחֲמִים** is sometimes a contributing factor to the Lord’s expression of **דָּקָה**, and while commitment between participants is important with **דָּקָה**, it is not so with **רַחֲמִים**.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Zobel, “דָּקָה”, in TDOT 5:63.

<sup>94</sup> Routledge, 1995, 196.

<sup>95</sup> See 4.4.2.

<sup>96</sup> Zobel, “דָּקָה”, in TDOT 5:53.

<sup>97</sup> Clark, 1993, 143. The texts are Jer 16:5; Hos 2:21; Pss 25:5; 103:4.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, 263.



## 3.2.4.2 רחם

Simian-Yofre claims the root רחם, “above all conveys the essence of mercy”, and he describes it as a fundamental element of the nature of God.<sup>99</sup> In Ps 103, this is especially evident in 103:8, where the adjectival form רחום opens the grace formula. This formula, as we shall see, is a central formulation of the nature of God.<sup>100</sup> In 103:13, the poet poignantly expresses God’s compassion by comparing it to the compassion of a father for his children.

## 3.2.5 RENEWAL OF LIFE AND GOOD GIFTS (103:5)

103:5 concludes the second strophe by describing the good gifts and renewal of life that the psalmist experiences as the result of the healing: “[the Lord is the one] who satisfies your existence<sup>101</sup> with good. Your youth renews itself like an eagle.”

The psalmist’s existence is thus satisfied with הַטוֹב, “the good”. According to Höver-Johag, טוב in the sense of “the good” par excellence can have two meanings, connected in the sense of cause and effect.<sup>102</sup> First, it can refer to the Lord himself as “the good one”. Accordingly, he interprets the טוב of Ex 33:19 as a theophanic term.<sup>103</sup> Second,

<sup>99</sup> Simian-Yofre/Dahmen, “רחם”, in TDOT 13:452.

<sup>100</sup> See section 4.1.2.

<sup>101</sup> The Hebrew, עֲדִינָי (“your ornaments”), makes little sense. BHS lists three emendations: עֲרִינָי (cf. LXX τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν σου, “your desire”), עֲדִכִּי, and עֲדִיכִּי. According to Allen, the LXX ἐπιθυμίαν, ‘desire,’ is usually translated from תאוה in the Psalter, and is probably only a guess here. It should therefore not be translated back to עֲרִינָי. “The standard slight emendation עֲדִכִּי ‘your existence,’ is a simple one and fits the context well in both sense (cf. Pss 104:33; 146:2) and form.” (Allen, 2002, 26.)

<sup>102</sup> Höver-Johag, “טוב”, TDOT 5:314-315.

<sup>103</sup> Ex 33:19 contains the initial answer to Moses’ wish to see God’s glory: “And he said: I will make all my goodness [כָּל־טוֹבֵי] pass before you, and I will call out the name, ‘The Lord’ [...]”.

God’s goodness is experienced by humans in the form of good things. Allen lists the טוב of Ps 103:5 as a possible reference to Ex 33:19.<sup>104</sup> And while this is possible (Ps 103 has several references to Exodus 33–34)<sup>105</sup>, it is much more likely that Ps 103:5 is related to the second meaning Höver-Johag lists: The psalmist experiences God’s goodness in the form of good things.

The section concludes with another life-renewing aspect of the salvation experience of the psalmist: renewal of youth like the eagle. In Is 40:31, the eagle is a symbol of the renewed (חִלְהִי hiph.) strength awarded those who wait for the Lord. “The eagle easily and freely soars aloft, he is a symbol of renewed, young strength.”<sup>106</sup> Reading the reference to the eagle in light of Is 40 makes much more sense than Dahood’s suggestion (following Gunkel) that the eagle is actually a reference to the story of the phoenix.<sup>107</sup> We will later see that Ps 103 shares thoughts and vocabulary with Deutero-Isaiah, including a very similar passage to Is 40:6–8 (Ps 103:15–16).<sup>108</sup>

### 3.2.6 INTERCONNECTED CONCEPTS

We have now seen the “benefits” for which the psalmist blesses the Lord. Heading this list is the first explicit mention of forgiveness in Ps 103 – and the only clear reference to forgiveness in this strophe. Can we then assume that rest of the strophe is irrelevant to our discussion of forgiveness?

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<sup>104</sup> Allen, 2002, 31.

<sup>105</sup> See section 4.1.2.2.1.

<sup>106</sup> Kraus, 1993, 291.

<sup>107</sup> Dahood, 1970, 27. He bases this on a reference to Job 29:18, and finds that this fits best with his rather peculiar interpretation of 103:4–5 “as a description of immortality”. (ibid.)

<sup>108</sup> See section 5.2.1.

The way the benefits are interconnected prevents such a conclusion. The healing of 103:3b is clearly meant to stand in parallel with the forgiveness motif of 103:3a. These concepts are thus consciously tied together by the poet. The healing in 103:3b is also closely connected to redemption from death in 103:4a. Thus, the forgiveness motif interacts also with redemption from death by extension. The life-giving gifts of 103:4b–5 further flows from the redemption from death in 103:4a.

We can here see several diverse concepts being woven together into an interconnected whole. This section can therefore be read as a tapestry of the wellness caused by the Lord’s “benefits”. Though the threads by no means are the same, they can no longer be easily separated, comprising together a coherent whole.

The forgiveness motif’s placement at the head of this list renders it foundational for the rest of the list of benefits. This claim is supported by Mays:

The list of the Lord’s dealing in verses 3–5 is composed of items which are part of one process. They all stand under the rubric ‘forgive’ in the first clause and flow from that. In sequence, they outline the course of a forgiveness that heals, redeems life from threatening death, so adorning life with steadfast love and mercy, and making it possible to experience life as good – with the result that life is renewed.<sup>109</sup>

These concepts, therefore, are included into the associational cluster of the forgiveness motif in Ps 103, and are vital for understanding how forgiveness is presented in Ps 103.

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<sup>109</sup> Mays, 1990, 29.

The psalmist experiences forgiveness as a healing and life-renewing experience. The Old Testament, Stamm claims, “does not know of forgiveness in the modern sense of a spiritual phenomenon; rather, it knows it only as a concrete, comprehensive process that also effects the individual or society externally”.<sup>110</sup> Here we see the concrete, tangible effects of forgiveness, as they are experienced by the psalmist of Ps 103. As Hausmann phrases it: “forgiveness expresses itself in a concrete event of change toward a positive future.”<sup>111</sup> However, we keep in mind the caution from Ps 32: these concrete effects may also be expressions of poetic metaphor.

### 3.3 SUMMARY

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In this chapter, I have examined how the forgiveness motif is presented in the first stanza. While the forgiveness motif was anticipated in the term **גְּמוּלָה**, benefits, in 103:2, it was in the second strophe that forgiveness truly came to the fore.

In the second strophe, we discussed the explicit reference to forgiveness in 103:3a. In the rest of the strophe, we saw a series of life-renewing and -affirming gifts: healing, redemption from death, crowning with steadfast love and compassion, satisfaction with good, and renewal of life. We saw how these gifts are all interconnected, all flowing from the forgiveness at the head of the list. We thus concluded that all these concepts partake in the associational cluster of forgiveness in Ps 103.

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<sup>110</sup> Stamm, “סְלַח” in TLOT 2:799.

<sup>111</sup> Hausmann, “סְלַח”, in TDOT 10:262.

In this strophe, therefore, we have seen how forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible can be seen as more than a spiritual phenomenon. We have seen how the psalmist experienced forgiveness with its tangible results: healing, rescue from death, good gifts, and renewal of life. However, we have also considered if these gifts are better viewed as metaphorical expressions of the joy of being forgiven.

## CHAPTER 4: STANZA 2 – COMPASSIONATE AND GRACIOUS IS THE LORD

In this chapter, I will discuss how the forgiveness motif is presented in the second stanza (103:6–14), which consists of three strophes, 103:6–8, 9–10, and 11–14. Forgiveness is of major importance in this stanza, and the motif is present in all three strophes. A focal point is the grace formula in 103:8, depicting the Lord as compassionate and abounding in  $\text{רַחֲמֵי}$ . The two following strophes may be read as meditation upon this grace formula. 103:9–10 emphasizes what the Lord refrains from doing, he refrains from repaying “us” in accordance with our sins. 103:11–14 extol the greatness of the Lord’s  $\text{רַחֲמֵי}$ , forgiveness, and compassion, thus developing key concept of the formula.

In this stanza, the individual thanksgiving of 103:1–5 is expanded to incorporate the praise of a larger community. The psalmist here blends his experience with the experience of Israel, and speaks on behalf of a group alternately identified as “we” and “those who fear him”. At the end of the chapter, I will discuss who these designations refer to.

### 4.1 STROPHE 3: THE GRACE FORMULA IN CONTEXT (103:6–8)

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In the third strophe (103:6–8), the primary locus for the forgiveness motif is the grace formula in verse 8. For this thesis, therefore, 103:6–7 are primarily of interest as they provide the context for this formula. We shall, however, also note how the psalmist here widens the horizon of his praise, moving from the personal to concerns of his community.

## 4.1.1 103:6–7: THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL

In these verses, the psalmist draws in the history of the community of Israel and widens the horizon from viewing the Lord as the helper of the psalmist, to the helper of all oppressed: 103:6 portrays the Lord as the one doing (עשה, part.) righteousness (צְדָקוֹת) and justice (מִשְׁפָּטִים) to all oppressed (עֲשׂוּקִים).

צְדָקָה refers above all to the Lord's "positive and beneficent intervention".<sup>112</sup> God thus upholds the principal right (מִשְׁפָּטִים)<sup>113</sup> and intervenes on the behalf of the oppressed. According to the Hebrew Bible, the underprivileged are entitled to God's specific care.<sup>114</sup> Cf. the similar statement in Ps 146:7, which heads a section of the Lord's help to the afflicted (the hungry, the prisoners, the blind, etc.). Gerstenberger here identifies the righteous as being the underprivileged (146:8c).<sup>115</sup> The label עֲשׂוּקִים/עֲשׂוּק can also be applied to the entire nation (cf. Deut 28:33; Jer 50:33; Hos 5:11).<sup>116</sup> This may also be the case in our psalm, as Ps 103:7 identifies the Israelites as witnesses to the Lord's deeds.

103:7 also asserts that the Lord has made known "his ways" to Moses.<sup>117</sup> With this allusion to Ex 33:13, the verse functions almost as an introduction to the grace formula in 103:8, which echoes Ex 34:6 (see below).<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ringgren/Johnson, "צְדָק", in TDOT 12:253.

<sup>113</sup> Johnson, "מִשְׁפָּט", in TDOT 9:93-94.

<sup>114</sup> Gerstenberger, "עֲשׂוּק", TDOT 11:416. The same is expected of the king, in imitation of the Lord (Ps 72). The king should crush the oppressor (עֲשֶׂק part) (72:4).

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Hossfeld/Zenger, 2011, 35. Hossfeld includes Ps 146:7 in this list.

<sup>117</sup> The focus on Moses is a feature peculiar to Book IV of the Psalms, which has famously been dubbed "a Moses book" by Marvin Tate (2000, 530). Only one of the eight mentions of Moses in the Psalter (Pss 77:21; 90:1; 99:6; 103:7; 105:26; 106:16, 23, 32) is made outside of Book IV (Ps 77:21).

<sup>118</sup> Hossfeld/Zenger, 2011, 35.

#### 4.1.2 THE GRACE FORMULA (103:8)

103:8 reads: רַחֻם וְחַנּוּן יְהוָה אֲרֵךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חַסֵּד. “Compassionate and gracious is the Lord, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” The grace formula<sup>119</sup> is often called a liturgical formula, and appears repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible in different variations: Ex 34:6; Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Neh 9:17.<sup>120</sup> The verse reads as a series of predicatives to the subject, יְהוָה, and is a central articulation of the Lord’s nature. It is, as Mays phrases it, “one of the most important theological statements in the Bible”.<sup>121</sup>

The formula’s prominence is due not only to its repeated use, but also to its placement at a pivotal position in the narrative of Israel’s history. Reading the Hebrew Bible in canonical order, we first encounter this formula in God’s self-revelation to Moses in Ex 34:5–7. The revelation is placed after the great sin of the golden calf (Ex 32), and immediately preceding the renewal of the covenant (Ex 34:10ff). In this narrative, the formula thus speaks to how God responds to the betrayal of his people: “by reinforcing his steadfast love and faithfulness.”<sup>122</sup>

This important context to the formula also shimmers in the background when we read it in Ps 103. Before we discuss this, however, we will examine the wording of the formula more closely.

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<sup>119</sup> While the formula has been given different names (e.g. mercy formula, compassion formula, attribute formula), I have borrowed the term “grace formula” from Spieckermann (2014, 264).

<sup>120</sup> Zobel, “חַסֵּד” in TDOT 5:57. Durham (1987, 454) also includes Num 14:18 and Nah 1:3 in his list of passages in which the formula occurs. Feldmeier/Spieckermann, (2011, 135 [n.32]) lists passages with possible allusions to the formula.

<sup>121</sup> Mays, 1994a, 327.

<sup>122</sup> Spieckermann, 2014, 265.



#### 4.1.2.1 The wording of the formula

The adjectives which open the formula, רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן, often appear together: רַחוּם appears 13 times in the Hebrew Bible, 11 times in connection with חַנּוּן.<sup>123</sup> Also in the cases where these adjectives appear without the other elements of the grace formula they witness to the Lord’s essential nature as compassionate and gracious. רַחוּם as we have seen conveys the “essence of mercy”.<sup>124</sup> The attribute “slow to anger”<sup>125</sup>, אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם, “means the ‘patience’ that does not react impulsively but waits”.<sup>126</sup>

According to Sakenfeld, the placement of רַב־חֶסֶד “alongside of ‘slow to anger’ and parallel to ‘merciful and gracious’ suggests a meaning such as ‘so great in faithfulness that he is willing even to forgive breach of relationship’”.<sup>127</sup>

In 103:4, we saw that חֶסֶד may carry a variety of nuances.<sup>128</sup> Here, we see a meaning of חֶסֶד more narrowly focused on forgiveness. We also saw in our treatment of חֶסֶד in 103:4, that the term belongs within the sphere of relationship. We see here the strength of God’s commitment to his people: God’s חֶסֶד endures even when his people fails that relationship.

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<sup>123</sup> Simian-Yofre/Dahmen, “רַחוּם”, in TDOT 13:448. In a majority of these cases they appear as a part of the grace formula. חַנּוּן is used alone in a single text, Ex 22:26 (Freedman/Lundbom/Fabry, “חַנּוּן”, in TDOT 5:30).

<sup>124</sup> See section 3.2.4.2.

<sup>125</sup> Literally “long (with respect to) anger”. (Anderson, 1972, 714).

<sup>126</sup> Stoebe, “חֶסֶד”, in TLOT 2:458.

<sup>127</sup> Sakenfeld, 1978, 119. This quote comes from a section discussing Ex 34:6.

<sup>128</sup> See section 3.2.4.1.

As we have seen, **דָּוָה** and **רַחֵם** are key terms in Ps 103, woven into its fabric.<sup>129</sup> Their importance in the psalm may indeed flow from their use here in the grace formula. Mays, for instance, reads the entire psalm as a “poem written in hymnic style on the text of Exodus 34:6–7 by a member of a circle who believed that the Lord has shown in all his dealings with Israel how his loving kindness prevails over their sin”.<sup>130</sup>

The rest of the psalm does indeed take up both words and concerns of the formula in 103:8. We have already seen key words and concepts from the formula in the first stanza (forgiveness in 103:3, and **דָּוָה** and **רַחֵם** in 103:4). In the second and third stanzas, we see the greatness of the Lord’s **דָּוָה** is extolled in 103:11, and his compassion in 103:13. The endurance of God’s **דָּוָה** is proclaimed in 103:17. The restraint of God’s anger is articulated most clearly in 103:9–10.

The influence of the grace formula is most discernible in the remainder of stanza 2, however, which can be read as an exposition on the formula. His steadfast love, compassion and grace is shown by what he refrains from doing (103:9–10), and is described with similes demonstrating the greatness of his **דָּוָה** (103:11), his willingness to forgive (103:12) and his compassion (103:13).

Before we see how the formula is treated in the rest of the stanza, however, we will look at how the Exodus context of the formula influences our interpretation of Ps 103.

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<sup>129</sup> See section 3.2.4.

<sup>130</sup> Mays, 1990, 28.

#### 4.1.2.2 The formula in Exodus

##### 4.1.2.2.1 *Ps 103:8 echoing Ex 34:6*

Can we be sure, though, that the Exodus context of the formula is relevant? According to Spieckermann, the formula is older than the post-exilic texts that contain it in its complete form, and he claims it “has been exported from the Psalter into the Torah [...]”.<sup>131</sup> In light of this claim, one might initially assume that the formula as it is found in Ps 103:8 is independent of Ex 34:6.

However, as Ps 103 consciously invokes the Exodus passage, these texts are clearly not independent.<sup>132</sup> The assertion of Ps 103:7, that the Lord has made known his ways to Moses (יִוְדִיעַ דְּרַכָּיו לְמֹשֶׁה), alludes to Ex 33:13, where Moses demands that God make his ways known (הוֹדִיעֵנִי נָא אֶת־דְּרַכֶּךָ).<sup>133</sup> The theophany in Ex 34:5–7 constitutes God’s response to Moses’ two requests (that God would make his ways known in Ex 33:13 and that God would show Moses his glory in Ex 33:18).<sup>134</sup> The “ways” God has made known to Moses (Ps 103:7) thus correspond to the divine attributes enumerated in the grace formula of 103:8.

There are further allusions to the Exodus context in Ps 103, supporting the assumption that the formula is dependent upon its Exodus formulation: The three terms for sin in Ex 34:7 are all included in the psalm (עוֹן and חַטָּא occur in 103:10 [עוֹן also in 103:3], פֶּשַׁע in 103:12). Allen also points to similarities between Ps 103:3 and Ex 34:9, Ps 103:18 and

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<sup>131</sup> Spieckermann, 2014, 264.

<sup>132</sup> Allen, 2002, 31.

<sup>133</sup> Hossfeld/Zenger, 2011, 35.

<sup>134</sup> Sarna, 1991, 216.

Ex 34:10–11. The **כִּוֹן** in Ps 103:5 may also be an allusion to Ex 33:19. We can therefore conclude with Allen: “Whether or not the formula used in v 8 is of cultic origin, here it functions as a literary quotation of Exod 34:6.”<sup>135</sup>

#### *4.1.2.2.2 Sin and forgiveness in Ex 32-34*

The use of these Exodus texts bears relevance to our discussion of forgiveness. By not merely using the formula from Ex 34:6, but also alluding to Ex 33, the psalmist draws our attention to the narrative context in which God’s self-revelation to Moses takes place. Ex 32 tells the story of the golden calf, in which the Israelites commit apostasy by worshipping the calf made for them by their gold rings. Moses’ initial prayer for forgiveness in Ex 32:32 leaves Israel’s situation “quite inconclusive”.<sup>136</sup> While God insists that “whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book” (32:33), he also sends Moses to lead the people to the promised land (32:34).

After God’s self-revelation in Ex 34:5–7, however, Moses asks for forgiveness again (Ex 34:9). He pleads for forgiveness of their iniquity and sin using the same term for forgiveness that we saw in Ps 103:3, **סָלַח** (Ex 34:9). He also asks that the Lord go up to the promised land with the Israelites (even though the Lord had insisted he would not, lest he consume them [Ex 33:3, 5]), and that he will take them as his possession. As an answer to this petition, the Lord announces his intention to cut a covenant with the Israelites (34:10). In the narrative, the formula thus appears to provide a basis for Moses’

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<sup>135</sup> Allen, 2002, 31. As Allen points out, the psalmist meditates on the formula in its current literary context, presupposing a redaction process having taken place (this process is discussed in Childs, 1974, 604-610).

<sup>136</sup> Durham, 1987, 432.

plea for forgiveness, and for the covenant renewal that takes place immediately afterwards.

Further, the story of the great sin of the golden calf forms a crucial backdrop for understanding the potency of God's self-revelation in Ex 34:5–7. Childs stresses that the whole formula does not appear in the first account of the covenant (Ex 19), but is reserved for the story of the restoration of the covenant.

The community which treasured these traditions was not the generation who could confidently say: 'all that Yahweh has spoken we will do' (24.7), but the people who stood beyond the great divide caused by the sin of the golden calf.<sup>137</sup>

As Spieckermann points out, there can no longer be a story of God's love for Israel, without keeping in mind the "fundamental betrayal of love at Mount Sinai."<sup>138</sup> In his interpretation, the theophany in Ex 34 responds to the question of how God can be present for Israel anymore.

Admittedly, Israel's breach of the covenant makes God's love henceforth a wounded love. Wounded by betrayal, it takes the form of mercy and grace, of distance from wrath, and of a willingness to forgive for thousands, i.e., for generations without limitation, insisting at the same time on punishment though restricted to four generations.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Childs, 1974, 612.

<sup>138</sup> Spieckermann, 2014, 264.

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*, 265. The formula's connection to forgiveness can also be seen in many of the other passages in which it occurs. Neh 9:17 prefaces the formula with saying  $\text{וְאַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ סְלִיחוֹת}$  ("but you are a God of forgiveness"). In section 3.2.1, we saw Ps 86:5 describing forgiveness as a characteristic feature of God, using the adjective of habit  $\text{סְלָח}$ . Ps 86:5 goes on to assert that the Lord is abounding in steadfast love ( $\text{וְרַב־חֶסֶד}$ ), which connects it to 86:15, where  $\text{וְרַב־חֶסֶד}$  returns as part of the grace formula. In Joel 2:13 and Jon 4:2, the formula is

4.1.2.2.3 *Differences between Ex 34:6–7 and Ps 103:8*

The clear invocation of the Exodus context also makes the differences between the texts relevant. Where Ex 34:6 has רַב־חַסְדֹּד וְאַמֶּת, Ps 103:8 ends on רַב־חַסְדֹּד.<sup>140</sup> More importantly, the self-revelation of God does not end in Ex 34:6, but continues in Ex 34:7<sup>141</sup>:

keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving (נָשָׂא, part) iniquity and transgression and sin (עֲוֹן וּפְשָׁע וְחַטָּאָה). But he will certainly not leave unpunished (sc. the guilty); visiting the iniquity (פְּקֹדָה | עֲוֹן) of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.

This text, unlike Ps 103:8, explicitly mentions forgiveness, in the form of נָשָׂא. The forgiveness of the Lord also has a comprehensive air, as forgiveness of all the three principal terms for sins (עֲוֹן, פְּשָׁע, חַטָּאָה) are mentioned.<sup>142</sup> However, there is a tension in the verse: while the Lord forgives all these sins, he shall certainly not leave unpunished (sc. the guilty), visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children in three or four generations. This apparent contradiction, writes Simian-Yofre, can be understood if one sees punishment and forgiveness as separate stages:

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extended with וְנָחַם עַל־הָרָעָה (“and relents of the calamity”). In both these texts forgiveness seems implied, while the explicit theme is God's relenting of a previously decided calamity.

<sup>140</sup> There are also some discrepancies in word order. Another difference is that though both texts are in third person speech, the text in Ex 34:6–7 is the Lord's self-revelation, while in Ps 103:8 the psalmist describes God. Spieckermann (2014, 265) uses the fact that the Lord's speech is in the third person as an argument for his claim that the formula did not originate in Exodus, but was first used as a formula to praise the Lord (as it is in Ps 103). For discussion see Durham, 1987, 454.

<sup>141</sup> According to Sakenfeld (1978, 227, cf. 112, 129), Ex 20:5b–6=Deut 5:9b–10 is partially preserved in Ex 34:6–7.

<sup>142</sup> Durham, 1987, 454. “[T]he multiplication of terms is a deliberate attempt at comprehensive statement”. According to Cover, the three most important roots in Hebrew for sin are חָטָא, פָּשַׁע, and עָוָן (Cover, 1992, 6:31-32).

If punishment aims to restore an objective order that has been infringed, it should be treated as reparation in the metaphysical sense. Forgiveness, by contrast, is the restoration of a personal relationship between the offended and the offender of the free initiative of the former.<sup>143</sup>

God's ability to forgive, as it is expressed in Ex 34:6–7, is thus not opposed to the necessity of punishment.

In its context, then, this is witness to God's forgiving nature: The punishment is restricted, while **דָּוָה** is unlimited (“for thousands”, cf. Ex 20:6<sup>144</sup>). In Ps 103, however, no vestige of the punishing God can be found. “It is significant that only the positive side of the whole, bipolar statement is cited; in the context of thanksgiving only that was relevant.”<sup>145</sup>

However, it is possible that the focus on the “positive” part of the formula is not due entirely to the setting of thanksgiving. In my reading, the psalm even goes on to critique the “negative” part of the statement. In contradistinction to Ex 34:7, that stresses that God will not leave unpunished, Ps 103:9 claims God will not always accuse, nor forever keep his anger. In opposition to Ex 34:7's claim that the Lord will visit the **עֲוֹן** of the fathers on the children, Ps 103:10 asserts that the Lord does not do with “us” according to our sin (**אֲשָׁמָה**), nor reward us according to our iniquity (**עֲוֹן**).<sup>146</sup> As we have seen, the

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<sup>143</sup> Simian-Yofre/Dahmen, “**חַרָּם**”, in TDOT 13:449.

<sup>144</sup> Durham, 1987, 287.

<sup>145</sup> Allen, 2002, 31.

<sup>146</sup> Another subtle reinterpretation of Ex 34:6–7 may be happening in Ps 103:3. The psalmist has experienced that the Lord is not visiting iniquity (**עֲוֹן** | **פְּקֹדֵי**), he is the one forgiving all your iniquity (**הַסֵּלַח לְכָל-עֲוֹנוֹתַי**).

rest of this stanza can be read as an exposition on the grace formula, in which the psalmist marvels at the seeming boundlessness of God's forgiveness.

With Ex 32–34 perceptible in the background, the assertions about forgiveness made by the Ps 103 thus stand out even more starkly in comparison, intensifying the psalm's witness about forgiveness.

#### 4.1.2.3 Summary

Ps 103:8 recites the grace formula, a central articulation of the nature of the Lord. As can be seen by the allusions to the context of Ex 34:6, the formula echoes this text, it is not independently appropriated. This fact influences our interpretation of the forgiveness motif in several ways.

First, it means that as we reach the grace formula in Ps 103:8, the poet has already drawn our attention to the narrative context within which that formula occurs, to the story of sin, forgiveness, and new relationship that surrounds the Lord's self-revelation in Ex 34:5–7. In this narrative, God responds to the people's betrayal with the golden calf with an assertion of his compassion, graciousness, and steadfast love, as well as the restraint of his anger. The formula's witness to God's character is strengthened by the Lord's willingness to act on behalf of his people, i.e. to forgive them.

Second, Ps 103 goes even further than Ex 34 in its witness to God's forgiveness. Ps 103 focuses entirely on the "positive" part of the formula in Ex 34:6–7. The psalm also subtly critiques the "negative" part of the formula. In contrast to Ex 34:7, Ps 103:10 claims the Lord will not treat "us" according to our sins. This heightens the psalm's witness to the



forgiving character of the Lord. The psalm then goes on to praise the seeming infiniteness of the Lord's forgiveness, דַּקְדָּקָה, and compassion.

The rest of the stanza may be thus read as an exposition of the grace formula. The two following strophes comment on the formula, focusing first on the negative and then on the positives.

#### 4.2 STROPHE 4: TREATING US BETTER THAN WE DESERVE (103:9–10)

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Strophe 4 consists of merely two verses, 103:9–10, connected by their opening word, לֵא (and לֵא in the B-colons), as well as their common purpose: They convey what the Lord, in his mercy, does *not* do. He does not always accuse (רִיב). Neither does he keep (sc. his wrath) forever (103:9). He does not do (עָשָׂה) with “us” according to our sins (אֲשָׁמָה), nor does he repay (גָּמַל) us according to our iniquities (עֲוֹן) (103:10).

While forgiveness is most explicit in 103:10, 103:9 also appears to convey this motif. רִיב most often involves litigation, in a literal or figurative sense.<sup>147</sup> Perhaps there is a connection here to the prophetic lawsuit. In contrast to such judgment discourse, however, the accused are here let off even though their iniquity is not denied (103:10).

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<sup>147</sup> Ringgren, “רִיב”, in TDOT 13:475.

A very similar statement is made in Is 57:16, uttered by God himself.<sup>148</sup> God knows that if he accused and was angry forever, the spirit and breath of life that God has created would grow faint.

Ps 103:9b says God does not keep (נטר) forever. The “obvious object” – wrath – is missing.<sup>149</sup> Cf. Jer 3:12, לֹא אֶטְזֹר לְעוֹלָם.<sup>150</sup> Ps 103:8 asserted that God is slow to anger. 103:9 goes further: Even when his anger is rightfully awoken, he does not keep it long.

Ps 103:10 continues to extol God’s ability to subvert expectations: God does not treat “us” as our sin and iniquity warrant. As we saw in chapter 3, the word for “repay” in 103:10b (גמל) comes from the same root as “benefits” (גמול) in 103:2, and we included the root in the associational cluster of the forgiveness motif. “So now we see that the ‘payoffs’ of Yahweh are not exacting, but stunningly generous.”<sup>151</sup>

Mentioned in 103:10 are two of the three principal terms for sin: חטא and עון. (The third, פשע, appears in 103:12.) As Ps 103 meditates on Ex 34:6–7, the use of these terms probably reflects their use in Ex 34:7, where all three are comprehended in what the Lord will forgive. While each of these terms have its distinct meaning, Cover claims that in contexts when they appear together they are usually virtual synonyms, simply

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<sup>148</sup> Ps 103:9 has “לֹא אֶטְזֹר לְעוֹלָם יְיָ וְלֹא יִרְיֵב וְלֹא לְגַצַּח יִרְיֵב וְלֹא לְגַצַּח אֶקְצֹף” and Is 57:16 has “כִּי לֹא לְעוֹלָם אָרִיב וְלֹא לְגַצַּח אֶקְצֹף”.

<sup>149</sup> Kraus, 1993, 292.

<sup>150</sup> BDB (“[נטר]”, 643) also lists Jer 3:5 and Nah 1:2 (the latter text describes how God, a jealous and avenging God, *does* keep [sc. his wrath] toward his enemies). The only text listed with wrath as an explicit object is Am 1:11, but this requires reading וַיִּטֶּר for וַיִּטְרֶף (based on Peshitta and Vulgate).

<sup>151</sup> Brueggemann, 1984, 160.

designating “sins”.<sup>152</sup> This is likely how the terms are used in Ex 34:7, where the combination of the terms aimed at comprehensiveness. This is presumably the point in Ps 103:10–12 as well. The combination of the different terms creates a sweeping statement: The Lord is willing to refrain from punishment for all kinds of sin, from both  $\text{וְעַן}$  and  $\text{אֲחַת}$  (103:10). “Our”  $\text{פְּשָׁעֵנוּ}$  is utterly removed from us (103:12).

### 4.3 STROPHE 5: THE VASTNESS OF GOD’S $\text{רַחֲמָיו}$ (103:11–14)

The fifth strophe spans over four verses, 103:11–14, knitted together by their alliteration: All four verses start with the letter  $\text{ב}$ . The poet here continues his exposition of the grace formula. Now the focus is on the positives, what the Lord does do. This is depicted in similes, portraying first the vastness of the Lord’s forgiveness and  $\text{רַחֲמָיו}$  in spatial terms (103:11–12), then likening his compassion to that of a father (103:13). 103:14 concludes the strophe and the stanza with a rationale for why the Lord is so lenient: he knows of our creatureliness, he knows we are made of dust.

#### 4.3.1 THREE SIMILES

##### 4.3.1.1 Spatial images of the Lord’s steadfast love and forgiveness (103:11–12)

The first simile concerns God’s  $\text{רַחֲמָיו}$ : “For as high as the heavens are above earth, so mighty<sup>153</sup> is his steadfast love toward those who fear him.” The second simile also uses

<sup>152</sup> Cover, 1992, 6:32.

<sup>153</sup> BHS’s emendation  $\text{גְּבוּרָה}$  for  $\text{גְּבוּרָה}$  is appealing, as it would give a complete agreement between the two parts of the comparison, as is found in 103:12, 13. However, BHS presents no textual support for the reading, and the LXX supports MT (LXX reads ἐκκρατίωσεν, the *vorlage* being  $\text{גְּבוּרָה}$  according to BHS). Allen (2002, 26) points to the similar construction in Ps 117:2, where  $\text{גְּבוּרָה}$  is used, and the word’s “stylistic echo” in  $\text{גְּבוּרָה}$  in 103:20. I have borrowed Hossfeld’s translation (“so mighty is his steadfast love [...]”), which also follows MT (Hossfeld/Zenger, 2011, 30).

spatial terms: “As far as the east is from the west<sup>154</sup>, so far removes he our transgressions from us.” These images convey the infinitude of God’s  $\text{רָחֵם}$  and forgiveness. The images are particularly powerful in combination: Both the vertical and the horizontal axis are called upon for maximum effect.

The vertical perspective on the Lord’s  $\text{רָחֵם}$  resembles Pss 36:6, 57:11; 108:5.<sup>155</sup> These texts, with slight differences in wording, speak of God’s  $\text{רָחֵם}$ , which is as high as the heavens (and his faithfulness that reaches to the clouds). According to Mays, the removal of sins as far as east is from west recalls the hymn concluding the book of Micah (Mic 7:18–20), a hymn also bearing resemblance to Ps 103 in other ways.<sup>156</sup> While the image is different, this text also speaks of the removal of “our”<sup>157</sup> sins beyond possibility of retrieving them: to the depths of the sea (7:19).

#### 4.3.1.2 God as father (103:13)

So far in this strophe, the entire cosmos has been utilized to portray the  $\text{רָחֵם}$  and forgiveness of God. In 103:13, a third simile is introduced, which is much more intimate, though by no means less powerful: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.”

The notion of God as father of his people is not particularly pervasive in the Old Testament, and is “only one of many figures which the OT uses to describe the

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<sup>154</sup> This can also be interpreted in the sense of time: “As far as the rising is from the setting”. (Hossfeld/Zenger, 2011, 30, 35.)

<sup>155</sup> *ibid.*, 35.

<sup>156</sup> Mays, 1990, 30.

<sup>157</sup> MT: “their sins”.

relationship between Yahweh and Israel.”<sup>158</sup> Some significant texts portraying the Lord as Israel’s father are Ex 4:22; Deut 32:6, 18; Hos 11:1ff; Jer 31:9; Is 63:15–16.<sup>159</sup>

The present text, of course, does not claim the Lord is the father of Israel. This is merely an image comparing God’s compassion to a father’s for his children. The image may also give maternal associations, depending on “whether one sees the secondary meaning *rehem* in every occurrence of the root *ḥm*.”<sup>160</sup> רַחֵם refers to the female genitalia, but denotes above all the place where human life originates, i.e. the womb.<sup>161</sup> While Stoebe assumes that these terms are related, Kronholm claims the relationship between these words are uncertain.<sup>162</sup>

Regardless, the fatherly compassion for his children is a powerful image of the compassion of God. Is 49:15 goes even further, claiming that God’s compassion for Sion surpasses even a mother’s compassion for her nursing child.

#### 4.3.1.3 Intertwining of images

In this strophe, three incredibly potent images, spanning from the height of the heavens to the intimacy of a father’s love, are employed in the interest of portraying God’s character. For our purposes the combination of the three images is equally important as any message the similes may carry individually. While each of the similes convey

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<sup>158</sup> Ringgren, “רַחֵם”, in TDOT 1:18.

<sup>159</sup> *ibid.*, 1:17-18. The king as the son of God is more firmly established, cf. 2 Sam 7:14; Pss 2:7; 89:27–28.

<sup>160</sup> Simian-Yofre/Dahmen, “רַחֵם”, in TDOT 13:443. This statement refers to a different text (Jer 31:20), but is applicable here as well.

<sup>161</sup> Kronholm, “רַחֵם”, in TDOT 13:455.

<sup>162</sup> Stoebe, “רַחֵם”, in TLOT 3:1225; Kronholm, “רַחֵם”, in TDOT 13:454.

something important about the Lord, their combination and similar structure discourages us from reading them as separate from each other. The three similes thus weave together distinct concepts: The might of God’s steadfast love is illustrated by his willingness to utterly remove “our” sins from us. This forgiving nature springs from the Lord’s fatherly compassion. The Lord’s **רַחֵם**, his compassion, and his willingness to forgive are intimately connected. In 103:3–5, we saw that **רַחֵם** and compassion belong to the associational cluster of the forgiveness motif (together with healing etc.). Here **רַחֵם** and compassion are connected even more closely with forgiveness.

#### 4.3.2 HE KNOWS OUR FORM (103:14)

In this stanza, we have seen the poet marvel over the extent of the Lord’s forgiveness, compassion and **רַחֵם**. The final verse of the stanza ends with a rationale for the forgiving nature of the Lord. 103:14 rounds off the alliterative fifth strophe with a second **כִּי** clause: “*For* he knows our form, he remembers<sup>163</sup> that we are dust.” God, our creator, knows humanity’s frail creatureliness, created from dust that we are (Gen 2:7; 3:19).<sup>164</sup>

According to Cover, while Christian theologians have stressed the tradition of the “fall” as the origin of sin, the Old Testament writers instead related human sinfulness to our creatureliness.<sup>165</sup> This relationship between sinfulness and frailty is particularly evident in Job, forming there a literary topos (Job 4:17–21; 15:14–16; 25:1–6).

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<sup>163</sup> According to Joüon/Muraoka (1991, §50e), **זָכוֹר** is a passive participle with active sense. According to them, this example represents an Aramaism. Instead of MTs **זָכוֹר**, LXX reads (presumably from **זָכוֹר**) the imperative **μνήσθητι**: “*Remember* that we are dust!” (NETS).

<sup>164</sup> Allen, 2002, 32.

<sup>165</sup> Cover, 1992, 6:33.

We see a similar rationale in Ps 78:38–39 in a recital of the wilderness events, and the frequent transgressions of the Israelites.<sup>166</sup> As in Ps 103, it is stressed that God is compassionate (רחום) and that he forgave (covered, כפר, piel) iniquity (עון). He also repeatedly restrained his anger and wrath (cf. 103:9) (78:38). He did this because he remembered (זכר) that they were mere flesh (בשר) and a wind (רוח) that passes and does not return (78:39).

In 103:14 we find personal pronouns in prominent positions (the first word after כִּי and the last word of the verse): כִּי־הוּא יִדַע יִצְרָנוּ זָכוֹר כִּי־עָפָר אֲנַחְנוּ. Their positioning creates a contrast between God and “us”: While God is the one with knowledge, “we” are merely dust. The use of the personal pronoun הוּא, already implicit in the verb conjugation, especially accentuates who the initiative belongs to.<sup>167</sup> The compassion of God is borne out of his knowledge as creator: “We” are but dust.

103:14 also functions as a transition into further treatment of the motif of human frailty in the third stanza. There this motif is revisited, though with a variation. This verse thus functions as a bridge toward the third stanza.

<sup>166</sup> McKeating, 1965, 77. Ps 78 is often identified as a descriptive hymn with affinities to the wisdom genre. Or merely as a historical psalm (Tate, 2000, 284).

<sup>167</sup> “Generally speaking, the addition of a pronoun gives some special prominence to the person or persons indicated by it [...]”. (Joüon/Muraoka, 1991, §146a)

## 4.4 THE BENEFICIARIES OF GOD’S MERCY

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### 4.4.1 WHO ARE WE?

As already noted, stanza 2 moves away from the personal language of 103:1–5. And in 103:10, the collective “we” is used for the first time: The Lord does not repay “us” according to “our” sin. We are thus presented with a new recipient group for the Lord’s forgiveness, which in 103:3 was only explicitly given to the individual. This is clearly a group of which the psalmist counts himself a part, or a group for whom he speaks. But who are they?

The “we”-group is indicated by 1.pl. suffixes in 103:10, 12, 14, and the personal pronoun **אֲנִי** in 103:14. The mentions of “us” in every other verse are interspersed with two mentions of “those who fear him” (**יִרְאוּ אֹתוֹ**) (103:11, 13). This alternating between the recipient groups binds them together, and indicates that “we” and “those who fear him” are the same group of people.

### 4.4.2 THOSE WHO FEAR HIM

With the introduction of “those who fear him”, we have apparently encountered a prerequisite for receiving God’s forgiveness and compassion. That is, those who want to experience God’s **רַחֲמֵי** must fulfill one criterion: they must fear the Lord.<sup>168</sup> But what does fearing the Lord entail?

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<sup>168</sup> So McKeating, 1965, 75.



Fearing the Lord is a diverse concept in the Hebrew Bible. Its meaning ranges from numinous fear of the Lord's holiness, to loyalty toward (i.e. exclusive worship of) the covenant God, and to fear of the Lord as a moral response, e.g. in wisdom literature.<sup>169</sup>

In the psalms, however, “Yahweh-fearers’ always refers to the community that worships Yahweh.”<sup>170</sup> According to Fuhs, the phrase “those who fear the Lord” uses the verbal adjective to modify the Lord as subject, and is an idiom expressing possession. Thus, the phrase “does not mean ‘those who worship Yahweh’ but ‘the worshippers who belong to Yahweh’”.<sup>171</sup> Perhaps the designation “those who fear him” functions less as a prerequisite for receiving **חֶסֶד**, and more as a group identifier?

According to Fuhs, the term originally referred to the cultic community that assembled in the sanctuary, but was later extended to include the entire people of the Lord.<sup>172</sup> And in certain late psalms influenced by the wisdom tradition, in which group he includes Ps 103, the term came to denote the “devout” or “those faithful to the Lord”. Ps 103:17 also exhibits influence from the nomistic concept of the fear of the Lord. In 103:17–18, the designation “those who fear him” (recipients of his **חֶסֶד**) stands in parallel with “those who keep his covenant (**בְּרִית**) and remember his instructions (**פְּקוּדִים**)<sup>173</sup> so that they do them” (recipients of his righteousness). Perhaps in the present psalm the designation

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<sup>169</sup> Cf. Fuhs, “**יִרָא**”, in TDOT 6:300-314.

<sup>170</sup> Fuhs, “**יִרָא**”, in TDOT 6:308.

<sup>171</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> *ibid.*, 6:308-309.

<sup>173</sup> **פְּקוּדִים** only occur in late psalms (apart from Ps 103:18, it appears in Pss 19:9; 111:7 as well as 21 times in Ps 119). According to Schottroff, the term occurs as an alternative for other expressions for God's “law” and “word” (Schottroff, “**פְּקָד**”, in TLOT 2:1019-1020).

functions both as a group identifier and as a prerequisite: The **דָּוָה** and forgiveness of God is meant for the community of those who are faithful to him, and this group can be recognized by their will to keep his covenant.

However, the necessity of keeping covenant for receiving forgiveness does seem incongruous. If one has kept the covenant, why would one need forgiveness? According to McKeating this can be explained by seeing that the sins in question are the sins of a believer. Even though the believer might occasionally fail, her desire to please God can remain unchanged. “Above all, they are not sins such as idolatry or worship of false gods, that put a man outside the sphere of grace, threaten the very basis of the covenant relationship itself. They are sins *within* that covenant [...]”<sup>174</sup>

Mays, on the other hand, turns this question upside down. It may seem that the forgiveness of God is dependent upon the community’s fear of the Lord, he says. “But a closer reading shows that the opposite is the case; they fear the Lord because they have recognized the triumph of God’s *hesed* over them as sinners.”<sup>175</sup> Mays points to Ps 130:4 for this notion: “For with you is forgiveness, so that you may be feared” ( **כִּי־עֲמִידָה** (הַסְּלִיחָה לְמַעַן תִּירָא)).<sup>176</sup>

The fear of the Lord is thus removed from any merit of the believers. The initiative to create his community of worshippers belongs solely to God. While such an interpretation has an attractive New Testament flavor to it, it does not adequately explain

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<sup>174</sup> McKeating, 1965, 75.

<sup>175</sup> Mays, 1990, 30.

<sup>176</sup> Mays, 1994a, 330. See section 3.2.1 on Ps 130:4.

103:17–18, where fear of the Lord and keeping of covenant are parallel concepts. Mays points to something important, however, that the forgiveness of the Lord is not portrayed as earned in this psalm. The only attempt at explaining why God is so lenient is in 103:14, where the merit of the believer is not in view. Instead, it is God's knowledge of the human condition, our frailty, that inspire his mercy.

#### 4.5 SUMMARY

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This second stanza is paramount for our understanding of forgiveness in Ps 103. Here we encounter the grace formula (103:8), which is fundamental for the psalm. The entire psalm, but especially the second stanza, meditates on the formula by taking up vocabulary and motifs from it.

In this stanza, the psalmist moves from the personal thanksgiving to the more general and comprehensive praise. The personal witness from the first stanza is expanded to include the history of the community. It is as though the individual thanksgiving refuses to be constrained to the personal, and the psalmist widens his horizon to the history of Israel. This is not an illogical move. The thanksgiving introduced the motif of forgiveness. What could be more natural for the psalmist than to revisit the paradigmatic history of sin and forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible, Ex 32–34?

Or we may consider it from another angle: The personal thanksgiving of 103:1–5 can be seen as an illustration of God's forgiving nature, as it is expressed in the grace formula in 103:8. It is the personal anecdote exemplifying the greater truth of the Lord's nature.

We have seen how the psalm’s use of Ex 32–34 influences our interpretation of the forgiveness motif. By alluding to the narrative context in which the grace formula appears in Ex 34:6–7, the psalm draws our attention to the story of sin and forgiveness told there. Further, the subtle critique which the “negative” part of the formula in Ex 34:6–7 is subjected to, makes the psalm’s witness to the Lord’s forgiveness stand out even clearer.

By only focusing on the “positive” part of Ex 34:6–7, and by the exposition the formula gets in the remainder of the stanza, the psalmist provides a reinterpretation of Ex 34:6–7, intensifying the focus on forgiveness. The psalmist gently points us away from the punishing God, and toward the endlessly forgiving Lord, whose care for “us” is like a father’s.

We have seen the fourth and fifth strophes meditating on the grace formula. Strophe 4 focuses on what the Lord does not do: He does not treat “us” the way we deserve, according to our sins. Instead he abandons his accusations, and lets go of his anger. Strophe 5 uses similes to describe the Lord’s apparently endless mercy. Both the entire cosmos and the familiar love of a parent are employed to show how vast God’s רַחֲמֵי, compassion, and willingness to forgive is. God’s רַחֲמֵי is as mighty as the heavens above earth, he removes our sins from us as far as the east is from the west, and his compassion is as intimate as a father’s for his children. As these images are entwined together, so the concepts within them (רַחֲמֵי, willingness to forgive, and compassion) are woven closer together. We have already seen רַחֲמֵי and compassion belonging to the

associational cluster of the forgiveness motif in 103:4. Here we see these concepts being tied even more tightly to God's forgiveness.

We have seen that the beneficiaries of the Lord's compassionate nature are alternately "us" (103:10, 12) and "those who fear him" (103:11, 13). The intertwining of these designations implies that they refer to the same group of people. The designation "those who fear him" also appears to introduce a prerequisite for receiving forgiveness and compassion. In 103:17–18, this prerequisite is extended to involve keeping of covenant. However, we have seen that "those who fear the Lord" is a group designation in the Psalms, naming those who worship the Lord in the cult, or the devout. It seems that in Ps 103 the designation "those who fear him" is a group identifier, but that there also are demands upon those who wish to belong to the group: they must be faithful to the Lord and his covenant.

The final verse of the stanza gives a rationale for God's forgiving nature: As creatures, we are frail and prone to sin. The possibility of "earning" God's  $\text{רָחֵם}$  by fearing him and keeping covenant is ruled out. The initiative is always with him who knows we are but dust.

## CHAPTER 5: STANZA 3 – HIS DOMINION RULES OVER ALL

So far in our interpretation of Ps 103, we have found a psalm very much concerned with divine forgiveness and related concepts, such as God’s compassion, **רַחֵם**, etc. We have thus found plenty of subject matter for the topic of this thesis. As we now turn to the third and final stanza, which spans over 103:15–22, we are faced with a different situation. Here the forgiveness motif cedes the limelight it has enjoyed so far in the psalm, as other major motifs enter the stage: Strophe 6 is concerned with the impermanence of humanity (103:15–16) in contrast to the everlasting **רַחֵם** of the Lord (103:17–18), and strophe 7 is devoted to God’s kingly reign (103:19–22).

To ensure that my search for forgiveness in the psalm does not eclipse these other major motifs, I will spend some time discussing them in their own right. I will, however, also attempt to connect them with the main topic of this thesis. Strophe 6 may be related to forgiveness by its use of **רַחֵם**, which we have seen is connected to forgiveness earlier in the psalm. And while strophe 7 has no reference to forgiveness or any closely related subjects, I will explore the possibility that this psalm considers forgiveness to be an actualization of God’s kingly rule.

In the last chapter, we noted the move between stanzas 1 and 2: Where stanza 1 concentrates on the experience of the psalmist, stanza 2 deals with the concerns of the faithful community. In this third and final stanza, the vision of the psalmist is broadened even more. The focus shifts from the “we” of the community to the more general **שְׂאֵת**, humankind, and the poet calls upon on all God’s works to bless their maker. The praise

now urged is universal in scope. However, in its final colon (103:22c) the psalm comes full circle, concluding with the same call to the psalmist's self to bless the Lord with which it started (103:1).

I will begin this chapter by giving some examples of how the third stanza is integrated with the rest of the psalm, in response to claims that the section is redactional. Further, I will discuss strophe 6, looking at the motif of human impermanence, and how this is a common motif to Book IV of the Psalter and Deutero-Isaiah. I will then look at its contrast in 103:17–18: the everlasting character of the Lord's  $\text{דִּוְקָ}$ . In 103:17–18 there are several familiar components from earlier in the psalm, i.e. the Lord's  $\text{דִּוְקָ}$  and the receivers, “those who fear him”. We will see how the third stanza sheds new light on these concepts.

The main emphasis in this chapter, however, will be on the seventh strophe, where a new motif enters the psalm: The Lord is king. I will discuss the motif in light of its prominence in the fourth book of the Psalter, which has been given much attention in recent Psalms studies. I will also discuss what this motif is doing here in a psalm so occupied with divine forgiveness, and whether these motifs can be connected.

## 5.1 CONNECTIONS ACROSS THE STANZAS

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In chapter 2, we encountered the view that the sections 103:15–18 and 19–22a have a “redactional character”.<sup>177</sup> I argued there for reading the psalm as a unified text, based on how closely the third stanza is connected to the rest of the psalm. I will now argue this

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<sup>177</sup> See section 2.2.

claim further by giving several examples of how the poet takes up concepts and vocabulary from the two previous stanzas.

We see this interconnectedness in several ways. First, the motif of human frailty (103:15–16) continues from 103:14. Second, 103:17 takes up the term **דָּקָה**, which we have repeatedly encountered earlier in the psalm (103:4, 8, 11). We are also reacquainted with “those who fear the Lord” (103:11, 13), as our understanding of this group is deepened in 103:17–18. Additionally, these verses demonstrate another connection to the Book of Exodus, which we have seen is crucial for understanding the second stanza in particular. Thirdly, 103:17–18 revisit the subject of the Lord’s righteousness as well as the word **עָשָׂה** from 103:6 (**עָשָׂה** also figures in 103:10). **עָשָׂה** further appears thrice more in this stanza (103:20, 21, 22). 103:19 repeats **שְׁמִי** from 103:11. 103:20–22 expand the call to bless the Lord from 103:1–2. Therefore, while strophe 7 introduces something new in this psalm, the divine kingship motif, this strophe stands firmly rooted in the psalm’s vocabulary.

These are mere examples of how the third stanza returns to earlier topics and expands our understanding of them. We will return to several of these when we now turn our attention to the exegesis of the final stanza.



## 5.2 STROPHE 6: HUMAN IMPERMANENCE AND GOD’S ETERNAL דָּקָה (103:15–18)

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The second stanza ended with a rationale for the Lord’s mercy: “we” are creatures, made of dust, and thus frail and prone to sin (103:14). This motif of human frailty follows us as we move into the third stanza.

In 103:15, however, the subject changes to אֲנוֹשׁ, humankind. The use of the *casus pendens* construction draws attention to this change: “Humankind, like grass is its days [...]”. Simultaneously, the talk of “we” ceases. It is, of course, not conducive to separate “us” too far away from “humankind”. The “we”-group is of course a part of humankind. Moreover, humankind is made of dust, just as “we” are (103:14). However, “we” are no longer mentioned, and the term אֲנוֹשׁ indicates that a more general perspective is taken.

More importantly, the motif’s function also changes. In 103:14 the point is that God knows “we” are frail creatures, prone to sin. This knowledge inspires his forgiveness. In 103:15–16, the point is rather that humanity is short-lived and impermanent. This prepares for a comparison in 103:17–18: Unlike humanity, God’s דָּקָה endures from everlasting to everlasting, and his righteousness to children’s children.

### 5.2.1 HUMANITY AS GRASS: A FAMILIAR IMAGE (103:15–16)

In 103:15–16, the psalmist employs another simile (as in 103:11–13), this time to express the transience of humankind. Its days are likened to grass (רִצְיָר), and a flower of the field (צִיץ הַשָּׂדֶה), that withers and is forgotten when the wind (or spirit, רוּחַ) passes it.

The poet again employs a powerful image, which prepares for a stark contrast to the permanence of the Lord's חֶסֶד in 103:17–18. This image, however, is a familiar one in the Hebrew Bible.

The image in Ps 103:15–16 bears a great resemblance to Is 40:6–8. The voice in Is 40:6 instructs the “I”-person to cry out that “All flesh (בָּשָׂר) is grass (חֶצִיר), their steadfast love (חֶסֶד)<sup>178</sup> is like the flower of the field (צִיץ הַשָּׂדֶה).” The passage also insists that the grass and flower wither when the breath (רוּחַ) of the Lord blows upon them. The word (דְּבַר) of our God, however, will stand forever. This differs from Ps 103:17, where the impermanence of humanity is contrasted with the Lord’s everlasting חֶסֶד.<sup>179</sup>

The motif of human impermanence also appears elsewhere in the fourth book of the Psalter.<sup>180</sup> Like in Ps 103, this impermanence is contrasted with the permanence of the Lord in some way. In Ps 90 a declaration of God’s everlastingness is followed by a claim that God makes humankind (אֲנוֹשׁ) return to dust (דָּבָא) (90:2–3). 90:5–6 compares humans to grass and flower with the same terms as in 103:15–16: חֶצִיר and צוּץ.<sup>181</sup> They flower in the morning, but fade.

<sup>178</sup> LXX (supported by Peshitta, Vulgate [and 1 Pet 1:24]) reads δόξα.

<sup>179</sup> “It is true that corresponding to חֶסֶד, ‘loyal love,’ here is דְּבַר, ‘word,’ but the word is itself the loyal promise of God, as the contrast with human חֶסֶד, ‘loyal love,’ in Isa 40:6 makes clear.” (Allen, 2002, 32).

<sup>180</sup> Creach (1998, 69) has found many similarities between Book IV of the Psalter and Deutero-Isaiah. These are the only two blocks of material in the Hebrew Bible that compare human frailty with the term חֶצִיר. Further, apart from Job 14:2, only Deutero-Isaiah and Book IV compare human impermanence to a flower using the term צִיץ (Ps 103:15; Is 40:6, 7, 8).

<sup>181</sup> *ibid.*

In Ps 92:8, the wicked and the evildoers are transient, not humankind as a whole. They sprout like herbage (עֵשֶׂב) and bloom (צוֹיץ). The Lord, in contrast, is forever exalted (92:9).<sup>182</sup>

In Ps 102:5, 12 the “I” of the psalm wither away (יבש) like herbage (עֵשֶׂב). The latter verse is followed by 102:13’s assurance that “But you, Lord, are forever enthroned [...]”.

As in these other texts, the flightiness of humanity is in Ps 103 compared to some lasting aspect of God. This comparison happens in the following verses, 103:17–18, which stand in stark contrast to flighty humanity in 103:15–16.

#### 5.2.2 THE ENDURANCE OF THE LORD’S דָּוָה (103:17–18)

The impermanence of humanity throws the next assertion into sharp relief: “But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting and to everlasting toward those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children for those who keep his covenant and remember his instructions so that they do them.”<sup>183</sup> We have already had cause to discuss the Lord’s דָּוָה and “those who fear him” in earlier chapters, and these subjects are therefore familiar.<sup>184</sup> However, our understanding of the subjects is deepened here, as the psalmist examines them anew from a fresh angle.

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<sup>182</sup> There is also a contrast to the righteous who sprout like palm trees (92:13), and bear fruit in old age (92:15).

<sup>183</sup> BHS proscribes rather drastic changes to MT in 103:17, presumably to reduce the surprising tricolon to a bicolon, in alignment with the majority of Ps 103’s verses. As this is seemingly based entirely on internal evidence and pure conjecture, I will follow MT. Fokkelman’s (2001, 168) suggestion is more conducive. He claims the sentence structure proves that instead of reading 103:17–18 as a tricolon + bicolon, the verses should be read as a bicolon (103:17a–b) + a tricolon (103:17c–18b).

<sup>184</sup> For דָּוָה see especially section 3.2.4.1. For “those who fear him” see especially section 4.4.2.

## 5.2.2.1 דָּקָה

We have already encountered the term דָּקָה in 103:4, 8, 11, and we have seen that it is a rich and many faceted term, which does not primarily refer to forgiveness. However, we have seen how closely דָּקָה is connected with forgiveness in this psalm. In 103:4, the term occurs as part of the psalmist's thanksgiving, headed by a description of the Lord as forgiving all the psalmist's iniquities. In the grace formula in 103:8, the term denotes God's faithfulness which is so great that he is willing to forgive a broken relationship. In 103:11, the simile depicting the might of God's דָּקָה is placed between 103:10, which establishes that the Lord does not do with "us" according to our sin, and 103:12 which claims that the Lord removes our sin infinitely far from us. In short, we have seen that דָּקָה belongs to the associational cluster of forgiveness in Ps 103.

As it does so, the divine forgiveness motif sounds in the background when we read דָּקָה in 103:17 as well. While דָּקָה should not be constrained to only one connotation, in this instance "forgiveness", the use of the term elsewhere in the psalm colors how it is interpreted here.

At the same time, our understanding of דָּקָה is expanded here. The term stands in parallel with צְדָקוֹת, righteousness. In 103:6, we found a meaning for צְדָקָה as God's beneficent intervention.<sup>185</sup> Johnson also points to the close connection between צדק and בְּרִית (covenant), as well as צדק and דָּקָה.<sup>186</sup> This is evident in 103:17–18 as דָּקָה and

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<sup>185</sup> See section 4.1.1.

<sup>186</sup> Ringgren/Johnson, "צְדָקָה", in TDOT 12:260.

צְדָקוֹת stand in parallel, and as צְדָקוֹת is given to those who keep the covenant. “God demonstrates his righteousness by maintaining both the covenant and, ultimately, creation itself.”<sup>187</sup>

More importantly for our purposes, we learn that חֶסֶד is from everlasting and to everlasting. Not only will God’s steadfast love last forevermore, but it has always existed. Unlike the transience of humans, God’s חֶסֶד is constant and eternal, and thus trustworthy.

#### 5.2.2.2 Those who fear him

As we saw in chapter 4, the mentions of “those who fear him” in 103:11, 13 seem to point to the designation as a group identifier, indicating the worshippers who belong to the Lord.<sup>188</sup> Here, however, there are demands placed upon those who wish to belong to the group. The receiver group of the Lord’s חֶסֶד and צְדָקוֹת is identified as “those who fear him” and “those who keep his covenant and remembers his instructions so that they do them” respectively. “In v 18 the initial divine doing (עָשָׂה) of v 6 is capped by the reminder that a complementary doing on Israel’s part is necessary.”<sup>189</sup>

We have already seen the relational character of חֶסֶד.<sup>190</sup> Here we see more clearly the reciprocal nature of the term. The Lord’s חֶסֶד is not aimless: It is directed against a community of people with whom he is in a relationship, and who in turn are committed

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<sup>187</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> See section 4.4.2.

<sup>189</sup> Allen, 2002, 33.

<sup>190</sup> See sections 3.2.4.1 and 4.1.2.1.

to him. The community shows its commitment to the Lord by adhering to his instructions and keeping his covenant. The relationship between the Lord and the community from which this psalm sprung is thus mutually binding.<sup>191</sup>

Sakenfeld points to the similarities between 103:17–18 and Ex 20:6 par Deut 5:10.<sup>192</sup> This tradition is partially preserved in Ex 34:6–7, which we have seen has a great influence on this psalm.<sup>193</sup> Ex 20:5b–6 (and par) speaks of the jealous God (אל קנא) visiting the iniquity (פִּקְדוֹן עוֹן, cf. Ex 34:7) of the parents upon the children to the third and fourth generation on those who hate him. However, he shows רַחֲמֵי to the thousandth generation (“for thousands”) to those who love him and keep his commandments.

Sakenfeld claims that though there is no explicit comment on the rebellious in Ps 103:17–18, “one feels God’s requital of those who hate him lurking behind the scene of the carefully restricted assurance of *hesed*”<sup>194</sup> However, the careful focus on the “positive” part of Ex 34:6–7 we have found so far in Ps 103 speaks against Sakenfeld’s interpretation. Even here, alluding to the “jealous God” of Ex 20:6, the psalm yet again avoids broaching the subject of God’s vengeance.

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<sup>191</sup> Cf. Routledge, 1995, 195.

<sup>192</sup> Sakenfeld, 1978, 227. She speaks about Ex 20=Deut 5, which presumably refers to Ex 20:5b–6 and Deut 5:9b–10, cf. *ibid.*, 129.

<sup>193</sup> See sections 4.1.2.2 and 4.1.2.3.

<sup>194</sup> Sakenfeld, 1978, 227.

### 5.3 STROPHE 7: THE DIVINE KING (103:19–22)

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#### 5.3.1 DIVINE KINGSHIP IN STROPHE 7

Strophe 7 is dominated by the motif of divine kingship. The proclamation that the Lord has established his throne in heaven and that his dominion rules over all is naturally followed by an exhortation to bless the Lord addressed to a widening audience. In addition to the common subject, the strophe is tied together by the *inclusio* created by the repetition of כל (with כָּ) and משל (rule). As God’s dominion rules over all (103:19), so all his works in all places of his rule should bless him (103:22).

The kingship of the Lord is a central theme of Book IV of the Psalter, and is especially prevalent in the Enthronement Psalms (Pss 93, 95–99, and, outside Book IV, Ps 47).<sup>195</sup> Ps 103 does not contain the “signature phrase”, יהוה מלך (Pss 93:1; 96:10 [par 1 Chro 16:31]; Pss 97:1; 99:1), but the universal reign of the Lord is nevertheless expressed in 103:19. There God is said to have established (בּוֹן, hiph.) his throne (כִּסֵּא) in the heavens, and that his royal dominion (מְלָכוֹת)<sup>196</sup> rules (משל) over all. According to Hossfeld, the divine throne is a scarlet thread through the Enthronement Psalms (Pss 93:2; 94:20; 97:2).<sup>197</sup> The divine kingship motif continues in 103:20–22b, as members of the heavenly court are exhorted to bless the Lord. The call to bless reaches his messengers, the strong heroes who fulfill (עשה) his word, and “listen to the sound

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<sup>195</sup> Seybold/Ringgren/Fabry, “מֶלֶךְ”, in TDOT 8:372.

<sup>196</sup> מְלָכוֹת is an abstract construction from מֶלֶךְ (ibid., 8:353).

<sup>197</sup> Hossfeld/Zenger, 2011, 37.

of his word”<sup>198</sup> (103:20). It reaches the **צְבָאוֹת**, the hosts surrounding God’s heavenly throne,<sup>199</sup> his obeying ministers (103:21). Finally, the call becomes all-encompassing as it reaches “all his works in all the places of his rule”, before the psalmist returns to the micro-level and repeats the call to his self with which the psalm started (103:22c).

### 5.3.2 DIVINE KINGSHIP IN BOOK IV OF THE PSALTER

In the latest decades, much attention has been given to the reading of the Psalter as a book. Gerald Wilson has had major influence upon this field of research. As he sees it, Book III ends with the agonized cry of Ps 89, “to the effect that all the national hopes pinned on the Davidic covenant (the structural element in the first segment of the Psalter) have come crashing down into the real world of defeat and exile.”<sup>200</sup> According to Wilson, Book IV functions as the editorial center of the Hebrew Psalter. “As such this grouping stands as the ‘answer’ to the problem posted in Ps 89 as the apparent failure of the Davidic covenant with which Books One-Three are primarily concerned.”<sup>201</sup> The psalms of Book IV, he says, “begin to point Israel away from the reliance on the inadequacies of human kings and kingdoms to the adequacy of Yahweh himself.”<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> The presence of a tricolon instead of the regular bicolon, as well as its omission in Peshitta, causes BHS to suggest that the final colon of 103:20 (**לְשֹׁמֵר בְּקוֹל דְּבָרוֹ**) may be a gloss. “But why should the preceding colon require a gloss?” (Allen, 2002, 27).

<sup>199</sup> Mettinger, 1988, 134.

<sup>200</sup> G. Wilson, 1992, 140.

<sup>201</sup> G. Wilson, 1985, 215.

<sup>202</sup> G. Wilson, 1992, 140. It seems to me that the assertion that the Lord reigns does not rule out the continued importance of “human kings and kingdoms” in the remainder of the Psalter. The heading of Ps 103, **לְדָוִד**, whether original or redactional, connects the psalm to David in some form. Thus, the Davidic kingship is also indicated in Ps 103, which in my opinion renders unlikely any redactional wish of suppressing the Davidic kingship completely. “Book IV does respond to the failure of the Davidic covenant by pointing to God’s enduring kingship, but it does not preclude a future Davidic hope.” (L. Wilson, 2010, 766.) See discussion in Howard (1999, 337), who also objects to the “almost total subordination of the royal, Davidic theme to that of Yahweh’s kingship.”



According to Tate, the “Moses-wilderness theme” of this collection is a strong suggestion that these psalms reflect “the ‘wilderness’ of the exile and post-exilic periods. The monarchy of David is gone, but Yahweh, who is the great king, above all gods and peoples, reigns and he is coming to judge the world.”<sup>203</sup> Tate also suggests that the emphasis on the kingship of the Lord correlates with the declaration at the end of the Song of the Sea (Ex 15:18) that “The Lord will reign forever and ever” ( **יְהוָה | יִמְלֹךְ לְעֹלָם** ) ( **וְיָֽעַד** ). The kingship of the Lord is thus grounded in the Mosaic traditions, according to Tate, and thus it is fitting that the group of psalms expressing this kingship should be positioned under the “Mosaic rubric”.<sup>204</sup>

Creach has found many similarities between Book IV of the Psalter and Deutero-Isaiah, one of which is the joint interest in the universal rule of the Lord. According to him, Book IV, “more than any other section of the Psalter, shares with Second Isaiah the conviction that only Yahweh is king in Israel.”<sup>205</sup>

### 5.3.3 KINGSHIP AND FORGIVENESS

The divine kingship motif, while common to Book IV, is rather surprising in Ps 103, and appears as foreign to the psalm at first glance. However, we have already seen that the third stanza has a more universal outlook than the personal focus of the first stanza and the communal focus of the second stanza. The introduction of the kingship motif may be a consequence of this universal scope.

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<sup>203</sup> Tate, 2000, 530.

<sup>204</sup> *ibid.* We have seen that Book IV is “a Moses book”, see p. 46, footnote 117.

<sup>205</sup> Creach, 1998, 68.

Further, Allen points out that **דָּקַדְקָה** and **צְדָקָה** are qualities indicating divine kingship in Ps 89:15.<sup>206</sup> This verse speaks of righteousness (**צְדָקָה**) and justice as the foundation (**מְכוֹן**, cf. **כִּוֵּן** in 103:19) of God’s throne, and claims that steadfast love and faithfulness (**דָּקַדְקָה** and **אֱמֻנָה**) go before him. Thus, the mention of **דָּקַדְקָה** and **צְדָקָה** in 103:17 would prepare the ground for the kingship motif in 103:19. Allen also points to the crown in 103:4, which is now returned to its rightful wearer.

Even so, the inclusion of the divine kingship motif in a psalm so preoccupied with divine forgiveness is interesting. How we treat the motif becomes significant. If one assumes that the last strophe introduces something new, which is only loosely connected to the rest of the psalm, then this inclusion does not need to be accounted for. Cf. for instance Hossfeld, who calls it a “hymnic coda” (and sees the whole section from 103:15–22 as redactional, cf. section 5.1 above).<sup>207</sup> If, however, the final strophe is treated as an integral part of the poem, an intriguing possibility emerges, namely that the psalm draws an unusual connection between God’s rule as king and his willingness to forgive. Lindsay Wilson draws this conclusion:

This process of forgiveness is explicitly seen as an outworking of God’s kingly rule (v. 19). [...] The proper response to the God who shows his kingly rule by redeeming individuals from their sin, is thus praise and blessing (vv. 20–22).<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Allen, 2002, 33.

<sup>207</sup> Hossfeld/Zenger, 2011, 34, 36.

<sup>208</sup> L. Wilson, 2010, 757.

## 5.3.3.1 Kingship and forgiveness in the Psalms

A typical position of the Enthronement Psalms is that the divine ruler judges with equity and righteousness (e.g. Ps 98:9). Leniency is more surprising. The combination of the motifs of divine kingship and divine forgiveness, while not unprecedented, is unusual. Apart from Ps 103, I have found only two instances in the Psalter where a psalm includes both motifs.<sup>209</sup>

One of these belongs to the Enthronement Psalms. Ps 99:8 claims the Lord was a forgiving God (אֱלֹהֵי שָׁלוֹם) for them (presumably the Israelites), but also an avenger of their deeds (וְיִנְקָם עַל-עֲלִילוֹתָם). While this hymn retains the juxtaposition of forgiveness and vengeance that we saw in Ex 34:6–7 (which Ps 99:8 possibly reflects<sup>210</sup>), the focus in Ps 103 is more one-sidedly on forgiveness.

Ps 145, another hymn,<sup>211</sup> also links the motifs of divine kingship and forgiveness, if only tenuously. While the kingship of the Lord is prevalent in this psalm (145:1, 11, 13), it does not explicitly mention forgiveness. It does, however, recite the grace formula in 145:8, which we have seen is connected to forgiveness.<sup>212</sup>

<sup>209</sup> I have used the list in Mettinger, 1988, 116 for references to where the Hebrew Bible speaks of God as king. This list includes contexts indicating God's kingship, using more terms than מַלְכוּת (e.g. "throne" and "reign"). I have concentrated my search on the Psalter. Apart from being the book to which Ps 103 belongs, it is there the Lord's kingship is given the most explicit treatment (Whitelam, 1992, 4:43). There may therefore be texts outside the Psalter combining the motifs of divine kingship and forgiveness.

<sup>210</sup> Brueggemann, 1984, 149. Therefore, the tension does not need to be resolved, as some interpreters attempt. See discussion in Tate, 2000, 527-528.

<sup>211</sup> Allen, 2002, 368.

<sup>212</sup> According to Mettinger (1988, 134), the Sabaoth name refers to God as the heavenly king. Extending the search to include occurrences of צַבָּאוֹת reveals another, though weak, link between kingship and forgiveness (my search is still limited to the Psalter). Ps 69, a lament where the psalmist's sin is at least part of the problem (69:6), addresses the Lord God Sabaoth (אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה צַבָּאוֹת) (69:7).

In Ps 103, therefore, we are presented with an uncommon, though not unique, combination of forgiveness and kingship. However, even if one accepts that God’s forgiveness is seen as an expression of his kingly rule, which is universal, the psalm gives no firm basis for assuming that God’s forgiveness is also universal. The forgiveness of the Lord is only explicitly given to the community of God-fearers in this psalm, and the individual who presumably is part of this group (103:3, 9–13). Even in this final stanza, with its universal outlook, the receivers of the Lord’s  $\text{רָחֵם}$  are “those who fear him”. The conditions for receiving  $\text{רָחֵם}$  are even heightened in 103:17–18, as we have seen, as adherence to the covenant is listed as a prerequisite.

### 5.3.3.2 The Lord is king – a root metaphor

Another reservation must be made. While there are few contexts in which there is an explicit connection between kingship and forgiveness, Mettinger has called the metaphor of God as king a “root metaphor”, a metaphor that generates and supports other metaphors.<sup>213</sup> Mays, building upon on Mettinger’s term, claims that all that is said in the psalms concerning God and his dealings with humans and the world is rooted in the truth of the metaphor of God as king.<sup>214</sup> “The declaration *Yhwh malak* involves a vision of reality that is the theological center of the Psalter”.<sup>215</sup> If one accepts Mays’ proposal, much more could be said about the divine king and divine forgiveness, because the metaphor of God as king lays behind everything that is said in the Psalter. There would be no way to say that a psalm is unconnected to the metaphor of God as king.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Mettinger, 1988, 92.

<sup>214</sup> Mays, 1994b, 6.

<sup>215</sup> *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>216</sup> This is, of course, the weakness of Mays’ proposal: Everything is subsumed under a single heading, and a “vision of reality” is presupposed for every psalm. As he has already determined that every psalm shares the same view of reality, it becomes difficult to explore whether individual psalms present a unique viewpoint.

Mays consequently answers the question of why the psalm concludes with proclaiming the universal reign of God thus:

The LORD's steadfast love can be as great as the heavens are high above the earth, because the LORD's throne is established in the heavens (vv. 11, 19). The LORD can remove our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west because his kingdom rules over all (vv. 12, 19). These are poetic ways of stating one of the fundamental points of psalmic theology: The salvation of the LORD is the manifestation of the reign of the LORD in the world [...].<sup>217</sup>

The forgiveness of the Lord, while not a typical element of the psalms most concerned with God's kingship, is thus an expression of the Lord's care for his covenant people. Ps 103 goes further than usual in displaying the Lord's forgiveness as part of his kingly rule. Allen notes about Ps 145 that "[k]ingship, human and divine, has two sides, power over its subjects and commitment to their welfare."<sup>218</sup> Ps 103 focuses on the mercy of the just judge, who is even ready to forgive breach of covenant.

#### 5.4 SUMMARY

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In this chapter, I have discussed the third and final stanza of Ps 103. Here, the forgiveness motif has not been in the center of attention, as in the two previous stanzas, giving way instead to other topics. However, the inference should not be made that the stanza is unrelated to the rest of the psalm. On the contrary, the stanza is closely tied to the remainder of the psalm, by common vocabulary and concepts.

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<sup>217</sup> Mays, 1994a, 330.

<sup>218</sup> Allen, 2002, 374.

Neither should one assume from the scarcity of references to forgiveness that the third stanza is of no value for the topic of this thesis. Firstly, the sixth strophe deepens our understanding of the term  $\text{רָחַם}$  as it is used in Ps 103, a term that in the rest of the psalm is closely connected to God's forgiveness. 103:17–18 contain a poignant expression of the everlasting character, and thus dependability, of God's steadfast love. The preceding simile of the flighty existence of humanity (103:15–16), underlines this point by creating a startling contrast. Humanity, like grass, is short-lived and may be surprised by the sudden wind. The steadfast love of the Lord, however, has always been and will always be available for those who fear him. Further, in 103:17–18 we see more clearly the reciprocity inherent in the term  $\text{רָחַם}$ . The demands placed upon those who wish to belong to "those who fear him", the group of those faithful to the Lord, are more clearly defined here. These verses articulate a need for adherence to the Lord's covenant, which was not mentioned in the earlier references to this group.

Secondly, the inclusion of the divine kingship motif in this psalm is interesting. The inclusion may be a result of the universal outlook taken in the third stanza. However, the psalm's celebration of the Lord's kingship is not simply an appendix. The psalmist has skillfully woven the psalm together, indicating that the final strophe should be read as an integral part of the poem. If this is true, God's forgiveness can be seen as an actualization of his rule as king. While the combination of the motifs of divine forgiveness and divine kingship in the same psalm is unusual, the notion of God as king might lay implicit behind other psalms concerning forgiveness. That is, if we believe Mays' proposal that the metaphor of God as king is the vision of reality that infuses all psalm theology. What

can at least be said is that God's kingship is evident in the care he shows his covenant people. In Ps 103 this care is intimately related to his forgiveness.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Psalm 103 is one of the most beloved texts in the Bible. It is easy to see why: The psalm is an eloquent tribute to the Lord, and his merciful care for his subjects. The poet's artistic skill can be detected in the many alliterations, repetitions, wordplays etc. He also employs powerful imagery, describing the vastness of the Lord's  $\tau\upsilon\chi\eta$ , forgiveness, and compassion, as well as the transient nature of humankind.

Allen has explained the various structural divisions of the psalm by seeing it as “mass of interconnected thoughts”.<sup>219</sup> This characterization gives one the impression that the psalm is an unruly tangle of thoughts. I think the psalm is better viewed as a weave of distinct threads, skillfully joined together into a work of art by a proficient poet.

For instance, the threads of the individual, the communal, and the universal are joined together in this weave. The first stanza concentrates on the salvation experience of the individual. In the second stanza, the psalmist expands his vision, blending the experience of the individual with the history of Israel, and the experience of the community of the Lord's faithful believers. In the third stanza, the vision of the psalmist broadens once more, as he introduces humankind. The sweeping call in the final strophe reaches all God's works, and exhorts them to bless their king. However, even in the universal last stanza the individual is not forgotten. The psalm comes full circle as it repeats the call to the psalmist's self to bless the Lord.

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<sup>219</sup> Allen, 2002, 28. This is aimed at the “central part” of the psalm (103:6–18).



The thread of the motif we have followed in this thesis, divine forgiveness, is woven especially close together with the threads belonging to  $\text{דָּוָן}$  and compassion ( $\text{חַמּוּד}$ ), earning these concepts a place in the associational cluster of the forgiveness motif. In 103:3–5, forgiveness heads the list of the benefits of the Lord, which results in (amongst other things) crowning with  $\text{דָּוָן}$  and compassion. In 103:8, compassion and  $\text{דָּוָן}$  are part of the grace formula, which conveys the forgiving character of the Lord. The three images of 103:11–13 entwine  $\text{דָּוָן}$ , forgiveness, and compassion especially close together.

Indeed, much of the substance and nuance of the psalm is conveyed by the way the poet combines concepts. There are many explicit statements on divine forgiveness in this psalm (most clearly 103:3, 10, 12). However, if we only were to discuss these statements, vital information would be lost. A telling example is 103:3. If we only noticed the explicit statement in 103:3a (“who forgives all your iniquity”) and ignored its clear parallel in 103:3b (“who heals all your diseases”) we would be left with a skewed picture of forgiveness as it is presented in this psalm.

In this final chapter, the time has come to summarize and integrate my findings, and answer my thesis question: How is divine forgiveness portrayed in Psalm 103? To fully answer this question, I will look at three questions in turn: How is forgiveness described in the psalm? Who are the recipients of forgiveness? And, finally, what is said about the one who forgives?

## 6.1 HOW IS FORGIVENESS DESCRIBED IN PS 103?

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Ps 103 presents a startlingly comprehensive view of forgiveness. In the first stanza, the psalmist says the Lord forgives *all* his iniquity (103:3). The second stanza mentions all the three principal terms for sin in the Hebrew Bible, עוֹן, עֲשָׂה, אֲשָׁם, as something the Lord either removes or refrains from repaying (103:10, 12). Apart from this common factor, however, there is no single description of what forgiveness is in Ps 103. Instead, the motif is considered from different angles. In this section, I will outline three important aspects of the forgiveness motif in Ps 103: It is presented as having tangible results, as absence of negative consequences, and as preservation of relationship.

### 6.1.1 MORE THAN A SPIRITUAL CONCEPT

In the first stanza, the individual praises the Lord for a series of benefits, all standing under the headline of forgiveness. In 103:3, forgiveness and healing stand in clear parallel, and are thus closely related. These concepts are related also in other Hebrew Bible texts. The benefits that follow in verses 4-5 – redemption from death, crowning with steadfast love and compassion, and other life-renewing gifts – all seem to flow from the forgiveness that heads the list. These concepts are all interconnected, and are woven together by the psalmist into a coherent whole. This interconnection brings all these concepts into the associational cluster of the forgiveness motif in Ps 103.

It may also indicate that forgiveness is not seen as merely a spiritual concept, that being forgiven is seen as a comprehensive process that is expected to bring tangible, beneficial, change. However, the section may also describe the salvation experience of the individual

in poetic metaphor. The redemption from death and life-renewing gifts that the psalmist enjoys may be metaphorical expressions for his delight in being forgiven.

### 6.1.2 EXEMPTION FROM NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

The other verses describing what forgiveness entails, 103:9–10, 12, are located in the second stanza, where the psalm takes a communal perspective. 103:12 conveys forgiveness by describing removal of sins infinitely far away. In 103:9–10, forgiveness is displayed as the absence of negative consequences which the sins may otherwise have caused. The Lord refrains from litigation, even if he might have a perfectly valid lawsuit (103:9). He also lets go of rightful anger. Had the Lord not chosen to withhold it, there would have been just punishment for the sins committed (103:10).

### 6.1.3 PRESERVATION OF RELATIONSHIP

There is another aspect of forgiveness that is not explicitly present in Ps 103, but which forms a backdrop to the second stanza: Forgiveness is a willingness to uphold a relationship which has been breached by the other party. This aspect comes to expression in the psalm's use of Ex 32–34. I argued in chapter 4 that the psalmist not only echoes the grace formula from Ex 34:6 in 103:8, but also alludes to the literary context of the formula. In this way, the psalmist draws our attention to the narrative context of God's self-revelation: the story of the apostasy of the golden calf that precedes the revelation, and the covenant renewal that succeeds it. The grace formula reveals a God who is so abounding in  $\text{רַחֲמֵי}$  that he will even forgive breach of relationship. He will stay committed to his people and renew that commitment.

In Ex 34, the formula is extended by a verse where the forgiving God is juxtaposed with the God “visiting iniquity”. In Ps 103, however, the psalmist goes out of his way to emphasize that God does not repay “us” according to our iniquities. The psalmist thus performs a careful reinterpretation of Ex 34:6–7, intensifying its witness to God’s willingness to forgive. Where Ex 34:6–7 maintains the need for just punishment, Ps 103 instead focuses on the extravagant mercy of the Lord.

This is true even in 103:17–18, where the psalmist goes furthest in setting up demands upon those who fear the Lord: they must keep covenant and remember his instructions so that they do them. Even there, alluding to the jealous God of Ex 20:6, the psalmist refrains from speculating what will happen to those who fail these demands.

## 6.2 WHO IS FORGIVEN?

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In the previous section, we have seen Ps 103 emphasize the seeming limitlessness of the Lord’s forgiveness. But who is this forgiveness for? We will now move on to the second question, and discuss who it is who receives forgiveness in Ps 103.

### 6.2.1 THE PSALMIST’S “SELF”

In 103:3 the psalmist’s self is identified as the recipient of the Lord’s forgiveness. I suggested that the individual witness in stanza 1 could be considered a personal example of something more general. The psalmist’s salvation experience is merely an example of the Lord’s forgiving nature that is outlined in the second stanza.

## 6.2.2 THOSE WHO FEAR HIM

There is also every reason to believe that the individual speaking in stanza 1 considers himself as a part of the “we” of stanza 2. The alternation of “we” and “those who fear him” in 103:10–14 indicates that these designations refer to the same group of people.

In chapter 4, we discussed who “those who fear him” are, and whether fearing the Lord is a prerequisite for receiving God’s  $\text{רַחֲמֵי}$ , compassion, and forgiveness. We found that in the Psalter, “those who fear the Lord” is a group designation identifying the worshippers that belong to the Lord. Fearing the Lord is thus not a prerequisite for receiving God’s forgiveness and  $\text{רַחֲמֵי}$ , as it may seem. However, in 103:17–18, “those who fear him” stand in parallel with “those who keep his covenant and remember his instructions so that they do them”. In this psalm, therefore, the designation may function both as a group identifier and as a prerequisite: There are demands placed upon those who wish to belong to the group. There is thus a tension between these demands and the seemingly limitless will to forgive that we see in the second stanza (especially in the reinterpretation of Ex 34:6–7).

I think the best way to understand this tension is seeing that God’s immense will to forgive is not aimless. It is directed at a community with which God is in a relationship. This relationship is mutually binding, and there are clear covenantal requirements upon those who wish to belong to the community. The psalm stops short of speculating what would happen to those who neglect their duties. However, what is said in the rest of the psalm suggests that God’s extravagant mercy would prevail again.

### 6.2.3 IS FORGIVENESS UNIVERSALLY ACCESSIBLE?

In chapter 5, we discussed whether the divine kingship motif found in the third stanza could be linked with the forgiveness emphasized earlier in the psalm. I argued that the many connections to the earlier parts of the psalm indicate that we should read the third stanza as an integral part of the poem, rather than as some sort of appendix. We also discussed whether it is possible to connect the motifs of divine kingship and divine forgiveness. I suggested that even the Lord's forgiveness can be seen as an expression of the king's care for his people.

However, while the Lord's kingly rule is universal, and the third stanza has a universal perspective, the psalm does not display God's forgiveness as universally accessible. It is in 103:17–18, in the universal third stanza, that the clearest demands are placed upon those who fear the Lord, as we have seen above. The possibility of a universally accessible forgiveness is not explicitly ruled out, but is outside the scope of the psalm. The concern of the psalmist is what happens in the relationship between the Lord and the worshippers who belong to him.

### 6.3 WHAT IS SAID ABOUT THE ONE WHO FORGIVES?

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We have now seen how Ps 103 describes forgiveness, and who the recipients of the forgiveness are. We have not, however, answered a basic question: Why are these people forgiven? We have seen that fearing the Lord is more of a group identifier than a prerequisite for receiving God's forgiveness. The forgiveness, therefore, is not portrayed as earned by the recipients. Thus, to answer the question of why they are forgiven, we must turn to the one who forgives.

### 6.3.1 HE KNOWS OUR FORM

There is only one reason given for why the Lord chooses to forgive, which is that he knows “our” form and remembers that we are dust (103:14). He knows that we are creatures, frail and prone to sin.

Though this is the only *explicit* motivation given for God’s willingness to forgive, however, there is more to be said on this subject. The psalmist also points us in the direction of another reason: The forgiveness of the Lord flows from his character.

### 6.3.2 FORGIVENESS FLOWING FROM THE LORD’S CHARACTER

That the Lord’s forgiveness is intimately connected with his character is most clearly shown in the grace formula of 103:8. This formula delineates God’s nature as compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in רַחֲמִים. “Being forgiving” is not among the attributes. However, the attributes mentioned inspire God’s forgiveness. Especially God’s רַחֲמִים and his compassion (חַנּוּן) are closely connected to his forgiveness in this psalm, and we have seen these concepts partaking in the associational cluster of the forgiveness motif in Ps 103.

God’s רַחֲמִים love, his commitment to his covenant people, is so strong that he is even willing to forgive their breach of relationship. This רַחֲמִים is as mighty as the heavens is above earth (103:11). As it is from everlasting and to everlasting it is also dependable (103:17). His compassion toward those who fear him is like a father’s compassion for his wayward children (103:13).

The forgiveness of the Lord thus has its provenance in the Lord himself. Indeed, the very first description of the Lord in Ps 103 is that he is the one who forgives all the psalmist's iniquity (103:3). While this is an individual thanksgiving, the particular situation is transcended by the use of participles. These, by sharing some of the nature of adjectives, represent actions as durative. Further, the individual blends his experience with the community's history. His story is merely the example of a more general truth: being forgiving is a characteristic feature of the Lord (cf. Ps 86:15; 130:4).

### 6.3.3 BLESS THE LORD

And this, I think, is the most basic observation I can make about Ps 103: I have looked for the forgiveness motif, and it is indeed an important motif in the psalm. But the psalm is not about divine forgiveness. It is about the Lord. It is about the one who forgives. The psalm is much more concerned with the one from which forgiveness flows than what forgiveness looks like. This psalm is much more concerned with praising the Lord than with outlining what forgiveness is.

And it is perhaps by seeing this truth that we can best connect the three stanzas together. The unique viewpoint of each of these stanzas are joined together by a common purpose: to praise the Lord.

In the first strophe, the call to praise was personal. The psalmist called upon his self to bless the Lord, who had blessed him with so many benefits. In the final strophe, in a growing crescendo, the call reaches out to the Lord's servants, on earth as in heaven. It reaches all who fall under his dominion, that is everyone and everything. God's kingly



rule is universal – so should his praise be. The redemptive gifts that the psalm has extolled deserve this creation-wide thanksgiving choir.

The king should be lauded. But this is not a worldly tyrant, whose power is for his own enjoyment and self-serving interest. The kingly rule of God can be seen also in his care for his people. In this psalm this care includes even the will to forgive his wayward servants.

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