Reality, Remembrance, and Response

The Presence and Absence of God in the Psalms of Lament

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Abstract

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This study explores the ways in which Israel understood Yahweh to be present by focusing on those psalms of lament which report that God is silent, absent, or hidden and which present him with memories of his presence to save.

The study begins by examining the use of memory recitals of Yahweh's creation, the exodus experience of Israel, and the personal experiences of the writer as the primary resources for approaching God in the psalms of lament. Special attention is given to the tension created by the psalmist between the present experience of God's absence and memories of his presence to save. This is then followed by a survey of current writings on God's presence and absence.

Next, the study explores issues in Psalms research which relate to the theme of God's presence and absence as it is expressed in the Psalms. Attention is given to the problem of speaking of God acting in human history and to the debate over whether the Psalms have their origin and use primarily in the cultic setting or in the private lives of the community. Also, various understandings of the experiences of presence and absence are considered.

This is followed by an exegetical study of seven psalms, with particular attention being given to the tension between experienced absence and remembered presence, the move from lament to praise, and the response to God's salvation of offering testimony before the great assembly.

The final part of the study explores the psalmist's use of experiences of reality, memory, testimony, and story as a means of approaching God in the silence in light of the preceding exegetical study.

Contents

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Abbreviations

AUSS	Andrews University Seminary Studies
AV	Authorized Version
BS	Bibliotheca Sacra
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CJ	Concordia Journal
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
CR:BS	Currents in Research: Biblical Studies
Enc	Encounter
ExpT	Expository Times
Int	Interpretation
JANES	Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society
JB	Jerusalem Bible
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JETS	Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society
JPre	Journal for Preachers
JPT	Journal of Pentecostal Theology
JR	Journal of Religion
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JSS	Journal of Semitic Studies
Jud	Judaism
NEB	New English Bible
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OTE	Old Testament Essays
RE	Review and Expositor
REB	Revised English Bible
REclB	Revista Eclesiastíca Brasileira
RQ	Revue de Qumran
RSR	Religious Studies Review

RV	Revised Version
SJT	Scottish Journal of Theology
SLJT	Saint Luke's Journal of Theology
TB	Tyndale Bulletin
TE	Theologia Evangelica
TEV	Today's English Version
ThS	Theological Studies
VT	Vetus Testamentum
WW	Word and World
ZAW	Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 The Bible as the Story of God's Relationship with Israel

The Bible is the story of God's relationship with humanity. Every scholar begins, consciously or unconsciously, with a number of presuppositions which he or she does not attempt to prove and this is a central presupposition which influences and shapes this present study. While such presuppositions may mislead and distort, they are essential to any study because they provide focus, limits, and structure, and perhaps more to the point, they provide a place to start. During the course of the investigation which follows, I will argue for and offer evidence to support the notion that the Bible is principally concerned with describing the divine-human relationship, but it will remain throughout a presupposition which I will not attempt to prove exhaustively or conclusively. As such, this relational presupposition will determine the types of questions which I will address to the text and, consequently, the range of possible answers which will be available to me.

If, as I am asserting, the Bible is centrally concerned with a relationship, it is not essentially a systematic theology, a history, a scientific treatise, a myth, a literary fiction, or a book of ethical teachings, although, in the course of the divine-human relationship, all of these areas may be touched on and all of these forms of expression may be utilized. The Bible is concerned with God, but only within the context of his relationship to his creation. Likewise, all that the Bible has to say about humanity is said with an eye to their relatedness to Yahweh. The divine-human relationship is at the core of all that the Bible communicates. The biblical story, then, concerns aspects of, and should be seen in the light of, this relationship.

The writers of the Bible are, throughout scripture, preoccupied with their own and the nation's relation with Yahweh. Such questions as "Where is God?", "What is he doing?", "What does he require of us?", "How can we receive his blessing?", and "How can we avoid his wrath?" have been repeated in various forms throughout the religious writings of Israel. In the course of Israel's relationship with their God, Yahweh has been sought out and hidden from. He has been seen as a source of blessing and of curse. God's justice has been appealed to and his anger has been appeased. God has been both a salvation from death and the terrible agent of annihilation. At times Israel have shouted for joy as God has swept in to destroy their

enemies and save them, while at other times they have cried out before a heaven turned to bronze, seeking for a God who has suddenly vanished from their lives. The presence of God to bless and judge and his absence and silence in the face of injustice, great suffering, and need have, throughout the biblical record, been a source of praise, rejoicing, confidence, exaltation, perplexity, outrage, suffering, protest, and struggle. Just as God's presence is essential to Israel's sense of identity and place, so too his absence is an ongoing source of perplexity and crisis.

The underlying concern of this study is the presence and absence of God as it is described in the biblical writings, and, more specifically, in the prayers of Israel. What does it mean to say that God is present? Experiences of God's presence have largely been bracketed out of recent biblical scholarship because they are seen as too subjective and inaccessible to be the object of scientific inquiry. Biblical study has been maintained by some to be confined exclusively to the tangible, measurable, objective, and observable. And yet, experiences of the divine are at the very core of every religious tradition. The basic questions which this present study seeks to consider are, "Is it possible to speak of a biblical concept or concepts of God's presence?" and "How do modern notions of God's presence compare and contrast with biblical notions?"[1]

Integral to any discussion of the notion of God's presence is the consideration of the problem of his silence, hiddenness, and absence. Experiences of God's silence or absence in scripture presuppose experiences of God as present, as is made particularly clear when absence is contrary to the writer's expectation. Hiddenness presupposes the possibility of sight, unexpected silence assumes the potential for communication, protest springs from the expectation of justice and the experience of injustice, abandonment is only possible where there has been relationship. Descriptions of God's absence rest upon experiences of God's presence. When confronted with experiences of God's absence, the biblical writers did not keep silent. They frequently responded to experiences of God's absence, hiddenness, or silence with prayers of lament and protest which presuppose the possibility of God's presence. Examining those biblical texts which confront God with experiences of divine absence, hiddenness, and silence provides insights into the ways in which

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[1] In a recent study, Watson has drawn attention to the tendency in scholarship to insist on the separation of questions of theology from those of biblical studies and explores the ideological commitments which lead to this practice. (Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997].) The purpose of this present study is to consider the ways that experiences of God's presence and absence are articulated in the Psalter, but in seeking to connect this study of the biblical text with current studies of God's presence and absence, many of which seek to undergird their arguments with a biblical warrant, it has become apparent that there are fundamental differences in the ways in which these questions are approached in the biblical text and in modern writings, so that a consideration of these differences and the reasons for them becomes unavoidable in addressing this topic.

these writers expected God to be present. I propose in this study, therefore, to consider notions of the presence of God as they are described in contrast to experiences of his absence.

It is not the purpose of this study to argue for a single understanding of God's presence or experience of his absence which appears uniformly throughout scripture. Nor is it possible to survey all of the biblical texts which address questions of divine presence and absence. The question of the presence and absence of God in scripture is too extensive to be adequately addressed within the confines of this present work, therefore, I intend to limit my consideration of these questions to the Psalter, which provides the most extensive example of the prayer language of those communities which have sought to be in an ongoing relationship with Yahweh. In addition, I intend to further confine the scope of this present study to those psalms of lament which attest to God's absence, hiddenness, or silence, while at the same time recalling past memories of Yahweh's presence. Thus, by focusing on psalms of lament, I will be concentrating primarily on one manifestation of Yahweh's presence: his presence to save. The psalmist uses memories of God's presence to save in the past in order to call his attention to the contrast, indeed the contradiction, between the current experience of God's absence and the remembered past in which God was said to be present. The crisis in the psalmist's understanding of his or her relationship with Yahweh which results from the contrast between remembered past and experienced present causes the psalmist to re-examine his or her understanding of God's presence in his relationship with the praying community. Precisely because the psalms of lament present and sustain this contrast between memories of the past and present experiences, between God's presence and absence, they offer useful insights into the ways in which the praying communities which produced the Psalter understood God's presence and absence. In those psalms which affirm both God's silence in the present and his salvation in the past, the psalmist articulates in the contrast between the two his or her understanding of God's presence and absence. I will, therefore, focus my study on those psalms which meet the dual criterion of expressing the experience of God's absence, while contrasting that experience with past memories, both of the community and the individual, of God's saving in times of need.

1.2 Theses

In this study of the psalm writers' use of memory in the psalms of lament, I propose to argue the following theses.

1) Psalms of lament, because they are primarily occupied with the problem of God's silence, hiddenness, and absence, also focus on and offer insights into notions of God's presence.

2) Community memory is a primary resource for the praying community in the psalms of lament as they confront experiences of silence, abandonment, and wrath. Even when such memories are not explicitly recited by the psalmist, they are still implicitly central to the psalm of lament in that they identify the nature of the relationship between Yahweh and the praying psalmist or community which has been brought under threat by the situation which prompted the lament.

3) Many of the psalms of lament create and sustain a tension between experiences of absence and memories of presence which is the basis for the psalmist's approach to God in seeking a resolution to the circumstance of lament.

4) The psalmist presupposes a continuity between past, present, and future, that is, he or she presupposes that Yahweh's character, as it is reflected in and defined by his interaction with the praying community, does not change over time. Indeed, this presupposition is, at times, maintained in the face of strong evidence to the contrary.

5) There is, in memory-recital, a move from the individual towards the community and from the present moment toward participation in the praying community throughout time; present, past, and future.

6) In the practice of memory-recital, within the context of lament, the psalmist is attempting to locate him- or herself and/or his or her community within the recital-story. The psalmist is not, however, interested in "re-presenting" or reentering into or re-experiencing the past, but in effecting a change in the present and/or future. Memory-recital seeks not to escape into the past, but to transform the present.

7) If the psalmist is successful in locating him- or herself within the community's memory, that is, if he or she experiences again God's presence in the form of deliverance from the circumstance of lament, then the psalmist has an obligation to add to the community's memory by declaring and testifying to God's deeds of deliverance before the great assembly and to future generations, so that the community memory will be perpetuated and will grow. In the psalms of lament, this responsibility may be expressed as actual testimony before the great assembly or as a promise of such testimony when God acts to save.

8) The relationship which exists between Yahweh and the praying community commits, and indeed traps, the psalmist. He or she can choose no other god and no other set of memories and still remain a part of the praying community. While the psalmist is constantly engaged in re-evaluating and, indeed, adapting his or her understanding of the relationship which exists between Yahweh and the praying community, particularly in the context of the psalms of lament, he or she is not free to construe reality in a way which negates the community's story or to abandon the community's memories. It is the limiting of the psalmist to one god, one set of memories, and one version of reality which creates and maintains the tension between experienced absence and remembered presence.

9) The ways in which the psalmist and the praying community of the Psalter utilize memories are fundamentally different from the ways in which modern scholarship understands and utilizes the notion of memory. Because community memory and the exclusionary claims that it makes on the praying community are rarely recognized as valid definers of reality in modern methods of biblical study, most modern discussions of God's presence and absence avoid utilizing memory in the same way that the psalmist does and, as a result, fail to adequately represent and sustain the tension between remembered presence and experienced absence that the praying community of the Psalter describes and sustains through the use of lament and community memory.

1.3 The Structure of the Discussion

I propose to divide this discussion of presence and absence and of memory and experience into the following six parts. This chapter will serve as an introduction to the discussion, concluding with a brief summary of the current state of Psalms research as it relates to the current study.

In chapter two I will introduce the principal elements in the Psalter's appeal to community memory in the context of the lament psalm, giving particular attention to the use of these memories as a response to experiences of God's absence and silence. I will then examine the difficulties which arise in attempting to formulate a theological understanding of God's presence and absence which is able to sustain the tension between the two without dissolving it in terms either of presence or absence. In order to do this, I will examine a range of general studies of the problem of God's presence and absence or hiddenness.

Chapter three will locate the discussion of the presence and absence of God in the Psalter within the scholarly literature on the subject, identifying and exploring those aspects of the discussion of presence and absence which have elicited debate

among scholars and which have proved most problematic for our understanding of biblical notions of presence and absence. I will examine the language of presence and absence found in the Psalms and will relate it to the problems which arise when a modern writer addresses language of God acting in history. In addition, I will outline the debate over whether the Psalms should be considered to be primarily a cultic phenomenon or a product of individual piety or a mixture of the two and will seek to demonstrate that the way in which we understand both the origin and the use of the Psalms affects the way in which we interpret the language of God answering and acting. I will then consider the ways in which the Psalter itself speaks of God's presence in the lament psalms, giving particular attention to those laments which record a transition from lament to praise. Finally, I will examine the problems created in Psalms research by the failure to give adequate consideration to the differences which exist between modern and biblical worldviews, with their different understandings of reality. I will seek to demonstrate that, as a result of the problematic of language which speaks of a God who intervenes in human history both in word and action, modern and psalmic notions of presence and absence are articulated differently. Modern scholarship works from within a perception of reality which often does not understand God to act and speak directly in human history and, as a result, different questions are asked by modern scholars and different answers are arrived at. Consequently, the presence/absence dialectic is articulated in a great many modern studies in ways which do not accurately reflect the psalmist's own expression of this dialectic.

Chapter four contains an exegetical study of seven psalms of lament which utilize the community memory of Israel as a primary resource for addressing crises in the relationship between Yahweh and his people. Of particular interest will be the different types of remembrance which are brought before God in prayer and the different ways in which these memories are utilized by the psalmist, the resulting tension between experienced absence and remembered presence and how the psalmist utilizes this tension to push God and his or her own theology of God to deeper levels of understanding, the efforts of the psalmist to locate him- or herself within the memories of the community, the central place of declaration and testimony both in drawing on the community's memories and in adding to those memories as God is experienced afresh, and the continuity between present experience, past memory, and future expectation which is at the base of the psalmist's appeal to God in a circumstance of lament.

In chapter five, I will apply those observations and conclusions which arise from the exegetical study in the preceding chapter in order to describe more fully notions of presence and absence in the Psalms. I will give particular attention to the understanding and use of memory found in the Psalms, to the use of the

experience/remembrance dialectic by the psalmist as a tool for exploring more deeply his or her relationship with Yahweh, to the relationship between individual and community in the exploration of this divine/human relationship, to the continuity between present, past, and future which underlies any attempt by the psalmist to bring the community's memory to bear on the crisis of the moment, to the importance for the psalmist of "finding place" or locating him- or herself within Israel's remembrance, to the importance of testimony as a response to God's saving acts, and to the notion of the community's story of relationship which the psalmist moves into and out of and which he or she draws from and adds to.

In chapter six I will summarize the findings of this study and will examine the implications of these findings for current understandings and articulations of experiences of God's presence and absence. I will consider the ways in which experience, memory, and testimony interact to build the ongoing story of the community of faith and will consider areas of future research suggested by this present study.

1.1.4 Directions in Psalms Scholarship

In recent decades there have been a great many publications treating the Psalms and a number of reviews have outlined the changing foci of Psalms study.[2] The form-critical approach pioneered by Herman Gunkel[3] set the principal direction of Psalms research in this century and continues to exert influence and bear fruit up to the present. Building on Gunkel's work, various authors have sought to identify the *Sitz im Leben* of the different psalm forms, the most notable of these being Sigmund Mowinckel[4] with his notion of an annual Re-enthronement Festival, Artur Weiser[5] who argued for a Covenant Renewal Festival, and Hans-Joachim Kraus[6] with his theory of a Royal Zion Festival. While Gunkel's division of psalm forms continues to be utilized by psalm scholars with only minor alterations, there has not been a consensus reached among scholars with regard to the correct identification of

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[2] David J. A. Clines, "Psalm Research Since 1955: I. The Psalms and the Cult," *TB* 18 (1967): 103-126. Erhard Gerstenberger, "Psalms" in *Old Testament Form Criticism*, ed. John H. Hayes (San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press), 1974. Bernd Feininger, "A Decade of German Psalm-Criticism," *JSOT* 20 (1981): 91-103. Denise D. Hopkins, "New Directions in Psalms Research -- Good News for Theology and Church," *SLJT* 29/4 (1986): 271-283. J. H. Coetzee, "A Survey of Research on the Psalms of Lament," *OTE* 5 (1992): 151-174. J. Kenneth Kuntz, "Engaging the Psalms: Gains and Trends in Recent Research," *CR:BS* 2 (1994): 77-106.

[3] Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms*, 2nd ed., trans. Thomas Mittorner (Philadelphia: Fortress Press/Facet Books), 1967.

[4] Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 2 vols., trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), 1962.

[5] Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press Ltd.), 1962.

[6] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms* , 2 vols., trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1993.

the *Sitz im Leben* in which those forms had their use, leading Brueggemann to observe that "this royal cult hypothesis, whether in its pure form with Mowinckel, or in the alternative forms with Kraus or Weiser, appears to be on the wane."[7]

With some of the limitations of the form-critical method being realized, the last two decades of Psalms research have seen the exploration of a number of new directions. For the purposes of introducing this present study, I will briefly consider three such directions; the canonical approach, the approach which looks at the nature and function of Hebrew poetry, and the functional approach which considers questions of the Psalms' theology and function as they are written, repeated, and reapplied in fresh settings.

Brevard Childs initiated one response to the increasing limited gains in the form-critical study of the Psalter. Declaring that "the law of diminishing returns has set in"[8] in the search for the cultic *Sitz im Leben* of the Psalms, Childs has argued instead that the secondary settings in which the Psalms were reapplied and adapted to new circumstances and the process of canon formation will prove more useful in applying Psalms research to the Christian context.[9] The most influential application of the canonical approach to the Psalms has been Gerald Wilson's ground-breaking study *Editing the Hebrew Psalter*.[10] In it he argues that the Psalter has been organized around the theme of the Davidic covenant. The first three books of the Psalter are primarily concerned, says Wilson, with the Davidic monarchy, first introduced in Psalm 2. Psalm 89, at the end of book three, marks the failure of that covenant and books four and five shift to an emphasis on the kingship of Yahweh, rather than an earthly king. For Wilson Psalms 90-106 are at the centre of the editing of the Psalter as a whole and provide the answer to the question posed in Psalm 89 concerning the failure of the Davidic covenant.

Stimulated by the advent of Wilson's work a number of scholars have considered the canonical shape of the Psalter; including McCann,[11] Creach,[12]

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[7] Walter Brueggemann, "Review of *Theologie der Psalmen*," *JBL* 101 (1982): 284.
[8] Brevard Childs, "Reflections on the Modern Study of the Psalms" in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God*, ed. Frank M. Cross, Wener Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976), 384.
[9] Claus Westermann has offered some useful insights into the formation of the canonical structure of the Psalms by examining residual evidence in the Psalter of various layers of its organization and redaction. "Zur Sammlung des Psalters," in *Forschung am alten Testament* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag), 1964.
[10] Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*. (Chico, California: Scholars Press), 1985. See also "The Shape of the Book of Psalms," *Int* 46/2 (1992): 129-142. "Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of Psalms in the Psalter: Pitfalls and Promise," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* ed. J. Clinton McCann (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press), 1993. "Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalms," *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* ed. J. Clinton McCann (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press), 1993.
[11] J. Clinton McCann, "The Psalms as Instruction," *Int* 46/2 (April, 1992): 117-128. See also *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1993.

Walton,[13] Mays,[14] and Mitchell.[15] In addition to considering the canonical shape of the Psalms as a whole, a growing number of studies have also considered the form and shape of individual sections of the Psalter, including those of Crow,[16] Goulder,[17] Howard,[18] Creach,[19] Zenger,[20] and Miller.[21] David Howard has offered a survey of the field of canonical research into the Psalms.[22]

The basic assumption of the canonical study of the Psalms, that the final editors of the Psalter selected and arranged the Psalms according to one or more unifying themes which can be identified and which can shed light on the reader's understanding of the whole in relation to its parts, has not, however, gone unchallenged. In a careful study of this approach to Psalms study, Norman Whybray examines a number of different scholars' approaches to the Psalms as canon (including McCann, Millard, Mays, and Wilson) and concludes that :

> There is evidence that in a few instances such reinterpretation was effected in the form of textual additions; but for the most part such reinterpretation was achieved, as it is today, by 'silent' means. There is no evidence of the thorough and systematic changes that would have been necessary if the Psalter were to become the expression of a single theology. The stages by which it took its present shape lie mainly beyond our knowing.[23]

"Books I-III and the Editorial Purpose of the Hebrew Psalter," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* ed. J. Clinton McCann (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press), 1993.

[12] Jerome F. D. Creach, *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press), 1996.

[13] John H. Walton, "Psalms: A Cantata About the Davidic Covenant" *JETS* 34 (1991): 21-31.

[14] James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press), 1994. See also "The Centre of the Psalms," in *Language, Theology, and The Bible* eds. Samuel E. Balentine and John Barton (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1994.

[15] David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press), 1997.

[16] Loren D. Crow, *The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134): Their Place in Israelite History and Religion* (Atlanta, Georgia; Scholars Press), 1996.

[17] Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press), 1996. See also "The Songs of Ascents and Nehemiah," *JSOT* 75 (1997): 43-58. *The Psalms of the Return (Books V, Psalms 107-150)*, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press), 1998.

[18] David M. Howard, *The Structure of Psalms 93-100* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns), 1997.

[19] Jerome Creach, "The Shape of Book Four of the Psalter and the Shape of Second Isaiah," *JSOT* 80 (1998): 63-76.

[20] Erich Zenger, "The Composition and Theology of the Fifth Book of Psalms, Psalms, 107-145" *JSOT* 80 (1998): 77-102.

[21] Patrick Miller, "The End of the Psalter: A Response to Erich Zenger," *JSOT* 80 (1998): 103-100.

[22] David M. Howard, "Editorial Activity in the Psalter: A State-of-the-Field Survey," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* ed. J. Clinton McCann (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press), 1993.

[23] Norman Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 124.

While canonical studies of the Psalter have made significant gains in understanding the dynamic process of the formation and changing use of the Psalms, a scholarly consensus with regard to a single unifying theme for the book as a whole has not been reached.

In my examination of those psalms of lament which draw on memories of God's saving acts in the past as a resource, I will argue that this phenomenon is not an editorial strategy used to organize the Psalter, but rather a self-understanding of the psalmist and his or her relationship with God. This appeal to remembrance in lament can be found widely distributed throughout the lament psalms and, therefore, the work currently being done of the canonical shape of the Psalms will have relatively little to contribute to this current study.

A second area of Psalms research which has blossomed considerably in recent years has been the study of the poetic language of the Psalter. A number of reviews of biblical poetry research have been published recently which have summarized the gains made in this field of study.[24] A number of significant works in Old Testament poetry appeared in the 1980s. Watson[25] divides poetic researchers into three essential categories, those scholars who studied the structural aspects of Hebrew poetry, such as O'Connor, Kugel, and Berlin,[26] those who studied discrete poetic texts, such as Alter and Fisch, and those who looked at more general questions of style and technique, such as Watson and Schökel.[27]

This present study owes more in its approach to the text to rhetorical criticism than to poetical study, that is, I will focus on the purpose in offering the psalm of lament and the function of the various parts in trying to achieve that purpose than I will on the effect of poetic form and structure on the meaning of the Psalms which will be considered. That being the case, the area of poetic study which most heavily influences this writing is the approaches of Robert Alter and Harold Fisch which look at the workings of poetical techniques through a close reading of particular psalms texts. Particularly useful are Alter's observations that poetry often serves to direct the movement of a psalm through a rising sense of tension to a climax

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[24] J. Kenneth Kuntz, "Recent Perspectives on Biblical Poetry," *RSR* 19/4 (1993): 321-327. Wilfred Watson, "Problems and Solutions in Hebrew Verse: Survey of Recent Work," *VT* 43/3 (1993): 372-384. Lawrence Boadt, "Reflections on the Study of Hebrew Poetry Today," *CJ* 24/2 (1998): 156-163.

[25] Ibid.

[26] See also Alviero Niccacci, "Analysing Biblical Hebrew Poetry," *JSOT* 74 (1997): 77-93. John T. Willis, "Alternating (ABA'B') Parallelism in the Old Testament Psalms and Prophetic Literature," in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, ed. Elaine R. Follis (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press), 1987. David J. A. Clines, "The Parallelism of Greater Precision: Notes from Isaiah 40 for a Theory of Hebrew Poetry," in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, ed. Elaine R. Follis (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press), 1987.

[27] See also David Noel Freedman, "Another Look at Biblical Hebrew Poetry," in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, ed. Elaine R. Follis (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press), 1987. Ronald L. Giese, "Strophic Hebrew Verse as Free Verse," *JSOT* 61 (1994): 29-38.

which is often followed by a dramatic turn in the movement of the psalm[28] and that, while Hebrew poets certainly follow poetic conversions, they are by no means bound to them. "Convention gives writers of both verse and prose a solid framework in which to construct their own discourse, but good writers always exert a subtle pressure on convention, in certain ways remaking it as they build within it."[29] Fisch's argument that there exists in biblical poetry a dialectical interplay between the individual and the community which he calls "covenant discourse" informs his understanding of the dynamic of crisis and resolution in the psalms of lament.

> Extraordinary though it may seem, the change is seen to occur as an effect of the poetry, for the psalms are not only testimonies to past and present events; they are testimonies to the future as well. Having established or reestablished his bond with the "Thou" who "hast been my help," he already sees his enemy vanquished; he has no more to fear. Poetry has made something happen. No matter how deeply interior the meditation, the psalmist does not let go his hold on the historical and concrete, where the "word" ... is felt to be as active as it is in the inner realm of consciousness.[30]

I speak more of the impact of the poetic word on both the internal state of the psalmist and his or her historical and concrete experience in chapters four and five.

A third area of Psalm research which has developed in the latter part of the century has been called the functional approach. Hans Werner Hoffmann observes that, in prophetic writings, a particular form may be taken from its original or "formal" Sitz im Leben and placed in a novel situation where it does not initially fit in order to create an effect on the hearer. Thus, Hoffmann argues that, in considering the question of Sitz im Leben, it is necessary to look both at the formal setting in which a particular form is normally used and the actual setting in which a form may be intentionally reapplied to a novel setting.[31]

Rolf Knierim has pointed out that a form alone is an insufficient criterion for identifying and defining a particular genre. He concludes that "Structural models can but do not have to be genres, and a tension between them is entirely possible. Conversely, a genre is not always constituted by one and the same structure."[32] He criticizes the exclusive place granted to genre in the form-critical approach to the text and calls for greater flexibility in text interpretation. Genre is only one of a number of typicalities of a text and Kneirim identifies the components

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[28] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 67.
[29] Ibid., 112.
[30] Harold Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988), 111.
[31] Hans Werner Hoffmann, "Form -- Funktion -- Intention," *ZAW* 82 (1970): 341-346. See also Kirsten Nielsen, *Yahweh as Prosecutor and Judge* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press, 1978), 2-4.
[32] Rolf Knierim, "Old Testament Form Criticism Reconsidered," *Int* 27 (1973): 453-454.

which comprise a text's typicality as "structure/ scheme/genre -- setting -- content/mood/function/intention".[33] Knierim calls for a more thorough consideration of these additional features of typicality.

Claus Westermann argues that praise and petition are not fundamentally different forms of discourse but are opposite poles on a continuum, so that all psalms may be characterized by their place on a continuum moving from petition to praise.[34] He also explores the threat to the relationship between God and his people which circumstances of lament occasioned and the appeal in many psalms of lament to the redemptive history of Israel in order to re-establish continuity of relationship in the past, present, and future.[35] The re-establishing of such continuity required an act of praise which began in the present and carried on into the future.[36] Thus, Westermann understands petition and praise to interact in a polar relationship with historical recital being a key resource functioning to bring about a move from petition to praise, thus re-establishing and maintaining Israel's relationship with God.

Walter Brueggemann has proposed utilizing the "fairly stable" foundation of scholarly consensus in form-critical work with regard to setting as a basis for exploring questions of function in the text of the Psalms. He suggests two outcomes of such an inquiry.

> First, it may advance our understanding of Israel's intention in transmitting the Psalms. Second, it may help contemporary users to identify more clearly what resources are available in the use of the Psalms and what may be "done" in this "doing" of them. I suggest a convergence of a *contemporary pastoral agenda* with a more *historical exegetical interest*.[37]

He contends that, while the setting and institution in which a psalm is utilized is different for ancient and modern contexts, the intent and function of that psalm remains essentially the same for both. Although their approaches are somewhat different, both Childs with his canonical approach and Brueggemann with his functional approach focus on the meaning of the Psalms as they evolve with their reapplication and reappropriation and on their use as a resource for Christian faith today.

Brueggemann has developed his biblical theology utilizing the rhetorical approach pioneered by James Muilenburg.[38] His underlying assumption in formulating an Old Testament theology is that there is no one unifying theme which

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[33] Ibid., 458.
[34] Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim and Richard Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 152-154.
[35] Ibid., 246.
[36] Ibid., 236-238.
[37] Walter Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function," *JSOT* 17(1980): 4.
[38] James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969): 1-18.

adequately encompasses the diversity and dissonance found in the Old Testament writings. He proposes instead a unifying process, the rhetoric of testimony and counter-testimony, as a way of drawing together the diversity of the biblical text into a coherent theology without falling into the trap of reductionism and dissolving the pervasive tensions in the text.[39]

This present study, while aware of current gains in the study of Psalms as canon and Psalms as poetry, will focus on questions arising within this third field of inquiry. In an attempt to articulate notions of God's presence and absence found in the Psalms, I will be examining three rhetorical elements in the psalms of lament and attending to their function, that is, to the way that the psalmist utilizes them in prayer. I will consider the psalmist's claims of abandonment and God-hiddenness, along with the testimony of his or her enemies that that experience is final for the psalmist and cannot be changed. I will also examine the psalmist's use of memory recital as a rhetorical device for first setting up a tension between the experience of abandonment and the memory of God's presence to save and second calling on God to resolve that tension through a new act of salvation. In addition, I will look at the psalmist's use of public testimony as a response to new experiences of God's presence to save from the circumstance which occasioned the lament. In short, this study will consider the rhetorical functioning in the psalms of lament of the articulating of the experienced reality of God-hiddenness, the remembrance of God's saving acts in the past, and the response of public testimony when God answers the prayer of the psalmist.

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39 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.

Chapter Two

God's Presence and Absence

2.1 Remembered Presence

2.1.1 The Old Testament Concepts of Memory and Story

The present study will use a number of terms which have come to have a wide range of definitions in scholarly literature. It is not my intent to examine the possible meanings of these terms exhaustively or to provide a definitive definition for them, but simply to clarify how they will be used in this study. The terms whose meanings I wish to clarify are memory, story, history, and myth.

In the psalms of lament, the primary experience of God is that of absence, silence, hiddenness, and abandonment. God is not absent in an absolute sense, for he is the object of address in the psalmist's prayers.[1] Nevertheless, in the midst of lament the psalmist's descriptions of divine presence to save are confined to his or her memories. The present experience of God's absence is placed in a dialectical relationship with memories of his presence. If the praying community had no memories of presence, there could be no dialectic created by experiences of God's absence. Memories of past presence are a foundation for the pleas and protests which seek to motivate God to answer the psalmist's prayer of lament; to be present again. Because the memories of the community of the psalmist are elemental for defining who Yahweh is and that community's relationship to him, the tension between remembered past and experienced present is fundamental to the psalm of lament. Even when the community's memories are not explicitly recited and appealed to, they lie behind every protest and appeal in the lament psalms. Thus, those psalms of lament which appeal to God's saving acts in the past as a basis for motivating him to respond in a present circumstance of need merely make explicit that which is implicit in every expression of plea and protest; the assumption that God's current silence is at odds with the way in which he is characteristically expected to

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[1] While the psalmist speaks varyingly of God as absent, silent, distant, asleep, forgetful, hidden, and abandoning, I will often combine these different understandings as they appear in the context of the lament psalm under the single idea of God's absence because in that context presence is understood as presence to save from distress and, as long as the distress continues, God is not present to save but is absent.

respond, based on the community's memories.[2] Experiences of absence call into question the psalmist's understanding of who God is and how he may be expected to act.

Even a cursory examination of the Psalms reveals that the English word "remember" does not fully encompass the various meanings of the Hebrew זכר. In the qal, זכר has the sense of the English "remember", "recollect", or "paying attention to", while in the hiphil it has the meaning "mention" or "invoke".[3] Eising points out the difficulty of translating the hiphil as a causative, "cause to remember" or "bring to remembrance", since this meaning often cannot be made to fit the context in which it appears. He argues instead for the translation "announce", "extol", or "proclaim", maintaining that "The causative function of the hiphil consists in stating the effect the mention of a fact has upon the hearer ..."[4]

זכר need not refer only to an activity in the present, but can refer to something which will be done in the future, as in the case of Ps. 77:12:[5] "I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD; I will remember your wonders of old."[6] Also, זכר describes not only an act of internal reflection, but often the expectation of an outward response, particularly when it is God who is asked to "remember".[7] The lament psalmist believes that if God remembers, he will act to change the circumstance of the psalmist.

> Remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago, which you redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage. Remember Mount Zion, where you came to dwell.
> Remember this, O LORD, how the enemy scoffs, and an impious people reviles your name.
> Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals; do not forget the life of your poor forever.
> Rise up, O God, plead your cause; remember how the impious scoff at you all day long.[8]

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[2] These community memories are what Emil Fackenheim refers to as "root experiences". These experiences arise out of past historical events and create a faith which, in the Old Testament, is frequently tested against new experiences. According to Fackenheim, the element of tension between past and present is an essential element in making the power remembered in the past accessible to the present. *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), 9-14.

[3] R. Laird Harris et al., eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 241.

[4] G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, tran. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing House, 1975), 74.

[5] All references to the Psalms will use the verse numbering found in the Hebrew text, including citations from English translations.

[6] Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical citations in English will be taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible.

[7] Pedersen draws attention to the connection between thought and action in the meaning of זכר; Johs Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vols. 1-2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 106-107. Also see Childs for a critique which examines the limits of Pedersen's argument; Brevard S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1962), 17-30.

[8] Psalm 74:2, 18-19, 22.

Thus, whereas the English word remember refers to a process of internal reflection, the Hebrew word זכר adds to this reflection the external elements of speaking and acting upon that which is remembered.[9] Because remembering in Hebrew implies and even requires a response which is consistent with the memory, זכר defines the identity of the one who owns the memories as his or her own. Loyalty to one's memories is expected, so that to stop serving God and to follow after idols is to forget him (Ps. 44:21; 106:7) and for God to forget the psalmist is for him to stop protecting him or her and keeping him or her alive (Ps. 42:10; 31:3). The psalmist expects God to speak and to act in a way which is consistent with the way he is remembered to speak and act, because that is a description of who God is. Thus, the act of remembering implies a certain level of commitment to that which is remembered. For Israel, God is who he is remembered to be and if he fails to speak and act in a way which is consistent with his identity, he must be reminded of who he is by remembering his people, his covenant with them, and the enemies which oppress them.[10]

Basic to any consideration of the use and meaning of זכר is Brevard Childs' classic study *Memory and Tradition in Israel*. Childs' study confirms the close tie suggested by Pedersen between internal reflection and external response through action inherent in זכר. He also observes a basic difference between זכר with God as the subject and with Israel as the subject. God does not remember, says Childs, in order to actualize the past, but can be called upon to remember present events. Chronology takes on a secondary importance as "God's memory encompasses his entire relationship with his people."[11] The result of Israel's remembering of God's past acts is a renewed sense of encountering God in the present time and circumstance. Furthermore, whereas Childs identifies the setting of God's remembering exclusively with the cult, Israel's remembrance is found in a broad range of settings. In the context of the complaint psalm, a crisis arises between the traditional cultic affirmations about God and the current experience of God by the worshippers. In the cult, says Childs, remembering serves a vital role in the internalization of the tradition in a new setting. Remembering for Israel results in actualizing those memories so that "there was an immediate encounter, an actual participation in the great acts of redemption."[12] It is not, however, a retreat into the past event being remembered, but a reapplication of that memory in the new context. So, for example, the theology of remembrance which is a key element in Deuteronomy serves to call each new generation "to obedient response through the medium of her tradition."[13]

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[9] Thus Childs concludes that "Memory is not identical with the action, but is never divorced from it." Childs, *Memory and Tradition*, 33.
[10] In Isaiah 62:6, God himself provides watchers (שֹׁמְרִים) on the walls of Jerusalem to remind him to do what he is supposed to do and what he has already purposed to do.
[11] Childs, *Memory and Tradition*, 41-42.
[12] Ibid., 84.
[13] Ibid.

For Childs, redemptive history is not the "real event" being remembered, but also each successive remembering of that event by Israel in a new time and place. He asserts that "... an understanding of the redemptive history depends on hearing the witness of all the different layers which reflect Israel's response to the divine initiative."[14]

Childs' foundational work raises a number of issues and questions which Childs himself does not address and which will be considered in this present study. First of all, Child's introduces but does not develop the notion that, through the actualization of memories, God is encountered anew by the worshippers. He describes this encounter in terms of "internalizing" the tradition, but makes no attempt to clarify what he means by that expression. In this present study I will examine the ways in which the psalmists understood their new encounters with God in the tradition. Secondly, Childs describes the effect of actualized memory in the Deuteronomic context as leading to a response of renewed obedience to God. Childs does not, however, examine the result of actualization in the complaint psalms which is very different. I will develop the argument in this present work that actualization in the context of a complaint psalm does not result in the worshippers' obedience to God in the sense of the keeping the Deuteronomic law, but requires instead an act of public testimony on the part of the psalmist which serves to confirm the memory before the great congregation and leads to its reappropriation by that community. Thirdly and most significantly, Childs makes the very important observation in his closing chapter that redemption history cannot be understood solely in terms of the original event which is remembered, but includes as well each new remembering and actualization of that event. He does not, however, go on to describe this "layering" process through which the remembered event grow and changes which each new remembrance. I will argue that, in the psalms of lament, that actualization takes the form of a perceived response by God which results in the affirmation of the memories as true. Also, I will maintain that testimony before the great assembly, an important element of many psalms of lament which draw on memories of God's saving acts, is fundamental to the growth and change of the redemptive history which Childs has suggested. I understand this present work as expanding and developing a number of the directions indicated by Childs' study.

The Hebrew understanding of memory also informs the way in which I will be using the term "story". With the advent of narrative theology, the term story has come to mean many different things. I will be using story to refer to the sum of those events, remembrances, words, and experiences which together give the community which produced and prayed the Psalms their identity and define their relationship with Yahweh. Story is not history in the modern sense and is not interested in strict chronology or exhaustive description. Without taking up the vexed question of whether

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[14] Ibid., 89.

such a thing as an objective history is even possible, I will use history to refer to the modern enterprise of historiography in which an attempt is made to reconstruct past events while adhering to the ideals of objective detachment, scholarly suspicion, and independent confirmation for testimony-based assertions in historical documents. The ones telling Israel's story do not maintain an objective detachment from the tale being told. Indeed, for a story to be owned, to be "our" story, "we" must be actively involved in it. But because the story of the Psalms community is about the identity of a people and about their relationship with Yahweh, it cannot be disinterested in questions of what happened. Story recounts the past interaction with Yahweh which resulted in the birth of the community of the Psalms, but that recital is always in the context of the ongoing relationship with Yahweh in the present. The Psalms community's story is formed from the sum total of their memories and, like those memories, is a growing, dynamic account of Israel's relationship with Yahweh in the past, present, and future. Thus, I will be using story to refer to the sum total of community memories which provide the community with a sense of identity and which defines their understanding of reality. To understand the Psalm community's story, then, it is necessary to speak both of their memories, which have formed the story as it is told in the present, and their experiences, which test, reinterpret, and add to the story. Because the community story is integrated with community experience in the present in ways which call on experience to be consistent with the story, I will develop the argument that, in the context of the psalm of lament, the story is an "historical story". It is not a history, but neither is it disinterested in what happened. Israel is interested in what happened to the extent that what happened in the past defines the parameters of what may happen in the present. It is through the process of integrating memory and experience that the story is revitalized, reaffirmed, and owned by the current community which tells it.

In the psalms of lament, the psalmist is interested in those memories which portray God as acting to deliver, protect, forgive, and heal. In confronting the experience of God's absence, silence, and hiddenness, the psalmist draws on three different categories of memory; memories of creation which define Yahweh's identity as being a life-giving and saving God, memories of the exodus which create a national and community identity in relation to Yahweh, and memories in the psalmist's and the present community's own past which act as a point of contact, allowing them to place themselves within the larger framework of the whole collection of the community's memories of the past. In the context of the psalms of lament, memory refers to those events which were experienced directly by the psalmist, to those which were contained within the nation of Israel's "traditions" of their relationship with Yahweh, and to those which have their origins before the beginnings of history, that is, in the creation accounts which cannot be remembered as something which was directly experienced, but which serve to identify Israel in their relationship with Yahweh. A sharp distinction should not

be made, however, between personal memory, Israel's national history, and their creation stories because, in memory recitals, the psalmist makes no such sharp distinctions between creation "myth"[15], salvation "history", and personal "recollection" when drawing upon the praying community's memory. Thus, the memory of the praying community includes recollection, history, and myth, but cannot be confined to or adequately defined by any one of these three alone. Memory, in the sense that the lament psalmist uses it, refers to the story of the relationship between Yahweh and his community of faith, both horizontally on a personal, a community, and a national level, and vertically in the past, present, and future, transcending at times the bounds of human experience which is subject to recollection. Thus when the psalmist says that he or she will remember or will call upon Yahweh to remember, that which is to be remembered are events, recollections, and accounts which define the Psalm community's relationship with Yahweh. The crisis of the lament psalm is, therefore, essentially a crisis of relationship in which the defining memories of the community are called into question by present experience.

2.1.2 Memories of God's Presence as Creator

In one sense, it is strange to refer to creation recitals as being part of Israel's "memory" because, while humankind are part of the biblical creation account, they are not witnesses to it and cannot, therefore, "remember" it.[16] The psalmist does, nevertheless, reflect upon the creation events, just as he or she reflects on the exodus events, in addressing the circumstance of lament. The lament writers use creation recitals to serve the same function as historical recitals and personal recollections, that is, to define the nature of Israel's relationship with Yahweh, to point out the contradiction between defining memory and experienced reality, and to argue on the basis of that contradiction that Yahweh can and should respond to change the circumstance which brought about the lament. Thus, in the context of the psalms of lament, it is appropriate to understand creation recital to be part of the praying community's memories of Yahweh.

The association between God and creation is not a characteristic unique to the writers of the Old Testament, but is one which they share in common with many of their

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[15] The term myth can have a number of different meanings, but I will limit its use in this study and understand it to refer to a reported "event" which lies outside of human recollection, but which, nevertheless, functions as a community memory in the larger story of the community. "Myths" about a community's origin, along with histories and personal recollections, function to tell the story of the community, to give them a sense of identity and to help constitute their sense of reality.

[16] The psalmist does not use the verb זכר to refer to reflection on God's acts of creation, with the possible exception of Ps. 77:12, "I will call to mind (זכר) the deeds of the LORD; I will remember your wonders of old", which may refer both to memories of the exodus and of creation in verses 16-21.

neighbours. The ancient Babylonian creation stories, for example, depict the dualistic struggle which exists between the chaos dragon Tiamat and the god Marduk who advances in a storm cloud to give battle and who defeats and kills the monster, establishing and assuring order in the universe. It is, however, a precarious security, as the battle between Marduk and Tiamat must be reenacted with the cycles of each passing year. Imagery drawn from Ancient Near Eastern creation stories can be found in some biblical depictions of Yahweh's creation (Ps. 74:13-14; 77:17-20; Isa. 51:9).

While the psalm writers, at times, borrow from the language and imagery of the creation stories of their neighbours, they do not do so uncritically. The psalmists adapt the creation stories of their neighbours to fit their own purposes. Christoph Barth has pointed out, for example, that nowhere in the Psalms is the myth of the conquest of death to be found intact, that death is nowhere given divine status or honour, that the idea of a cyclic repetition of the defeat of death does not appear in the Psalter, and that Israel consistently relates the conquest of death with the "faith of Israel".[17] McKenzie draws attention to the fact that the borrowing of creation imagery and language from other Semitic groups by Old Testament writers is restricted largely to poetic passages in the Old Testament and is carefully avoided in the creation accounts of Genesis. Furthermore, he notes that, when such stories are utilized in Old Testament poetic writings, the work of the creative deity is attributed to Yahweh and no attention is given to other gods or elements in the story.[18] Any evaluation of the psalm writers' adaptation and use of the myth-imagery of their neighbours must, therefore, take account of the different emphases placed on and uses made of such creation accounts by both the biblical writers in general and the psalm writers in specific.

The most notable difference in the biblical writer's use of commonly-held creation imagery is the association in Old Testament writings between creation story and historical events in the life of the nation. The Bible is distinctive in its emphasis on human history as the sphere of divine action. While there continues to be widespread debate among scholars as to how best to define "history", it can be demonstrated that Israel stands out from their neighbours in the prominent place that God's acts in history occupy in their religious writings.[19] The biblical writers adapted the mythical images which they borrowed from their neighbours, so that the creation of Yahweh is an event which marks the beginning of history. Thus, the creation of Adam and Eve is presented as the climax of

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[17] Christoph F. Barth, *Introduction to the Psalms*, tran. R. A. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 52-54.

[18] John L. McKenzie, "A Note on Psalm 73(74):13-15." *ThS* 11 (1950): 281-282.

[19] Albrektson's landmark study, while arguing effectively that Israel's understanding of divine activity in history cannot be said to be unique to Israel, affirms the uniqueness of the prominence which Israel gives to Yahweh acting in history. (Bertil Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel* [Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1967], 115-116.)

creation and the genealogies of their descendants occupy a prominent place structurally in the book of Genesis.

The recasting of Ancient Near Eastern creation myths within the context of history acted to reshape the form of those myths. Jon Levenson points out that the forces which oppose Yahweh in creation are no longer primordial but are themselves creatures. The creation of the great sea monsters did not occur until the fifth day of Yahweh's creation (Gen. 1:21) and in Psalm 104 Leviathan is represented as a completely domesticated creature of Yahweh's making.[20] Levenson argues that the Hebrew Bible has adapted the imagery of Yahweh's struggle against chaos in order to explore the notion of his incomplete "mastery". He maintains that images from the creation stories of Israel's neighbours appear in the Old Testament precisely because Yahweh's mastery is neither complete nor assured and the language of myth is preserved in order to provide a means of expression in those times when God does not act to save. Chaos persists on the borders of creation, forever challenging Yahweh's mastery. Levenson argues that "... in Israel the combat myth of creation increasingly tended to appear in moments in which YHWH and his promises to the nation seemed discredited."[21]

The association between God as creator and as sovereign over the created world can be most clearly seen in Deutero-Isaiah. In Second Isaiah, the Yahweh who first created Israel as a nation (Isa. 43:1-7) performs acts of new creation to return his people from exile (Isa. 45:9-13) and rebuild Jerusalem (Isa. 44:24-28). Yahweh also creates abundant new life in the desert in order to sustain the poor as they return from exile (Isa. 41:17-20) and uses his shepherd Cyrus to subdue the nations as an expression of his creative power (Isa. 45:1-7). Thus, Yahweh's creation of the nation Israel in the exodus and redemption of his people from exile are understood by Isaiah as expressions of his creative activity and are used to indicate not the idea of novelty, but of Yahweh's sovereignty over idols.[22] Few traces of foreign imagery, however, remain in these passages. The mastery of Yahweh is not in doubt in Deutero-Isaiah as his opponents are only vain idols, worthless bits of stone and wood (Isa. 40:18-20; 44:12-20; 45:5-18), and foreign creation myth imagery is conspicuous by its absence.[23] Thus, the biblical writer's use and adaptation of creation myths which were common to the other cultures of their time appears to be selective and limited.

God-as-creator is not a theme which runs uniformly throughout the Old Testament. As a survey of the use of the word ברא demonstrates, the notion of God as

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[20] Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 53.
[21] Ibid., 132.
[22] A thorough study of the topic of creative redemption in Second Isaiah may be found in Steven Lee, *Creation and Redemption in Isaiah 40-55* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).
[23] A likely exception to this being Isa. 51:9, "Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?"

creator is rarely referred to in the first half of the Old Testament outside of the book of Genesis and it is reasonable to consider whether the use of creation references in the Psalter serves the same function as such references in Genesis or Deutero-Isaiah. As has already been mentioned, the psalmist does not make a sharp distinction between exodus memories and creation recitals. In Psalm 77:17-21, for example, creation imagery and exodus memory are indistinguishable, while in Psalm 136, the move from creation recital to exodus recital is made without pause or interruption.[24]

In the Psalter, references to the creation of Yahweh appear most frequently in the context of praise and, in that context , borrowing of creation imagery from the myths of Israel's neighbours is infrequent. The writers of lament, however, make use of commonly held creation imagery much more frequently, but not to express doubts about Yahweh's mastery , as Levenson suggests, but about his relationship with Israel. In Psalm 74, the psalmist seeks to motivate God to destroy the Babylonians who have themselves destroyed his temple, which is a central symbol for the presence of Yahweh with his people. In order to do this, the psalmist draws on creation memories which are cast in the form of Yahweh's battle with and victory over the Leviathan in order to argue that Yahweh and not the gods of those who have destroyed the temple is supremely powerful. The assumption of the psalmist is not, however, that Yahweh was overpowered by the gods of those who destroyed the temple, but that he chose to cast off his people in anger. The issue in Psalm 77 is also his relationship with Israel centered around the statement "It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed." I will argue in chapter four that Psalm 77 is an unresolved lament which questions the continued veracity of Yahweh's relationship with Israel, mixing borrowed creation imagery and exodus memories. Psalm 89 affirms Yahweh's victory over Rahab in the midst of the sea in the context of his perpetual covenant with the house of David, but then goes on to question whether this covenant is still in effect.

Thus, in the context of psalms of lament, creation recitals serve a particular purpose. They serve to articulate a relationship between Yahweh and Israel which has been cast into doubt by the circumstances of the moment. The question is not one of mastery, "Is Yahweh still able to save?", but one of relatedness, "Is Yahweh, who is able to save us, willing to do so?" Creation memories in the psalms of lament define who Yahweh is in relation to his people.

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[24] Fishbane has commented on the biblical writers' "reuse" of exodus imagery, adapting it in order to interpret subsequent events in the life of the nation. He points, for example, to the combination of the imagery of the crossing of the Reed Sea and the Jordan river in Psalm 114:3. (Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* [New York: Schocken Books, 1979], 123.)

2.1.3 Memories of God's Mighty Acts in History

A second group of memories upon which the lament psalmist draws are memories of Yahweh's exodus deliverance of the nation from Egypt. Again, these are memories not in the sense that those who recite them were present at the events recalled, but in the sense that they serve to identify the community with whom Yahweh is in relationship and to describe the nature of that relationship. This collection of memories is frequently described in terms of God's mighty saving acts to deliver and preserve his people.

The notion of God acting in history is highly problematic and has been much debated. While a detailed survey of the discussion of God's mighty saving acts falls outside of the scope of this present study, several of the issues which that discussion has raised must be examined, particularly when considering the psalmist's use of exodus memories in the lament psalms. Here I will consider briefly some of the limits which exist in our ability to speak of God acting in human history from within a modern context, while in chapter three I will consider the more specific question of how God's acting in history is understood and utilized both by the psalmist and in psalm interpretation.

The God of Israel is a God who acts decisively in history, not simply reenacting the events of original creation within a timeless cultic setting, but intervening in events of history in order to change the course of history. To use Anderson's words,

> ... in Israel's faith the realm of the sacred was located in the midst of history, not in some mythical twilight zone, for Israel experienced the reality of God in "concrete events and interpersonal relationships." Instead of cultically imitating actions of the gods in "the olden days" beyond historical recall, Israel remembered and elaborated events that happened in a definite place and time.[25]

Throughout the Old Testament, Israel frequently appeals to community memories of God's past saving acts within the nation's history.

Israel's recital of memories of God's saving acts occupies a central place of importance in their understanding of their own identity and of their relationship with Yahweh. But when we consider the historicity of God's acts in his relationship with Israel in the context of modern scholarship, two equal and opposite erroneous extremes are possible. The first is to argue that our ability to establish the historicity of these recitals of God's mighty saving acts is absolutely essential, either for our own faith or for that of Israel or both. The second error is to maintain that the acts themselves (what did or did not "happen") are finally irrelevant to questions of faith; that truth may be contained, for example, in the ideas and concepts found in biblical accounts of what God has said and done, without depending in any way on the historicity of such accounts. In other words,

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[25] Bernhard W. Anderson, *Creation Versus Chaos*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 31.

the truths of biblical revelation are illustrated by biblical accounts but are independent of them, in the sense that they are "true" whether or not the biblical accounts refer to historical events.

This first position, which maintains that we can accept the Bible as divine revelation only to the extent that we can establish the historicity of the accounts which it contains, presents the scholar who holds such a view with two basic problems; the restrictions and limits found in the science of history in general and the problem of identifying and proving the presence of God in any particular historical event. Thus, the question of the historicity of biblical writings is a doubly vexed one.

History is distinct from the natural sciences which depend heavily on direct observation and measurement, on repetition, and on experimentation in which variables may be controlled and manipulated at will. The historian is extremely limited in his or her access to the object of study. Bebbington notes two problems which confront the historian as he or she tries to gain access to the events of history. The first is the problem of access to the evidence. Unlike the natural scientist who may rely on direct observation and experimentation, the historian has no direct access to the past. He or she must rely on fragmentary physical evidence and second-hand accounts for the evidence needed to draw conclusions. The second limit placed on the historian results from this restricted access to the evidence from which he or she draws conclusions. Because of the distance created by time between the event being studied and the historian, his or her own judgments enter much more prominently in the formation of conclusions. History, more than many other sciences, is subject to the judgments of the historical investigator. As a result, Bebbington argues that historical knowledge "... is always probable rather than certain."[26]

When assertions of God's presence in history in the form of action or speech is subjected to the rigours of historical evaluation, additional difficulties arise. One means of addressing the problem has been to restrict God's presence to "natural" historical events, such as the displacement of the Babylonian empire by Cyrus the Persian. In this "objective" historical occurrence, the prophet Isaiah saw the hand of Yahweh, so that Yahweh could say of Cyrus "He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose."[27] But such perceptions of God acting in history offer an interpretation of historical events which will always be open to competing interpretations. The "truth" of the biblical interpretation can never be proven, only believed or disbelieved. Something more is needed in order to provide objective evidence.

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[26] David Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1990), 3-11.
[27] Isaiah 44:28.

This has led some conservative scholars to argue for the historicity of "supernatural" expressions of divine presence. George Ramsey has effectively summarized this approach.

> Miracles, or what we might call "unlawful" occurrences (i.e., happenings contrary to the known laws of nature), constitute phenomena which cannot be explained by natural causes. So (the reasoning goes) the positing of a supernatural cause is the only means of explaining such occurrences. Miracles thereby become objective evidence of the activity of God .... Since, according to the thinking of these writers, verification is necessary to prevent religious conviction from being a "leap in the dark," and since miracles are the means by which God's existence and activity are most easily verified, the historicity of the miracle stories becomes the keystone of their theological system.[28]

The activity of God in the miracle stories of the Bible, however, frequently leaves behind very little in the way of physical evidence. Furthermore, archaeological investigation has produced conflicting evidence. While some miraculous events are not contradicted by the archaeological evidence, others, such as the miraculous destruction of Jericho, appear to be ruled out.[29] Evidence for the miraculous, therefore, rests primarily on the testimony of witnesses to such miracles and the "objective proof" of such miracles lies in the veracity of such witnesses. Ramsey's principle criticism of this dependence on testimony is the lack of any critical evaluation on the part of "fundamentalist" writers of the veracity of such witnesses, so that "what happened" becomes simply whatever the biblical writer reports, making the fundamentalist scholar simply a "... purveyor of tradition rather than an historian ,..."[30] Thus Ramsey points to the principle limitation of using testimony as a basis for evaluating historicity, the difficulty of establishing the reliability of the witness.

Miracle stories such as Moses's burning bush or the parting of the waters of the Red Sea fail the test of probability, that is, they are by definition improbable or "unlawful". The task of the historian, then, is to reject such reports as non-historical, unless the testimony of such witnesses is considered to be sufficiently convincing to outweigh the argument of probability. It is the assumption of most modern biblical scholarship that such testimony is never sufficiently compelling to overcome the argument of the improbability of the miraculous. Thus, biblical reports of God's presence as they are expressed through his acts in history are generally rejected by modern scholars as unhistorical, either in the sense that they are untrue or that they are inaccessible to historical evaluation. Ramsey concludes correctly that

> Historical, scientific methods cannot verify the workings of God. His activity is always 'hidden.' There are many happenings where we may, in faith, perceive

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[28] George W. Ramsey, *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Reconstructing Israel's Early History* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 108. Ramsey criticizes in particular the theological views of John Warwick Montgomery, Clark Pinnock, and Francis Schaeffer (Ibid., 107-115).
[29] Kathleen M. Kenyon, *Digging Up Jericho* (New York: Frederick A Praeger, Inc., 1957).
[30] Ibid., 111.

> his activity, but this faith-perception will always be what the writer of the Hebrews said it was -- the conviction of things not seen, not empirically demonstrable.[31]

Ramsey's argument, while pointing out the severe limits of inquiry into the acting of God in history, does not lead to the conclusion that God does not act in history, either naturally or supernaturally. Whereas the historian's ability to establish the reliability of a witness to a miraculous event may never be sufficiently strong to establish the historicity of such an event against the rule of probability, neither can such limits in ability be accepted as proof that the improbable, or as Ramsey calls it the "unlawful", did not happen. The probability of a particular individual winning the grand prize in a national lottery is very small, so that we may reasonably say of a particular lottery ticket "it will not win", but the grand prize in a lottery is, in fact, won on a regular basis and we cannot say "the lottery is not winnable". In order to exclude the supernatural as a possibility, it would be necessary to demonstrate both that natural laws exist and that there cannot exist instances of those natural laws being violated. Ramsey demonstrates that the testimonies of witnesses to any particular miraculous account are always improbable, but his argument does not address the question of whether or not God does, in fact, act and speak in "unlawful" ways. Modern historical method has failed to make a case for or against the reality of God acting in history because of the inaccessibility of such actions to historical method.

But if it is impossible to establish the historicity of the biblical story, it is also impossible to abandon completely the question of history and yet maintain the commitment to memory found in the Psalter. Israel draws from these stories their sense of identity as a people in relationship with Yahweh and that identity is formed from the experiences of interaction which the stories recount. The stories may not be history in the modern sense, but neither are they arbitrary inventions because they refer to experiences and encounters which have shaped and defined Israel and which they, in turn, use to shape and define their world. Furthermore, the psalms of lament record part of the process of testing these stories against experienced reality and demanding of God that remembered story and experienced reality be consistent. Thus, while it is impossible from a historical point of view to describe these experiences as purely objective data, neither is it possible to change these stories for another set of stories because it is from experiences described in these stories that the psalm writers have derived their identity and defined their relationship with Yahweh.

An example of the attempt to disassociate faith from any historical bases for faith is found in the writings of Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann maintains that the kernel truth of the Bible is non-historical, dismissing the notion that history and historical acts are in any

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[31] Ibid., 115.

way relevant for us unless we ourselves can share in the experience of the same events. He states that,

> We can see God's act only in an occurrence that enters into the reality of our own true life, transforming us ourselves. But we cannot understand a miraculous natural event such as the resuscitation of a dead man -- quite apart from its being generally incredible -- as an act of God that is in this sense of concern to us.[32]

Faith is understood by Bultmann not as holding a set of beliefs to be true, but as existential self-understanding, so that "... to believe in the cross of Christ means to accept the cross as one's own and to allow oneself to be crucified with Christ."[33]

Bultmann understood revelation as consisting of eternal truths which, while they may be first revealed in historical events, are independent of them. He states that:

> ... knowledge of these truths and acknowledgment of them are not bound to the knowledge or acknowledgment of historical epochs or of the historical persons through whom we first become conscious of them: we can recognize their validity and claim at any time. Thus reflection on history can have a pedagogical importance but it cannot be decisive.[34]

Because Bultmann identifies faith with self-understanding rather than with events outside of one's direct experience, the question may be asked, "Are there any past acts or events which are essential for faith?", to which Bultmann responds yes, the event of Jesus Christ. He denies, however, any access to that event historically. Van Harvey has pointed out the problem of trying to deny the historicity of an event, while at the same time holding onto that event as a basis for faith.

> Since he is committed to the view that God acts only in Jesus Christ and in the proclamation about him but insists that no historical knowledge of that event is relevant to faith, it is difficult to know what he means by an "act of God," or what possible relevance the life of Jesus has for one's self-understanding. [35]

If the memories of the Hebrew and Christian communities of faith are emptied entirely of any historical reference, those memories lose the ability to do anything other than to reflect to the reader his or her own existential experience. As a result, "... the act of revelation is contentless. It is a happening with no structure and in no way positively informs the pattern of faith."[36]

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[32] Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament & Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, tran. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 7.
[33] Ibid., 34.
[34] Ibid., 12-13.
[35] Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 143.
[36] Ibid., 144.

Bultmann's approach results first of all in a loss of ownership in the story being told. The biblical story may be recited and one may recognize oneself and one's own experience in that story, but it is not one's own story. It can have a "pedagogical importance", but it cannot define me and identify me in a way which I do not recognize. In addition to the loss of ownership in the story being told, a second result of Bultmann's approach is that the biblical story can no longer identify the reading community, even when their experiences call the story being told into question. Identification is only possible to the extent that the story aligns itself with the experience of the reader.

Whereas Bultmann denies the possibility of revelation outside of personal experience, the psalm writers place revelation in the form of memory recital over against personal experience. The lament psalms bring together the general truths about God which arise out of memories of past experiences of God's relation with Israel and present experiences which do not fit those memories. The psalmist no longer recognizes past revelation in present experience, but will not deny either revelation (the story of who he or she and the nation of Israel are in relation to this God) or contradictory experience (that Yahweh no longer participates in that relationship as he has in the past), but brings both to God in prayer seeking resolution in the form of renewed revelation. The context of prayer in the lament psalm is frequently a specific situation which requires a particular response and the psalmist is seeking for God to act again as he is remembered to have acted in the past. For the military leader of Psalm 44, faced with a military defeat and the continued threat of powerful enemies, the general concept that God acts to bring victory in battle is of little use if no instance in which he has done so in the past can be identified. The psalmist is actively involved in testing experienced reality against community memory. The memories of the community are essential for approaching God with the demand that he act, particularly when all the evidence of the moment tells against such action.

I will argue that biblical memory-recital is neither history nor is it unhistorical, but is a story which makes a truth-claim on the hearer. Biblical testimony to the speaking or acting of God in the past offers an improbable truth-claim for the reader's consideration. The historicity of the truth-claim of such testimony may be believed or disbelieved, but it may not be proven or disproven objectively, that is, from a detached and uninvolved distance. Memory recitals in the psalms of lament bring together one version of truth, the reality which is contained in the community's memory, with a contradictory version of truth, the reality of experiences which call for those memories to be rejected as either a false truth or one which is no longer valid. Lament psalms serve to test and challenge the reliability of the community's testimony. The "proof" which the psalmist seeks is not a demonstration of the historicity of the community's memories, but a fresh experience of God which will negate the presently experienced version of truth and which will confirm the truth of the community's memories. The psalmist wants God

to act again as he has in the past to save him or her. This expectation of proof demonstrates the connection for the psalmist between "what is true" and "what is believed to have happened".

Thus the psalms of lament utilize community memories of what Yahweh has done and, therefore, who he is and how he can be expected to act, in order to call Yahweh's attention to the contradiction between what the tradition says about him and what the current circumstances suggest. In order to motivate God to respond and save, transforming lament to praise, the memories which the psalmist recites occupy a central place in the lament psalm.

2.1.4 Memories of Personal and Communal Experiences of God

Within the context of psalms of lament, the memories of Israel as a nation are owned by the psalmist personally, that is, he or she seeks experiences of Yahweh's saving action, so that the psalmist's place within the memories of the historical community will be confirmed and the veracity of the community's memories about Yahweh may be established anew. Personal memories of past experiences of Yahweh's salvation are utilized in the lament psalms to strengthen the psalmist's claim of being connected to the community and the community's memories (Ps. 9:2-7; 40:2-4; 42:5). Furthermore, when Yahweh responds to the prayers of the psalmist, he or she offers a personal testimony that Yahweh acts to save (Ps. 18:5-7, 17-20; 30:2-4, 12-13; 34:5-7; 66:16-20; 116:1-6; 118:10-14; 124) which serves both to confirm the psalmist's place in the community and their memories and to add to those memories.

The principle tasks of the psalmist in the recital of memory in the psalms of lament are, first of all, to connect the individual with the community and, secondly, to connect the present community with the community of Israel's memories, that is, the psalmist must find his or her place first in the immediate community (in the case of individual laments) and second in the larger history of God's saving acts for Israel. When reciting the praying community's memories of God's saving acts in the context of lament, the psalmist will include testimonies of his or her own past experiences of God's deliverance in order to establish that he or she belongs to the community of Israel and that the present-day community is part of the larger historical community, sharing in their memories and their relationship with Yahweh .

Fisch speaks of this kind of praying as "covenantal discourse".

> The term I would wish to propose for defining the nature of this kind of poetry [prayer in the first person singular] is "covenantal discourse." The words become the sign of a covenant of praise, binding together a community on the horizontal plane and, on the vertical plane, binding generation to generation. We should remind ourselves that in the covenant mode the individual, no matter how solitary he is, is bound up in the solidarity of the group and the group, no matter how solidary, is addressed in the second-person singular (cf. Exodus 20), each

> and every member being as it were charged with personal responsibility. The text of the Psalms often affirms this by way of testimony ...[37]

Fisch sees the struggle of Psalm 22 as the struggle to overcome isolation. "The sequel [Ps. 22:4-6] makes it clear that such loneliness [found in verses 2-3] must be and is overcome: it is overcome horizontally by the speaker's joining himself to the fellowship of all Israel, and vertically by his joining himself to the past and the future."[38] When the psalmist is successful in his or her attempt to "reconnect" with the horizontal and vertical communities of Israel, he or she offers testimony which extends into the future by affirming that, although nothing has yet changed in the circumstances of the psalmist, the enemy of the psalmist is seen as already defeated and the psalmist rejoices in a deliverance as though it were already received.[39] The psalmist also recognizes his or her connection with the future in the obligation to testify before the great congregation (frequently expressed as a vow of praise), thus carrying the memories of the community into the future.

The recital of community memories, then, becomes an act of community-building for the future. To use Moltmann's description, "Narrative communities are shaped by the re-calling and making-present of their common origin, and by the shared voyage of discovery into memories."[40] Memories of the past are, in this way, encountered in the present and extended into the future. The psalmist adds to the community memory his or her own experiences of God's presence to save and they become a part of the psalmist's resource for responding to God's silence in the future.

2.1.5 Lament as a Challenge to Memory

The experience of God's hiddenness and silence which is given voice in prayers of lament becomes the setting in which the memories of the community are rehearsed, tested, argued for, and, it is hoped, revitalized and added to. This is the critical crisis point where the memory-recitals of the psalmist are challenged and must be reevaluated in the light of contradictory experiences. The psalmist will neither radically alter nor abandon the community memories. Neither will he or she excuse Yahweh from attending to those memories nor in any way modify the reality of the experience of abandonment, silence, and hiddenness which challenge their veracity. The prayer of the psalmist creates a tension between remembered presence and experienced absence which the psalmist

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37 Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose*, 118.
38 Ibid., 114.
39 Ibid., 111.
40 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 25.

sustains, often at great risk and cost, demanding of Yahweh that he respond to reaffirm the community's memory.

Because the context of the lament psalm is one of great need in the face of God's hiddenness, the type of presence which the psalm writer seeks and the types of memories upon which he or she draws are very specific. The psalmist remembers God's saving acts, because she or he does not simply seek Yahweh's presence, but specifically Yahweh's presence to save. Thus expressions of Yahweh's presence in the context of the lament psalms are largely confined to a presence which responds to the psalmist's lament or plea. Most frequently in the psalms of lament, the psalmist asks God for two things: deliverance from distress and judgment of her or his enemies. These, then, become the "test case" for memory. The lament psalms set up a tension between memory and experience which may only be resolved when memory is finally abandoned as untrue or when Yahweh acts again as he is remembered to have acted in the past, not repeating past action but bringing about a fresh deliverance.

In examining present-day discussions of God's presence and absence, it would be helpful to consider the extent to which this tension between remembered presence and experienced absence is utilized as a tool for understanding the nature of God's presence with and hiddenness from the community of faith. In the next section, I will examine six different authors' attempts to articulate the problem of God's hiddenness and silence in the light of the way in which the tension between memory and experience appears in their arguments.

2.2 The Tension Between God's Presence and Absence

2.2.1 The Costliness of Tension

I have suggested (and will argue more fully in chapters three and four) that memory is used in the psalms of lament to create a tension between remembered presence and the experience of absence. The function of this tension is argumentative and motivational so that the psalmist seeks to motivate Yahweh to act as he is remembered to have acted in the past and not to continue to be silent, hidden, or absent. This tension, which both affirms Yahweh's absence and refuses to relinquish the expectation that he will be present to save, is at the heart of the lament psalm. Any attempt either to deny or qualify absence or to make expectations of presence general or abstract diminishes the tension that the psalmist sought to sustain.

A survey of the literature on God's presence and absence reveals the infrequency with which this tension is preserved in modern considerations of these two experiences of God. In biblical scholarship which examines the question of God's presence and absence, there is a marked tendency either to abandon Israel's memories or, much less frequently,

to minimize or deny the experience of absence. The first dissolves the tension found in the psalms of lament in favour of a God who is absent, who cannot be relied upon to act to save, while the second results in assured presence which never seriously entertains and explores those experiences of life which testify that God has abandoned his people. While there is a clear expectation in scripture that God will be present to save, the psalms of lament express the bewilderment, confusion, and outrage caused by God's silence and hiddenness in times of distress.

Precisely because Israel has experienced God as present, his absence is a point of major concern and crisis for Old Testament writers. So prevalent and important is this theme that Richard Boyce argues that the whole of the Old Testament may be characterized in terms of these experiences of God's presence and absence, which serve as a "... 'red thread' binding together the history of this god with this people ..."[41] Numbers of scholars have wrestled with the problem of trying to articulate a description of God's presence and absence, with widely varying results. I will summarize the views of Paul Fiddes, Samuel Terrien, Samuel Balentine, Eliezer Berkovits, James Crenshaw, and Tom Milazzo, evaluating the extent to which each author recognizes and makes use of the tension between remembered presence and experienced absence found in the Psalter.

2.2.2 Paul Fiddes

Paul Fiddes identifies God's presence directly with suffering and death. He argues that "... the mode of God's presence in a suffering world can only properly be understood as a suffering and death; only the idea of a God who suffers death can answer the challenge that 'God is dead'".[42] He goes on to say that "God is not absent and not irrelevant in our age, because he knows for himself the experience of death .... Suffering is a mode of God's presence, and cannot be used as a symbol for his absence".[43]

Fiddes has limited memory to include only memories of the suffering and death of Christ and has ignored those memories which speak of God as being present to save from distress, with the result that he collapses the tension between memory and experience. This restricted memory allows him to re-label experiences of suffering as expressions of God's presence. Because Christ has suffered and experienced death with us, we meet Christ in the midst of our own suffering. The result is a denial of experience, so that that which was experienced as a sign of God's abandonment and hiddenness now becomes a sign of his presence. The memories of the community are no longer memories of God saving from suffering, so that experiences of suffering are re-designated and their negative impact is effectively denied.

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[41] Richard Nelson Boyce, *The Cry to God in the Old Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 1.
[42] Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 176-177.
[43] Ibid., 191.

2.2.3 Samuel Terrien

According to Samuel Terrien, the average Israelite experienced God's presence in the cult. That sense of presence was, however, "... persistently compounded with an awareness of absence".[44] He argues that Hebrew religion is unique for recognizing the absence of God, because only in the Hebrew faith is God completely disassociated from nature.

With the foundation of a monarchy, Terrien argues, the elusive presence of Yahweh was diminished. "God is near, but his presence remains elusive. He is a 'walking God.'"[45] Building a Temple, therefore, was an important point of transition. "The elusiveness of presence, which had been until then the cardinal foundation of Hebraic faith, slowly gave way to the myth of Zion."[46] As the Old Testament unfolds, God's presence in Israel becomes more and more an elusive and distant thing. Terrien understands the expression of God's presence to change in well-ordered stages. God appears first in epiphanic visitations to the Patriarchs, is later sacramentally present in the Temple, next appears to the prophets in visions, is represented after that in the form of security and deliverance in the Psalter, becomes wisdom personified in the wisdom literature, is seen as a future epiphany in the Messianic hope, is present as the Word, and finally, in the New Testament, Jesus summarizes presence in the form of the Name and the Glory. Terrien argues that, whereas Yahweh was experienced as present at the beginnings of their history, there has been a progressive withdrawal by Yahweh, with the result that he is no longer present and history has become "a stage now empty of God".[47] He maintains that, after the exile, God is absent from history but present in the cosmos and he asserts that "Hebraism had been founded in divine presence. Judaism arose from divine absence".[48]

While Terrien's description of the changes which took place in the way in which the biblical writers perceived Yahweh to be present is helpful, his understanding of the elusive presence of Yahweh can be criticized on two points. Firstly, he claims that only the Hebrew religion is capable of experiencing divine absence because only in the faith of Israel is God completely separated from nature. It is unclear, though, how Terrien understands the pagan "nature-gods" to be present. If he means that, because pagan religions equate their gods with nature, they can never be physically absent, then it can be argued that Israel did not envision Yahweh as structurally absent in this sense either.

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[44] Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978), 28-29.
[45] Ibid., 170.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., 380.
[48] Ibid., 390.

Even when the psalmist spoke of God as hidden or absent, he or she continued to address Yahweh as the object of prayer. When Yahweh was said to be absent, that absence was described in terms of his failure to respond to a particular need of the people, that is, Yahweh was absent to save. If, on the other hand, Terrien means that pagan gods were always present to hear and to respond to prayer, then we would expect that pagans would not plead with their gods in prayer or say that their gods have not heard or answered their prayers. The association with nature of the gods of many of Israel's neighbours did not, however, guarantee either their accessibility or their response to prayer. Thus, it is difficult to see how the concepts of divine presence and absence amongst Israel's neighbours can be said to be qualitatively different from those which Israel held.

A second difficulty with Terrien's model arises from his argument for a successive withdrawal of God from human history. In order to argue his case, Terrien sometimes categorizes experiences of presence in rather arbitrary ways. Thus, for example, while the Patriarchs experienced God in theophanies, the visual experiences of Yahweh which prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel reported are referred to as visions, which for Terrien are, in some unspecified way, less immediate experiences of divine presence. It is particularly ironic that Terrien would see the advent of Emmanuel, "God with us", as expressing a continued distancing of God's self. Terrien also maintains that the different "stages" of withdrawing presence are distinct from one another and that the transition between different stages can, at times, be precisely identified. For example, he identifies Elijah's vision on Mt. Horeb (I Kings 19) as a marking a transition for Israel, saying that "... it closed the era of theophany and relegated it to the realm of the unrepeatable past. At the same time, it opened the era of prophetic vision, where miracles of nature became miracles of character."[49] And yet theophanies continue to occur in biblical writings, including the relatively late wisdom tradition reflected in Job. The Psalter contains expressions of presence from a number of Terrien's stages, including theophany, cultic encounter, wisdom writings, and deliverance and protection from danger. Thus, while Terrien rightly observes that expressions of God's presence in the Old Testament change in frequency and mode in different periods and types of literature, the pattern of divine withdrawal from history is neither as complete nor as well-delineated as he suggests.

Terrien has reduced the tension between remembered presence and experienced absence found in the Psalter by restricting Israel's memories of Yahweh's presence to act in history to the distant past. For Terrien, the door has been closed on divine action in history and there is no going back. Presence has become the Word proclaimed and received by the believing community.[50] Terrien has lost the use of memory; memory, that is, in the sense that the psalmist understood it; memory that has the power to impinge on

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[49] Ibid., 229.
[50] Ibid., 477.

the present and the potential to transform the future. With the loss of memory has come the loss of absence. God's presence has become increasingly elusive, but he is always present in the Church which proclaims and lives by the Word. Because there can be no memory of presence in history, no experience in history which testifies to God's absence can seriously challenge the claim of elusive presence.

2.2.4 Samuel Balentine

Samuel Balentine, in his study of references to the hiding of God's face in the Psalter, notes the relative infrequency of an association between the hiding of God's face and human sin in the Psalms and he concludes that this hiding cannot, therefore, be attributed automatically to human sin. He argues that,

> God's hiddenness is not primarily related to his punishment for disobedience. It is not basically a reflection of man's inability to understand or even to perceive God's presence in the world. It is manifest in both these ways, but is not restricted to them. It is rather an integral part of the nature of God which is not to be explained away by theological exposition of human failures or human limitations.[51]

Balentine does not, however, deny the connection found in scripture between God's absence and human sin. In the prophetic literature, he notes the more substantial connection between God's hiddenness and his judgment.[52] This prophetic emphasis on judgment for sin, however, serves to highlight the fact that the way in which the psalmist approaches the problem of divine hiddenness is different from that of the prophets. For the psalmist, because sin is not sufficient in itself to explain all of the biblical writer's experiences of God's hiddenness, that hiddenness is inexplicable.[53]

Balentine notes that the primary context of the hiding of God's face in the Psalter is that of lament. Indeed, hiddenness is an essential element of lament. If God is not truly hidden, then all lament becomes merely a prelude to thanksgiving.

> To strip the lament of this element of anxiety is not only to change its whole character, but it is also to miss out one of the significant insights into how the sense of the hiddenness of God was dealt with in the Old Testament .... Without the struggle the questions directed toward God would be meaningless, and to interpret all questions as merely preliminary to confessions of confidence is to be indifferent to the agony of the struggle out of which they were born.[54]

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[51] Samuel E. Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 175.
[52] Ibid., 164.
[53] Ibid., 166.
[54] Ibid., 124.

Hiddenness cannot be denied or relativized without dissolving the tension between presence and absence and turning lament into a liturgical formula with a predictable and assured outcome.

Balentine argues instead for the normality of both presence and hiddenness in Israel's relationship with her God. He maintains that "Both experiences derive from the nature of God himself. He is both hidden and present, both near and far away."[55] The point to which Balentine repeatedly draws the reader's attention is that the psalmist refuses to deny God's hiddenness by supplying the reader with a ready explanation in order to resolve the tension between God's presence and hiddenness. Particularly helpful is Balentine's observation that the psalmist is able to explore this tension, without excusing God by blaming human frailty or succumbing to despair, because he or she explores the hiddenness of God through speech addressed to God and in the context of community worship.[56]

Balentine's work advances the present discussion in a number of ways. Firstly, he has demonstrated the distinctive nature of the tension between remembered presence and experienced hiddenness or absence to save found in the Psalter. This tension is sustainable because lament is addressed to Yahweh and because no answer is provided by the praying community to the questions "Why?" and "How long?" The tension may only be resolved when Yahweh answers. Secondly, he has demonstrated that the experience of absence or hiddenness is an essential element of lament. Without unexplained hiddenness there can be no unresolved tension and, consequently, no genuine lament. To the extent that hiddenness can be accounted for, lament becomes simply a prelude to thanksgiving. Thirdly, he has suggested that the maintenance of this tension is only possible in the context of the worshipping community which addresses its lament directly to God and which provides the form that helps to make the experience of lament bearable.[57]

2.2.5 Eliezer Berkovits

Eliezer Berkovits begins his examination of God's presence in history from the definitive experience of the Jewish holocaust.[58] He maintains that "The question raised by the holocaust that concerns humanity most directly is not 'Where was God?', but 'Where was man?'"[59] The holocaust served, for Berkovits, to demonstrate the complete

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[55] Ibid., 172.
[56] Ibid., 170.
[57] Balentine follows Brueggemann in this observation. (Walter Brueggemann, "The Formfulness of Grief," *Int* 31 [1977]: 265.)
[58] Dan Cohn-Sherbok provides a helpful summary and critique of major holocaust theologians in his book *Holocaust Theology* (London: Lamp Press), 1989.
[59] Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith after the Holocaust* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1973), 36.

collapse of Christianity as a credible witness to the presence of God in the world. He denies that Christianity can speak of God's presence in a convincing way because it cannot really understand the notion of a hidden God. Hiddenness, argues Berkovits, contradicts the basic assumptions of the Christian faith.

> The 'hiding God' can hardly be an authentic Christian idea. The entire purpose of the incarnation in Christianity is salvation, to lift man out of his profane existence and give him reality as a new being in the realm of eternity. This is the function of the savior, to be accomplished in the epiphany of the Christian faith. By its very nature it can be achieved by a God who reveals himself; by the visible breaking of the transcendental into the realm of the profane. The very nature of this God incarnate is divinity made manifest. This God cannot not save. If he is in hiding, he does not save. If he does not save, he is not; his death is final and irrevocable.[60]

According to Berkovits, many Christian theologians subscribe to a naive and simplistic understanding of history which is founded on the idea of God's retributional justice, that is, the notion that prosperity demonstrates righteousness while persecution and suffering demonstrate unrighteousness.[61]

Berkovits sees the absence of God from history as necessary for human development. If God were to act directly in human history, that history would be destroyed, because history is the realm of human responsibility. He maintains that God's self-limiting in staying out of human history is, in fact, a sign of his strength.

> To curb the use of power where infinite power is at hand, to endure the mocking of one's enemies when one could easily eliminate them, that is true strength. Such is the mightiness of God. God is mighty, for he shackles his omnipotence and becomes 'powerless' so that history may be possible.[62]

Only through God's long-suffering is it possible for sinful humanity to continue to exist, but because God both permits free will and permits sinful humanity to persist, the inevitable result is the suffering of the innocent. He concludes that "... he who demands justice of God must give up man; he who asks for God's love and mercy beyond justice must accept suffering."[63]

As a result of these restrictions which God has placed on himself, the only means for God's presence to be manifested in history is through the continued survival of the nation of Israel, against all the odds.[64] Because God's presence is manifested through the unjust suffering of Israel, Berkovits sees exile as fundamental to the nature of Judaism, beginning when Abraham left his home and continuing until the present day. Christianity, says Berkovits, cannot witness to the presence of God in history, because

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[60] Ibid., 64.
[61] Ibid., 92.
[62] Ibid., 109.
[63] Ibid., 106.
[64] Ibid., 110.

they are too powerful. "Half a billion Christians all over the world prove nothing about God's presence in history. They are too many, too influential, too pervasive. They are a this-world power in the context of power history"[65], whereas, "To be chosen by God is to be chosen for bearing the burden of God's long-suffering silences and absences in history".[66] Berkovits argues effectively for the loss of the notion of God's absence in much of institutional Christianity. Furthermore, his understanding of Israel as a nation in exile articulates one expression of God's hiddenness. Berkovits has little to offer, however, in terms of a God who is present.

The strongest point of contact between Berkovits' understanding of the presence and silence of God and that found in the Psalms is his insistence on taking seriously those experiences which contradict presence. While he sometimes resorts to caricatures in his portrayal of the Christian church, he rightly points out the difficulty which many Christian theologies have in taking the silence of God seriously.

Berkovits abandons the formative memories of Israel except in a very restricted sense. They are valid to the extent that they testify to the continued suffering and survival of Israel. But by abandoning any notion of God's material intervention in history, Berkovits has lost the ability to protest. He can object to the injustice of the world, but he cannot not protest to God, petitioning for a change. Indeed, for Berkovits, the world is as it should be. The "just" God of Christianity is dead and God's presence is manifested in the world only so long as Israel continues to survive in a state of exile; against the odds. For Israel to cease from their suffering and establish themselves in power, peace, and security would be to remove the witness of God's presence. The Psalm's understanding of God's silence is different from that held by Berkovits in that the psalm writers call aloud to Yahweh in protest, demanding justice in this life.

2.2.6 James Crenshaw

James Crenshaw argues against the notion that God is always absent or silent when the innocent suffer. On the contrary, he maintains that the Old Testament sometimes speaks of a God who is present as an agent of suffering. In the command of God to Abraham to sacrifice his only son, in the wanton murder of the children and servants of Job, in the torment of Jeremiah and the abandonment of Qoheleth, Crenshaw sees evidence that God may act as a personal enemy. He notes, for example, the fact that for Job God is both too near (10:20) and too far away (23:3, 8-9),[67] concluding that "What

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65 Ibid., 114.
66 Ibid., 124.
67 James Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 61.

all this adds up to is easily expressed in a single sentence: Job thinks God has become a personal enemy."[68]

Crenshaw's arguments are one-sided and selective in their use and interpretation of the biblical text. He does not abandon memory, but explores a narrow field of evidence which tells against the larger tradition of a God who acts to save. For Crenshaw, Yahweh may not be absent or silent, but the Yahweh who may be approached with the demand that he save at times is. While his argument lacks balance, it serves to highlight in its most drastic form the tension between memory and experience. Finally this tension is unresolvable apart from God, so that lament, plea, and protest may only be addressed directly to God. He concludes one of his works with the statement, "That we cannot abandon the Lord is both a testimony to the profundity of sacred memory and a constant source of torment."[69]

2.2.7 Tom Milazzo

Tom Milazzo rejects the possibility of God's absence and wrestles instead with the problem of his inexplicable hiddenness. He begins by arguing that the question of the existence of God is not a modern one but that it has existed throughout scripture within the larger question, "Why, in the presence of God, is there death?"[70] If God exists, then his silence in the face of death becomes, for Milazzo, the irresolvable problem. Either we are guilty before God and deserve to die or God permits the death of the innocent and is, therefore, unjust, or he is not hidden but, in fact, absent.[71] Because the innocent suffer, Milazzo cannot accept the first option and is left to decide between the other two. But Yahweh, says Milazzo, refuses to come out of the shadows and be questioned and he begins to suspect that God is horribly present in the silence and that God is the source of terror. Because God could release us from death but chooses not to, he is implicated in and guilty of our death.[72] As long as Yahweh is a God of death rather than life, he is a monster.

> The God of death can be feared, but it cannot be loved. Insofar as fear casts out love, God cannot be loved. In the absence of love, of a heart that is given completely and without question to God's love, God's call inevitably remains unrequited and unsatisfied. That unrequited love becomes the occasion for YHWH's bitter rage, vengeance, and fury. Faith meets its death in the presence of a God that is always angry, bitter, cruel and lustful.[73]

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[68] Ibid., 68-69.
[69] Ibid., 119.
[70] G. Tom Milazzo, *The Protest and the Silence: Suffering, Death, and Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 23.
[71] Ibid., 44.
[72] Ibid., 150.
[73] Ibid., 122.

Israel, then, is caught in a terrible dilemma. On the one hand, God is essential to sustain life, but on the other hand, his presence remains forever in doubt.

> Israel lives in the sense of having been chosen by YHWH. Israel's heart has been sought by God. It was not Israel who chose God. Yet those pursued by God turn around and find that there is no God there. The presence that pursues the heart of Israel has no face, no presence, no embrace.[74]

For Milazzo, the only solution is for God to set us free from death without placing any conditions on our salvation, because such conditions would violate our freedom to love.

> YHWH's call to Israel in judgment calls the human freedom to love into question, for it calls human beings to give what cannot be given upon demand – the human heart. Theodicy becomes a problem at the point where the human freedom to love is eclipsed by the force of God's demand for human love. Deliverance, therefore, is as much a demonstration of God's love as it is an attempt by God to secure our love through our suffering.[75]

As long as we die in the presence of God, we are not free to love him. As long as we die, says Milazzo, "Death has already won our hearts."[76]

Because death persists and God remains forever hidden, there is finally nothing for humanity to do but protest against the silence. The dilemma of God's silence remains unsolvable. "To this question the sage could find no answer, the seer could find no revelation, the psalmist could find no prayer. With this question upon his lips, Jesus died."[77]

Milazzo has completely bracketed out all notion of memory, so that he goes in search of the hidden God with nothing but the reality of death. Because there has never been and can never be any expression of God's presence as long as death persists, he accepts no testimony of encounter or of deliverance or of relatedness as valid. As a result, the type of protest in which Milazzo engages is very different from the protest of the psalmist. The psalmist protests *precisely because* he or she has the community's memories of a God who is present to save, so that protest in the Psalter serves a function: it is protest which seeks to motivate God to save anew. Although death persists, the psalmist recognizes in God's individual acts of deliverance from enemies and sickness an act of raising him or her up from the depths of Sheol. Each new act of deliverance testifies to God's deliverance from death. But for Milazzo, because death persists, protest only serves to fill the silence, calling on God to come out of the shadows. God can never be present for Milazzo until death is no more.

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74 Ibid., 47.
75 Ibid., 66.
76 Ibid., 158-159.
77 Ibid., 143.

2.2.8 Summary

The tension created between remembered presence and experienced absence is a difficult one for the psalmist to sustain and it is not, therefore, surprising that many modern treatments of God's presence and absence do not seek to articulate and sustain it in the way that the psalmist has done. Fiddes has tended to deny absence experientially, reinterpreting suffering as a sign of God's presence and, thus, collapsing the tension between memory and experience. Terrien moves experiences of presence, and thereby experiences of absence, out of the realm of the concrete and tangible. By seeing presence as highly elusive, Terrien makes it easier for the reader to sustain the tension between the assertion that Yahweh is always elusively present and experiences in which he seems hidden and which seem to contradict that assertion. As a result, hiddenness becomes less problematic, but there is also less hope that God will resolve periodic experiences of hiddenness with fresh acts of salvation. Memory becomes increasingly confessional memory of the ancient past which no longer seeks to be revitalized in renewed experiences of presence. Berkovits sees God's presence in the improbable survival of the nation of Israel, so that there can no longer be a valid protest against the persecution of the Jewish people. For Israel to prosper in its own strength would be for the testimony of God in history to be removed from the earth. Thus, with the loss of memory has come the loss of hope. Crenshaw and Milazzo argue for God's malevolent presence as a normative expression of who God is. For Crenshaw, God is an active enemy, while for Milazzo he callously withholds his deliverance in the face of death. By bracketing out memories of God as saviour, both authors have distorted the presence/absence tension and, as a result, articulate experiences of God in terms of overwhelming suffering and despair. Of the six authors that we have considered, Balentine comes closest to maintaining the tension found in the Psalms. He acknowledges both the presence and the absence of God as being part of his nature, but does little more than observe the tension between presence and absence with which the lament psalmist lives. He argues effectively for the reality of the experience of lament, but has less to say about experiences of renewed presence which bring lament to an end. Much of modern scholarship seems unwilling or unable to sustain the tension between presence and absence which we find in the psalms of lament and the inability of modern scholarship to access the historicity of God's saving acts has resulted in the loss of the sharp protest and demand for change found in many of the psalms of lament. The loss of memory has made experiences of hiddenness, silence, and abandonment vastly more problematic, because the primary basis for the psalmist's protest against the silence has been removed.

Having addressed the questions of the psalm writer's use of memory and the presence and absence or hiddenness of God in a general way in this chapter, in chapter

three I want to look at the theme of presence and absence as it appears in the Psalms. Specifically, I will seek to place my own argument for the functional use of the tension between remembered presence and experienced absence within the larger theological discussion surrounding the psalmist's prayers of lament.

Chapter Three

The Presence and Absence of God in the Psalms:

Addressing Important Issues in Psalms Research

3.1 When God is Present

In this chapter I want to place the notion of the presence and absence of God as it is articulated in the Book of Psalms within the larger theological discussion of related aspects of Psalms study, focusing on the issues and problems which arise as a result of trying to understand these themes of presence and absence. I will be paying particular attention to those psalms of lament which confront the problem of God's absence and silence in moments of crisis by remembering past occasions on which God's presence and action to save seemed particularly real for Israel, thus putting God's remembered presence and experienced absence in direct tension.

In this first part I will discuss a number of issues in Psalms research which relate to my theses. I will begin by drawing attention to the relational nature of the language which the psalm writers use to describe God's presence and absence. In the second section I will discuss the problem of appropriating the biblical language of a God who acts in human history in a worldview which finds the notion of such action highly problematic. Sections three and four will address the debate over whether the primary *Sitz im Leben* of the Psalms is the temple cult or the secular lives of individuals and communities.

3.1.1 Notions of Presence and Absence in the Language of the Psalms

Key to understanding the tension between the presence and absence of God is the language that the Psalms use to talk about God. Language about God in the Old Testament is spoken in the context of his relationship with Israel and some of the richest

and most vivid language for describing that relationship is found in the Psalter.[1] Such language, even when it is metaphorical or symbolic, describes the experiences of the psalmist in his or her own relationship with Yahweh. For the community that produced and prayed the Psalter, the Psalms are not simply a settled recital of dimly remembered legends from the distant past, endlessly repeated until the liturgy has lost all connection with life outside of the temple, but rather they are a lively and dynamic expression of an ongoing relationship between God and his people.[2] The absence of God is a frequently reported problem for the psalmist and the words which he or she uses to express that experience provide insights into the ways in which the absence of God impacted on the psalmist's relationship with God. The psalmist speaks of God's "hiding" himself or his "face" (Ps. 10:2; 13:2), "standing far off" (Ps. 10:2; 22:2) and "forsaking" (Ps. 22:2; 27:9), "turning away" (Ps. 27:9) and "rejecting" (Ps. 27:9; 43:2), "turning a deaf ear" (Ps. 28:1) and "not listening" (Ps. 66:18), "forgetting" (Ps. 13:2; 42:10), "remaining silent" (Ps. 28:1; 83:2) and "not answering" (Ps. 22:3), and "holding back his hand from destroying the enemy" (Ps. 74:11). God's absence is described using terms which imply relationship, that is, the psalmist speaks frequently of God's failure to actively communicate and interact with him- or herself and with the praying community.

To remedy this experienced abandonment by God and oppression by the enemies, God is called upon to do three things. Firstly, he is called upon to attend to the distress of the psalmist. God is to "arise", "rouse himself", "awake", so that he may "hasten" and "come quickly". The psalmist needs to attract God's attention, so that he or she calls on him to "look", "see", "listen," "give ear", "be not deaf", "consider", "hear",

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[1] Terence Fretheim has called attention to the heavy emphasis placed on interpersonal relationship between God and humanity by the biblical writer's choices of metaphors used to talk about God in his suggestive article "The Color of God: Israel's God-Talk and Life Experience," *WW* 6/3 (1986): 256-265.

[2] The expectation that cultic liturgy must be devoid of passionate experience is so strong for Gunkel that it causes him to reject the notion that many of the Psalms, which were cultic in origin, may be thus classified in the form in which we now have them. Indeed, for Gunkel, many of the Psalms seem to have "grown beyond" this traditional understanding of cultic liturgy.

> Very many of the psalms which have come down to us do not belong to the poetry of the cult .... Accordingly, out of the Cult Songs have grown Spiritual Poems. Here a kind of piety which has freed itself of all ceremonies expresses itself, a religion of the heart. Here something wonderful has happened. Religion has cast off the shell of sacred usage, in which, until now, it has been protected and nurtured: it has come of age.

(Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, trans. Thomas M. Horner [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969], 26.) Mowinckel comments on the datedness of Gunkel's view which results in his inability to see personal experience as compatible with cultic material. "He clung, like most of the older psalm interpreters, to the curious prejudice that direct cultic destination -- as 'cult formulas', as they said -- was more or less incompatible with deep personal feeling and experience ..." (Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, vol. 1, tran. D. R. Ap-Thomas [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962], 29.) It was Gunkel's observation, then, that the understanding of cultic literature prevalent in his day did not adequately describe Israel's Psalter.

"turn", "answer", "not ignore", "not forsake", and "not reject". Secondly, the psalmist is often in trouble and wants God to act in order to "save", "do good", "deliver", "help", "protect", "keep safe", "be merciful", "not abandon", "take hold of", "hide", "rescue", "defend", "sustain", "restore", "uphold", and "draw out". Equally prominent is language of healing, forgiveness, and restoration for the psalmist and the psalm community. God is to "blot out transgressions", "wash", "cleanse", "give relief", "make to dwell in safety", "guard", "encourage", "accept", "restore", "heal", and "bless". Frequently included in these prayers for salvation is a third element, the notion of judgment for those who are oppressing the writer. Thus he or she calls on God to "strike", "break", "contend", "rain fire", "cut off", "plead his cause", "judge", "call to account", "declare guilty", and "vindicate". Many of these verbs call for decisive, specific action on God's part in response to the prayers of the psalm writer.

The words which are used to describe God bear out the nature of the relationship which the psalmist enjoys with Israel's divine partner. God is called a "shield", the "sun", a "rampart", a "fortress", a "stronghold", a "dwelling", a "refuge", a "rock", "strength", a "horn", "saviour", "redeemer", a "shepherd", a "hiding place", and "sheltering wings". In an expression of confidence, God is invited by the psalmist to "test", "search", "try", "examine", "instruct", "teach", "lead", and "guide". The psalmist invites God into continued and ever deepening relationship, asking him to "shine forth", "cause his face to shine on him", "give light", "set in his presence", "reveal his face", "be with", "come near", "be not far", "not hide his face", "remember", and "not forget". Overwhelmingly, the vocabulary of the Psalter speaks of and seeks communication, involvement, and interaction with God.

Even the experience of God's absence is itself indicative of and leads into relationship. The experience of absence challenges a relationship built on prior experiences of God's presence, causing a crisis in that relationship for the psalmist. The result is often a cry of protest directed against God: "Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?", "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?" And these protests, in turn, lead to renewed confidence in Yahweh as he answers prayer: "But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands;...", "You have rescued me ... he has done it." The general move from lament to praise within many of the psalms of lament and within the Psalter as a whole supports the notion that the questioning and challenging of God in times of his absence and silence is a constructive part of the praying community's relationship with Yahweh. The absence of God causes that community to examine critically their relationship with Yahweh. Experiences of God's absence which lead to complaint and protest do not deny relationship, but rather, they rest on the assumption of relationship with and access to God. Because of this, experiences of God's silence and absence both inform and are

informed by a tradition which testifies of God's presence to act and to save. The crisis of the lament psalm is, then, a crisis of relationship.

Expressions of God's silence and absence in lament psalms are contrasted to remembered experiences of presence in the form of saving actions performed by God for the psalmist and for his people Israel and it is for similar acts of salvation that the psalmist prays in his or her petitions to God. Testimonies to past relatedness fuel the psalmist's demands for an end to God's silence, hiddenness, and inactivity. But, as we shall see in the following section, the notion, so common in the Psalter, of God acting in human history is a highly controversial and problematic one when we try to interpret it in a modern context.

3.1.2 God Present Through Action

The prominent place of God's action

From the point of view of the psalmist, it is God's actions which express most clearly Israel's experience of God's presence. God is said to be present when he responds to petition, acts to save, and brings judgment. An impassive god who never moves and who is unable to respond is, by definition, an idol. Indeed, the difference between God and an idol is that, while God may not always respond as expected, the idol *cannot* respond.

> Their idols are silver and gold,
> the work of human hands.
> They have mouths, but do not speak;
> eyes, but do not see.
> They have ears, but do not hear;
> noses, but do not smell.
> They have hands, but do not feel;
> feet, but do not walk;
> they make no sound in their throats.
> Those who make them are like them;
> so are all who trust in them.[3]

Yahweh is God indeed precisely because he does not fit this description. Even the experience of God's absence is valid and poignant precisely because God has been experienced as immediately present to save. Brueggemann has called attention to the fact that the experiences of pain, frustration, anger, and abandonment with which Job, Qoheleth, and the author of Psalm 88 struggle arise out of the tension between the conviction that God does characteristically act and the experience of God's action being withheld.[4] The outraged and anguished cry of abandonment which springs from Israel's

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[3] Psalm 115:4-8.

[4] Walter Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment: Psalms, Modernity, and the Making of History* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1991), 52.

lips is devastating in its power precisely because God, who is a God of action, is withholding that action and is refusing to save, to restore, and to guide.

It is out of this expectation that God does act, and out of the experience of surprise, hurt, and anger when God fails to act and to save, that the psalmist is able to ask, to plead, and to demand of God "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps. 13:2). "How long, O LORD, will you look on? Rescue me from their ravages, my life from the lions!" (Ps. 35:17). " O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?" (Ps. 80:5). "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?" (Ps. 22:2). "Why do you hold back your hand; why do you keep your hand in your bosom?" (Ps. 74:11). If God does not act, then prayers which demand action need cause no discomfort when they go unanswered. But Yahweh is a God who acts and, therefore, the psalmist calls upon God to "arise", "awake", "deliver", "save", "judge", "destroy", "return", and "answer". The psalmist constantly speaks of a God who makes himself known to his people very concretely through his "works" (פעלים), "deeds" (מעשׂיך), "wonders" (פלאים), "miraculous signs" (מופתים), and "mighty acts" (גבורות). What God does and does not do defines, in great part, his relationship with his people. Thus, in seeking to understand the psalmist's notion of God's presence and absence, it is important to note the prominent place in the Psalter of reports of God acting, in the context of both praise and lament.

The importance of history in Israel's faith

The community of the psalmist placed great emphasis on the actions of Yahweh to choose, to save, and to bless. This element of Israel's story is so prominent that it is possible to make the remembrance and recital of God's acts in history central to biblical theology, as Gerhard von Rad has done. Indeed, for Ernest Wright, a leading figure in the Biblical Theology Movement, history was believed to be the principal means of revelation.[5] But a number of questions should be asked about the reports of God acting in the life and national history of Israel. Firstly, how important are these reports of God's action in history to the psalm writers' understanding of their relationship with God? Secondly, can the psalm writers' understanding of God's acting in human history be said to be in any way unique? Thirdly, given the differences between modern and ancient understanding of notions of history and God's relation to it, how is our own interpretation of the language of God acting different from that of the psalmist? Finally, if the modern and ancient views of God's acting in history are different, can we understand and appreciate a view that is foreign to our own and, if so, to what extent?

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[5] G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1952), 13.

Bertil Albrektson's comparative study of ancient Near Eastern religious literature has shed a great deal of light on the first two questions. Albrektson compared the Israelite understanding of God's acting in human history with that of their neighbours and cast serious doubt on the notion that Israel's understanding of Yahweh's participation in human history can be claimed to be qualitatively different from the views held by their neighbours. For example, he notes that kings who had experienced victory in battle credited their gods with triumphing over their enemies by using the phrase "the gods delivered them into my hands", which Albrektson says "... seems to have been spread all over the ancient Near East and is found in texts from different ages and different areas."[6] Another statement which appeared frequently, particularly in royal inscriptions, was that a king acted at the word (order, command) of a god or gods, so that the notion that gods would act on behalf of and speak to their worshipers was a common one.[7]

Albrektson does, however, draw attention to the unusual emphasis placed on God's acting in history found in the cultic literature of Israel.

> One thing may however be stated with some confidence: it would seem that the idea of historical events as divine manifestations has marked the Israelite cult in a way that lacks real parallels among Israel's neighbours .... It may be a significant fact that it has not been possible to quote any Ugaritic texts above among the evidence for the general Near Eastern idea of a divine rule and a divine revelation in history, for the simple reason that no passages which express this idea are found in these texts.[8]

He concludes that, while the notion of a deity who acts to save in history is not unique to Israel, the importance of this theme for Israel, particularly in their cultic material, is a distinctive feature of Israelite religion.[9] Therefore, even though there is no absolute distinction in the way in which Israel understood God's participation in history, the remarkable emphasis which Israel places on God's mighty acts in history does stand without parallel. In the psalms of lament and thanksgiving, the writers' frequent recounting of God's saving acts in the nation's past serves to illustrate the importance of this theme as a resource in the life of the praying community. The psalm community's understanding of how God acts may not be different from that of its neighbours, but the central place it gives these acts in its understanding of its relationship with Yahweh is. The testimony in Old Testament writings of what God has done in great part defines who

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6 Bertil Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel* (Sweden: CWK Gleerup Lund, 1967), 38.

7 Ibid., 42-43.

8 Ibid., 115-116. While there are no examples of cultic texts found among the Ugaritic texts considered by Albrektson, he does give several examples of cultic materials in Mesopotamian writings which speak of the gods intervening in human history, so that the point of my argument is not the complete absence of such references from the cultic writings of other ancient Near Eastern religions, but the relative rarity of such reference when compared with cultic material in the Old Testament.

9 Ibid.

God is and creates expectations as to how God will act in relationship with the psalmist in the circumstance of lament.

Interpreting reports of God acting

This strong emphasis on God's acting in history has proven to be highly problematic when we attempt to interpret such texts using modern historical methods. Because modern historical method makes it difficult, if not impossible, for many scholars to accept the biblical account as a literal report of "what happened", the texts which report God acting in history must be understood and interpreted as something other than a literal report. Thus, a third question which needs to be considered is, how are we to understand the function of the recital of God's actions in the Psalms in the light of the very restricted ways in which we understand history and God's action in it today? The conflict between speech in terms of a God who intervenes and acts in human history and the assumption of most modern scholarship that God does not and cannot interrupt the flow of history with direct action has provoked extensive attempts to interpret the biblical language of God's action in the light of modern notions of history and theophany. The problem, then, is to find a way of interpreting the language of God acting to save in a way which takes seriously the understanding and use of such language both by the psalmist and by the Post-Enlightenment reader. This becomes important as we seek to preserve and understand the tension in the lament psalms between memory and experience.

Claus Westermann provides an example of the problem, drawing our attention to some of the limits within which a post-Enlightenment study of history must work. He notes that that which is most easily available for inspection from the distant past are those things which can be most easily documented, namely the written records of kings.[10] In the Old Testament, only the period of the monarchy produced the kind of document records which are the principal resource of modern historical analysis. Westermann maintains that the Enlightenment definition of history can refer only to the political history of nations and takes the form of report, whereas the biblical "history" of Israel is a mixture of religion and politics and is frequently expressed in narrative form.[11] Westermann does overstate his case in making this conclusion. Archeology, for example, is not limited to the period of the monarchy and can be subjected to the rigours of critical examination. Nevertheless, Westermann's point is well taken, that much of the biblical report is inaccessible to testing by modern historical methods.

Westermann's notion of the "re-presentation" of history is an attempt to take seriously both the language of God's saving acts in the Psalms and the modern

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[10] Claus Westermann, "The Old Testament Understanding of History in Relation to that of the Enlightenment," in *Understanding the Word: Essays in Honor of Bernhard W. Anderson* (Sheffield, England: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press, 1985), 208.
[11] Ibid., 207-219.

assumption that such reports cannot be harmonized with the ways in which God is experienced today. Part of Westermann's approach to this conflict between a language of action and the lack of confirming experience of action in the present is to assume that this conflict is at least partially present in the Psalter. In his study of the psalms of lament, Westermann attempts to bridge the gap created by a God who acted in the past, but who has not acted to save the psalmist. The past history of God's actions is contrasted with the present situation of the psalmist and God's past acts are "re-presented" into the present for the express purpose of transforming the present situation. "The past forces itself into the present precisely in its contrast to the present. What *has* happened is heard as the antithesis of what *is* happening".[12] According to Westermann, the psalmist holds up before God his past actions, forcing him to remember his past salvation and motivating him to save and heal in the present, so that "Recalling history had the immediate purpose of influencing history."[13] This would seem to imply that, for Westermann, the historical circumstances which are remembered are similar to the present situation which the psalmist wishes to influence.

Westermann does not, however, understand God to act today as he is remembered to have acted in the past and he has difficulty with the notion that what the psalmist remembers and recites as the mighty acts of God can be considered similar to what he or she expects to experience in the context of prayer. For Westermann, "re-presentation" does not mean that the psalmist expected God to act in the same way that he is reported to have acted in the exodus traditions. He does not make clear to his reader, however, the extent to which the psalmist shares in the modern view that God no longer acts today.

I would argue that Westermann uses two strategies to try to manage the move from past remembrance of action to the lack of experiences of such action in the present. His first strategy is one of historical distance. Ironically, while recognizing the potential of the unresolved tension between the remembrance of presence and the experience of absence to challenge and change history, Westermann does not sustain the notion of a God who acts in history beyond the earliest Old Testament events. Stating the limits of his notion of "re-presentation", he concedes that:

> Of course this is possible only where history still stands in unbroken continuity with the activity of God. We may well ask whether there has ever again been a

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[12] Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim and Richard Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 215. Brevard Childs also emphasizes that, for the psalmist, the process of actualization which takes place through the act of remembering and reciting God's past saving actions does not serve to draw the praying community into the past event which is re-experienced, but rather to bring the past event forward into the present. *Memory and Tradition in Israel*, (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1962), 84.

[13] Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 220.

> "re-presentation" of history with such immediacy and power to open the future since the end of this unity of history and divine activity in ancient Israel.[14]

For Westermann, God progressively withdraws himself from human history in the unfolding of the Old Testament and we are left with a God who acted only in the dimly remembered and ever more distant past. The notion of "re-presentation" rests on the assumption that there is no longer a unity between history and divine activity.

In Westermann's approach, the Psalter appears to function as a transition point between ancient and modern notions of God's acting in history. He notes the separation in the Psalter of psalms of historical recital and psalms of "declarative praise" (songs of thanksgiving of the people) and concludes

> ... that a literary category identifiable as the declarative praise of Israel did not exist in the Psalms (with the exception of Ps. 124 and 129 ...), and that the Psalms essentially limited themselves to the transmission and 're-presentation' of those facts which fell within the history of Israel's beginnings.[15]

Thus, Westermann believes that the psalmist does not expect God to act in the same ways that he is remembered to have acted in the historical recitals found in the Psalter. I would maintain that, for Westermann, the psalm writer is neither an ancient nor a modern, but represents a point in the transition from one perspective to the other. Thus, Westermann tries to maintain a continuity between two very different notions of history through the use of temporal distance in which the God who acts gradually moves into the background, until he no longer acts within history as he was reported to have done at the time of "Israel's beginnings".

A second strategy which I would maintain that Westermann employs in order to try and manage the contradiction between modern and ancient views of God acting in history is to draw a distinction between specific acts of history and history in a more general and elusively non-particular sense, restricting God's activity to the latter.

> Under the rubric, "The 'Re-presentation' of History," one might be inclined to think immediately of the "re-presenting" of single events as may perhaps be brought to mind in a nation's celebration of a military victory. "Re-presentation" of history in Israel from the very beginning was by contrast the "re-presentation" of the whole course of history surrounding an event, giving the event continuity.[16]

And again, "The Old Testament cannot pin God down to a single soteriology; it can only speak of God's saving acts within a whole series of events".[17] Westermann maintains his argument for a non-particular approach to cultic remembrance by drawing a distinction

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 235.
[16] Ibid., 220.
[17] Ibid., 259.

between the actual historical event which inspired the psalmist to write and the "re-presentation" of that event which takes place when it is recalled by the congregation in the context of the cult. He correctly draws our attention to the fact that the intent of cultic "re-presentation" is not to relive the past events, but rather to re-affirm the character of Israel's relationship with God in order to address the current situation.[18] What results for Westermann, though, is a somewhat limited notion of history. He states that, "... *history cannot be made to fit into a single moment or into a single event. History always involves a whole range or course of events; it is never simply an event.* "[19] As a result of avoiding the particularity of isolated historical events, Westermann is able to move more easily from reports of how God acted in the past and the modern assumption that God cannot act in history. In order to try and make this move, Westermann uses the psalmist as a transitional stage between the two very different worldviews, assuming that the psalmist does not look for God to act in the same way in the present that he has acted in the past. He offers no evidence, however, to support his assumption that the psalm writers and the praying communities for which they wrote were aware of the modern problematic of God acting in history.

The limitations of these strategies are two-fold. Firstly, while Westermann correctly identifies the preoccupation of the psalmist not with the past but with present needs and desires, he does not give adequate attention to the importance of past events in shaping current expectations that God will *act again*. He makes the argument that Israel uses the "re-presentation" of God's saving acts in the past merely to affirm his presence in the community of worship and not to evoke similar actions in the present. Westermann states that:

> The meaning of the "re-presentation" of history in the descriptive Psalms of praise (and in the historical Psalms which come from them) is then not actually the remembrance of the facts of history, enumerated or implied; rather, meaning lies in extolling Yahweh who is *present* with the community in his actions in history. It lies in praising Yahweh *who is* as he has revealed himself to be in his dealings with the nation (majesty) and with Israel (grace).[20]

Westermann affirms that the psalmist is attempting to motivate God to influence history, but he does not make it clear what form the psalmist expects this influence to take other than by the simple fact of God's presence with the community. The prayers of the psalmist, though, do not reflect this vagueness found in Westermann's approach. As the language of the Psalter indicates, the psalmist does not want only to affirm that God is present in the community, but that God will respond directly to a particular crisis in the

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18 Ibid., 228.
19 Ibid., 226; [italics original].
20 Ibid., 236-237.

life of the psalmist and/or the nation. The psalmist does not ask only for presence, but also for saving action.

The second problem with Westermann's approach is that it assumes that God's action can only be detected in a long series of events and not in any specific moment of history. The psalmist, however, recalls God's saving action, often very selectively and in very specific and detailed terms, in order to motivate God to act again in the present situation. The specificity of the desired action which the psalmist seeks is defined by the specificity of the crisis which has caused the lament. God's presence to save remains in doubt as long as the particular situation which caused the prayer of lament to be offered remains unresolved.

Westermann's notion of "re-presentation" is intended to deal with a contradiction not felt by the psalmist, that is, the contradiction between remembered action and the absence of any possibility of action. "Re-presentation" in very non-specific ways of events in the distant past is not a strategy which the psalmist needs, but one which reflects the needs of the modern church. For the psalmist action is only delayed; for Westermann there can no longer be action on God's part.

This tendency to imply that the psalmist shares in a modern worldview is far more easily seen in Noth's understanding of "re-presentation", particularly in his appeal to the writings of Karl Barth. Barth believes that a tension exists between history in which God is immediately involved and that in which he is involved only indirectly or in a mediated sense. For Barth, history in which God is immediately involved is not history at all. It is "real history" in the sense that it involves actual events, but it is not history which is accessible to the historian. Thus, when God is immediately present in "history", only narrative and "non-historical" or "pre-historical" depictions may be used to describe his presence.[21] Barth is speaking of the inaccessibility of "real", "immediate" history for post-Enlightenment historical method, not for the writers of the Psalms.

Martin Noth, however, interprets Barth's distinction to apply to the question of transcendence and immanence. He states that:

> As in all history, so *this* history is especially involved in the tension between the course of time and the presence of God which is not bound to time, between the "mediateness" (*Mittlebarkeit*) [sic.] and the "immediateness" (*Unmittlebarkeit*) [sic.] of all history to God, of which K. Barth speaks in discussing God's unending creation. 'Re-presentation' is founded on this -- that God and his action are always present, while man in his inevitable temporality cannot grasp this present-ness except by 're-presenting' the action of God over and over again in his worship.[22]

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[21] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III, part 1, trans. J. W. Edwards et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 80.

[22] Martin Noth, "Re-presentation," in *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation*, trans. James Luther Mays (London: SCM Press, 1963), 85.

But whereas Barth understands the implications of bringing a modern worldview to a text which does not share that view and he is making a distinction between events which are accessible to modern historical method and those which are not, Noth is bringing to the text a modern struggle to understand the tension between God's transcendence and immanence and projecting those concerns onto the psalm writers, rather than observing a concern already present in the text. Thus, Noth has not adequately appreciated the difference between the worldview of the psalmist and his own. The language of the lament psalms does not demonstrate an awareness of God as transcendent to the point of his being unable to act in response to prayer.

Neither Noth nor Westermann respond to the expectation in the psalms of lament that the God who acted in the past to save will act again in a way similar to his past actions. The language of the Psalms demands more than a remembering of God's acts in order to re-experience God's presence; the psalmist, in fact, wants and sometimes even demands that God *act again*, as he has acted in the past, to save in very concrete ways from very real dangers and trials. The basis of such an expectation is precisely the history of God's acting in the past. Both Westermann's and Noth's notions of "re-presentation" are valid and reasonable attempts to wrestle with the problem of language of God acting from within a worldview which finds such actions inaccessible. It remains a difficulty, though, that modern notions of "re-presentation" are frequently at odds with the language of the Psalms in that they do not give sufficient weight to the importance of remembered past saving acts of God as a basis for expecting that God will act again. Those praying the psalms of lament want concrete action and base that expectation on God's past record of concrete action.

The bringing together of divergent worldviews

If we allow that ancient and modern understandings of God acting are fundamentally different, a fourth question arises: can these two views be harmonized? It has been my argument that Westermann has wrestled with this problem and has used the psalmist as a transition point between the two views, applying historical distance and a non-specific view of history in order to try to maintain the language of God acting in both worldviews. The incompatibility of these two understandings of history is made more obvious when no such attempt is made to provide a gradual transition between worldviews. An example of this can be seen in the writings of Bernhard Anderson. Anderson believes that the psalmist brings the remembered past into the present precisely to ask the question, "Why won't God act decisively again?"[23] But, while this seems to suggest that Anderson recognizes that the psalmist is not a post-Enlightenment

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[23] Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 56.

thinker and can argue for a consistent expectation that God will act within the biblical story, he too is unable to transcend the barrier created by the Enlightenment in his understanding of how God answers such prayers.

Anderson maintains the biblical language of a God who acts, but is unable to equate God's speaking and acting with modern understanding of these concepts. The result is what Langdon Gilkey has called a dualism in modern neo-orthodoxy, which speaks using one set of terms and meanings in a religious sphere and using the same terms but a different set of meanings when speaking in a scientific sphere.

> When modern biblical writers speak *theologically* of the revelatory event, their attention focuses on the prior and objective event, and they speak in the biblical and orthodox terms of a God who speaks and acts, of divine initiation and human response, and of revelation through mighty, divine deeds in history. When, however, they function as *scientific* historians or archeologists and ask what actually happened, they speak of that same prior event in purely naturalistic terms as "an ordinary though unusual event," or as "an East wind blowing over the Reed Sea." Thus they repudiate all the concrete elements that in the biblical account made the event itself unique and so gave content to their theological concept of a special divine deed. In other words, they continue to use the biblical and orthodox theological language of divine activity and speech, but they have dispensed with the wonders and voices that gave univocal meaning, and thus content, to the theological words "God acts" and "God speaks."[24]

The result, says Gilkey, has been an attempt to keep alive the language of speech and action, while denying any particularity to God's speaking and acting. He states:

> What has happened is that, as modern men perusing the Scriptures, we have rejected as invalid all the innumerable cases of God's acting and speaking; but as neo-orthodox men looking for a word from the Bible, we have induced from all these cases the theological generalization that God is he who acts and speaks. This general truth about God we then assert while denying all the particular cases on the basis of which the generalization was first made. [25]

Anderson has fallen into a practical dualism and utilizes a common vocabulary with two separate sets of meanings, each appropriate to its own worldview, in order to appropriate the language of God acting. Westermann's notion of "re-presentation", on the other hand, attempts to soften this dualism exemplified by Anderson and described by Gilkey and to recognize the difficulty involved in the move from ancient to modern interpretation. Theophany and God's mighty saving acts can be brought forward from the dimly remembered past into the modern world only partially and by interpreting such events using modern notions of history and action.

The language of the Psalter suggests that Israel was a different kind of worshipping community from the modern church. In one sense it goes without saying

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[24] Langdon Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology and the Travail of Biblical Language," *JR* 41 (1961): 199; cf. *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1969), 80-101.
[25] Ibid., 203.

that the modern and ancient worldviews are different, and yet often in attempts to understand and interpret scripture there is the strong tendency, as the work of Westermann and Noth demonstrate, to assume too much of a post-Enlightenment worldview in a pre-Enlightenment world. Modernity frequently does not adequately appreciate the psalmist's struggle with presence and absence because the way in which modern methodologies approach these concepts is fundamentally different. Modern notions of history do not allow the placement of experienced absence in direct, vivid tension with remembered presence expressed in action, and to maintain that tension in prayers to God. The result is a breakdown in a dialectic that the psalmist was able to sustain.

The problematic with which the psalmist wrestles is different from that which confronts the modern reader.[26] The problematic of modernity is characterized in our day by the absence, in many communities of faith, of testimonies of the saving acts of God. The psalmist expects God to act and is puzzled, and at times outraged, by God's inactivity, whereas modernity has abandoned expectations that God can and will act. Reports of God's acting are often radically reinterpreted to align themselves with the assumptions and experiences of modernity. As children of modernity, we cannot read and hear the crisis of God's absence in the Psalms with the same ears as did those individuals and groups which produced the Psalter. God's absence has lost some of its ability to wound, precisely because there is no expectation that God can or will act. The modern reader must engage in a "suspension of disbelief" which was unnecessary for the psalmist. As a result, we read the Psalter differently and we find it far easier to explore questions of God's absence than to enter into the world of the Psalms and stand unmoved alongside the psalmist in the tension between God's presence and absence.

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[26] The "modern reader" in the sense that I am using the term does not, in fact, exist, any more than any stereotype is an accurate and complete description of a widely varied collection of individual views. By "modern reader", I am referring firstly to the application of modern, scientific method to biblical study (in this sense we are all modern readers to a greater or lesser extent) and secondly to the extent to which a reader gives preference to post-Enlightenment assumptions about the text which can be neither proven nor disproven but which are, in fact, faith statements about how the reader perceives reality, based on his or her worldview. Thus, for example, it is scientific to apply the methods of literary criticism in order to understand a miracle story in scripture, but it is a widely held modern assumption that miracles, because they are not available to general observation and are not replicable for purposes of experimentation, do not, in fact, exist. This latter is an assumption which, by definition, can be neither proven nor disproven. A presumptive modern reading would say that miracles never occurred throughout history, and a more extreme reading would assume that the biblical writers understood this and viewed reality much as the modern reader does. Thus, one is a "modern reader" to the extent that one a) uses modern methods in approaching the text and b) introduces unproven and unprovable assumptions of modernity into the reading of the text. Thus, this category includes both those areas which are accessible to scientific study and which, therefore, have some claim to being considered fact, as well as those assumptions which are ascientific, falling outside of the range of scientific method, and which are, therefore, suppositions.

Summary

In summary, I have argued three main points so far. Firstly, the frequent use and strategic placement of memory recitals in the Psalms demonstrates the importance which those who produced and prayed the Psalter placed on God's saving acts in history. Albrektson's observation that cultures other than Israel made use of the notion that their gods could act in history does not lessen the importance of the observation that the prominence of this theme in Old Testament prayer is unparalleled in the religious writings of Israel's neighbours. The recital of such saving acts is key to understanding the experience of abandonment and the expectation of salvation in the psalms of lament. Secondly, the modern reader has difficulty in appreciating the psalmist's experience of the tension between remembered presence and experienced absence, because he or she often does not expect God to act as he was reported to have acted in the Psalms. Post-Enlightenment worldviews often find it difficult to accept such language as a literal description. Thus, while discussions of the absence and hiddenness of God are common in scholarly literature, it is much less common for these considerations of the absence of God to place that absence in tension with the expectation that God can and should act to save in specific situations, as the psalmist does. Thirdly, attempting to enter into and appreciate the worldview of the psalmist is highly problematic for the modern reader and yet an understanding of the meaning of the biblical text for those who produced it is an essential guide in formulating a modern interpretation of that text. In attempting to move from ancient to modern worldviews as we interpret the text, however, we can afford neither to ignore this divergence between these worldviews nor to import modern perspectives and assumptions into the Psalms uncritically in our attempts to understand the dilemma confronting the psalmist in the psalm of lament. One attempt to manage the gap between worldviews in Old Testament scholarship has centred around the way in which cultic prayer language arises and is used, and the following two sections will address the question of how we interpret and respond to such language.

3.1.3 God Present in Israel's Cult

Isolating God in the cult

The great variety of the language used in the Psalms to describe the presence and absence of God and the use of so many active verbs suggests that these Psalms spoke of a broad range of experiences of God in many different circumstances and contexts. But there is wide disagreement among scholars as to the origin and use of such language. There has been a marked tendency among biblical scholars (Mowinckel, Weiser, Ringgren) to limit the Psalms to strictly cultic origin and use. On the other hand, a

growing number of scholars (Westermann, Gerstenberger, Miller) now believe that cultic origin and use by themselves are not sufficient to fully describe the ways in which the Psalms are used, nor to explain the origins of the entire Psalter.

In this section and the one which follows, I will examine both of these positions and will argue for the latter position that, while clearly the Psalms have strong ties to the cult and are indeed intended to be used in the cultic setting, the language which they contain also suggests that many had their origin in experiences outside of the cultic setting and that, therefore, their usage in the religious life of Israel, while possibly centred in the cult, was by no means restricted to it. This distinction becomes important when we seek to understand how the community which produced and prayed the Psalms interpreted speech about God's acting to save. If Psalm-language can be shown to have its origin and use exclusively in the cult, the challenging language of a God who acts to save can be more easily interpreted in symbolic, non-literal ways, that is, such language can be taken to refer exclusively to the internal, subjective aspects of experiencing Yahweh's salvation, thus making the language of God's acting far less problematic.[27]

The principal point that I want to argue in this section is that the restriction of Psalm-language to exclusively cultic origin and use is neither disinterested nor motivated by concerns internal to the Psalter itself, but is motivated, at least in part, by the problematic of interpreting the language of God acting in a modern context. I would argue that, instrumental to the modern attempt to manage the contradiction between different understandings of the language of God acting is the notion that such language is "cultic" in nature and that cultic language is fundamentally different from the language of daily experience in that it refers to a separate reality. That our notions of cult and cultic language are far from disinterested, but are, in fact, tools for bridging the gap between two different worldviews, can be seen in the Psalms research concerning the origin and use of Psalms. On the one hand, some views maintain that the Psalms are created for use in the worship setting and that what they describe occurs entirely within that setting as part of congregational worship in the temple. The other side of the argument maintains

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[27] Rudolf Otto, for example, has argued that experiences of God occur only within the emotions of the one who experiences an encounter with the holiness of *numen* of God. Thus says Otto:

> ... the feeling of the *numen* as 'the mysterious' worked as a potent stimulus on the naïve imagination, inciting it to expect miracles, to invent them, to 'experience' them, to recount them, just as before the felt awfulness of the numen became a stimulus to select or fashion inventively, as a means of religious expression, images of fear and dread .... the 'supernatural' of miracle is purged from religion as something that is only an imperfect analog and no genuine 'schema' of the numinous.

Expectations of external action on God's part can be dismissed as the idle fantasies of the immature and naïve mind and need not disturb the modern reader of scripture. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational..* trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 64.

that the language and images of the Psalms reflect a wide range of experiences in life outside of worship. Relevant to our discussion is the notion that "cultic language" is somehow different from the language of secular experience and that, therefore, the Psalms are not merely descriptive of experience in a straight-forward fashion, but are metaphorical and symbolic expressions of those experiences in worship. This notion of a special cultic language provides the modern reader with a much needed insulation from the language of divine action in the Psalms, allowing us to reinterpret such language in non-literal ways. Certainly prayer language can be non-literal, but the assumption of a great deal of Old Testament scholarship is that the reports of God acting in Israel's history cannot be literal.

One response to the difficulties posed by the recitals of God's acting in human history has been to restrict the Psalms exclusively to use in the cult as part of the liturgy and to confine the notion of God's acting to the internal and subjective experience of the individual worshipper and the community as a whole in the context of temple worship. This would greatly simplify the problem of speaking about a God who acts in a world where such talk might be understood as unscientific, and, indeed, where such intervention might be unwelcome. Typical of those scholars who argue for the experiencing of God primarily if not exclusively in the cult setting are Mowinckel, Weiser, and Ringgren and in the writings of each can be seen a restricted use of the concepts of language and reality which allows them to consider the language of the Psalms without having to struggle with the conflict between testimonies of God acting and experiences to the contrary.

Sigmund Mowinckel

Sigmund Mowinckel identifies the cult as the site of divine-human relationship. He states that:

> Cult or ritual may be defined as the socially established and regulated holy acts and words in which the encounter and communion of the Deity with the congregation is *established, developed, and brought to its ultimate goal*. In other words: a relation in which a religion becomes a vitalizing function as a communion of God and congregation, and of the members of the congregation amongst themselves.[28]

He adds that "The cult is ... the visible and audible expression of the relation between the congregation and the deity."[29] Thus, for Mowinckel, the cult provides the primary locus

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[28] Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*,, vol. 1, 15 [italics mine]. Mowinckel does, however, acknowledge that temple songs were later adapted for private use. Sigmund Mowinckel. *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, vol. II, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 107-108.
[29] Ibid., 16.

for relationship with God. The hoped-for result of theophany created in the cult is that God will act again to ensure and to create life in the form of blessing. At the centre of historical remembrance are the saving acts of Yahweh. The worshipper is drawn into a mythic world and the distance between present festal myth and those events which are remembered from the nation's past collapses, so that "There is consequently no disagreement between myth and reality. The nucleus of Israel's festal myth was the remembrance of that historic reality: the Exodus, the election, the covenant, the immigration."[30] Everything is drawn together in the cult and the cult's unique perception of reality is necessary in order to hold together myth, past historical event, and reality outside of the cult.

> We must ask: *where* are the historico-mythical 'acts of salvation' that are at the same time described as belonging both to the past and the present, and experienced as belonging to the present, with results decisive for the future? ... it is where religion and religious life unfold in a common experience and realization of 'the real' in all its creative and existential wealth and concrete presence, that is, in the congregational temple cult. In other words the only interpretation which is satisfactory both for the actual and the future, the historical and the cosmic, together with the primeval element (the Creation) in these psalms, and which at the same time tallies with the general view of the psalms which has been presented in the foregoing, is the *cultic* one.[31]

While Mowinckel's understanding of the cultic nature of many experiences of God has much to commend it, he is unable or unwilling to consider that such experiences of God may also happen outside of the cult or to explore the ways in which the merger of cultic memory and presently experienced reality can move outside of the cult. The seamless merging of historical recital, cultic myth, and secular reality occurs only in the hot house of the cult and cannot step beyond the door of the temple. Mowinckel argues for a merging of three realities within the cult, but offers no evidence to support his supposition that the Psalms community was less aware of a sharp delineation between historical memory, mythical reality, and secular reality or that they were more willing than we to ignore any divergence between the three.

Mowinckel depends for his argument on a specialized and symbolic use of language in the cult. In the use of "cultic language", the worlds of secular reality and mythic reality can be seamlessly merged because any contradiction to secular experience which is introduced by "mythic language" can be reinterpreted in non-literal ways. This is only possible when the everyday language of experience takes on a new set of specialized meanings in the cultic setting. "Yahweh is king" spoken by a pious Hebrew in the market place is a very different notion from "Yahweh has become king" declared in the cultic setting of the Festival of Re-enthronement. Thus, "God has given justice" may mean something very concrete and specific before the elders in the gate of the city and

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[30] Ibid., 20.
[31] Ibid., 112.

something abstract and subjectively experienced in the specialized language of the cultic recital of a lament psalm. But does this specialized language actually exist for Israel? While the setting may be different in the temple, the expected outcomes of the prayers "hear!", "answer!", "save!", "judge!", and "heal!" are the same both in the temple and in the city streets because the needs which motivate such prayers do not have their origin within the cultic setting but are imported from the secular realm. The assumption that the worshipper can and must be satisfied with a symbolic and subjective answer to such "coded" cultic speech does not arise from evidence lying within the text of such prayers. Therefore, the assumption that such prayers cannot and are not expected to have literal and direct answers from God in the experience of the worshipper when he or she leaves the temple is an assumption brought to the text by the modern reader.

Artur Weiser

Artur Weiser builds on Mowinckel's notion that the Psalms have their origin in the cult festival but he specifies the *Sitz im Leben* of the Covenant Renewal Festival, thus emphasizing Israel's unique appropriation of the wide-spread practice of cultic festivals. For Weiser, the experience of theophany is contained within the cult itself in the form of "cultic drama". In the dramatic reenactment of covenant renewal, argues Weiser, God was actually experienced anew. He concludes that "The theme of the Old Testament Covenant Festival is the continually renewed encounter of God with his people which has as its final aim the renewal of the Sinai Covenant and of the salvation it promised."[32] Weiser understands the cultic participation of the congregation to be the human response to the past acts of God, which in turn provides a basis for God's theophany once again in the midst of the cult. Thus, individual Psalms of all types must be seen to have their origin in the worship service, which is the principal arena for God's theophany. The dramatic presentation of saving acts both interpreted current events and was interpreted and shaped by those past events which are recited in the cult. But the tradition was also constantly being formed by its encounter with the contemporary history and life experience of the worshippers.

Weiser makes a number of assertions which are questionable and, indeed, his basic argument is attested to in the text, at best, only indirectly.[33] The first is that the

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[32] Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 28-29. R. E. Clements understands the Sinai theophany recorded in the Old Testament to be both a literary representation of a past event and an experience which is repeated in Israel's cultic life. *God and Temple* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 22-26.

[33] Ibid., 50. Although the existence of the supposed 'cultic drama' is not immediately relevant to my argument, it should be noted that the existence of such a cultic event is far from certain. While the Babylonians made use of cultic drama, Weiser offers no evidence to support his assumption that Israel, being neighbours, shared in this practice. Westermann is critical of Weiser's notion of the cultic drama, pointing out that in two of

Yahweh tradition, which is prominent in the majority of the Psalms, arises predominantly if not exclusively from the *Sitz im Leben* of the Festival of Covenant Renewal. Although the Sinai covenant is a prominent theme in the Psalter, it by no means stands alone. Often Israel's recital in the Psalms refers not to the Sinai Covenant, but to the creation, either independently (Ps. 74:12; 8:4-9) or together with the theme of covenant (Ps. 77:12-21). Thus, it is unlikely that a hypothetical festival of covenant renewal can be given the preeminent place that Weiser chooses to give it.

The second questionable assertion is that the recital of the mighty saving acts of God in the past leads to a "re-experiencing" of theophany in the cultic setting. The instance of covenant renewal used by Weiser to illustrate the cultic drama, Joshua 24, in no way refers to a *new* theophany of God during the ceremony. While it is true that the passage speaks to the generation that entered Canaan as though they themselves had seen the destruction of Pharaoh, there is no suggestion in the passage that this projecting back in time to the exodus results in any new manifestation or theophany at the time of the covenant renewal at Shechem. Also, while there are instances of theophany described in a number of Psalms (for example Ps. 18:7-16), there is no particular connection between these reports and the Sinai covenant.

A third factor is the lack of evidence in the Psalms themselves that the object of recital of God's saving acts is the reliving of past events, as was the case in the covenant renewal in Joshua 24. The lament psalms are *not* preoccupied with re-experiencing the past, but with addressing a new need in the present. And the hoped for result is not only an experiencing of God's presence in the cult, but also a redressing of a crisis or injustice in the secular life of the psalmist or of Israel. The psalmist does not seek to relive the past, but to change the present. The result of Weiser's confinement of the Psalms to cultic use, for the purpose of re-experiencing theophany, is that primary emphasis is placed not on the present life experiences of the worshipper outside of the temple, but on meeting the past within the cultic drama in order to re-experience it.

Helmer Ringgren

Helmer Ringgren seeks to tie experiences of God to participation in the worshipping community. Given that the worship of God in Israel is not an experience for individuals in isolation, but is related to the community, for Ringgren, the Psalms were written to be used in the cultic community and they could function as a means of mediating the presence of God most fully only in that setting. To be outside the cultic community is to be separated from God. Thus, "nearness" and "fellowship" with God may be experienced by the individual *only* from within the cultic community and

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his examples (Ps. 44:2; 9:15) the verb used (סִפֵּר) refers to a narrative act, "to tell" or "to recount". (Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 224.)

anything which disturbs the individual's place in the worshipping community results in a disruption in his or her relationship with God.[34] As the worshipper recounts the mighty acts of God in the setting of the cultic community, a framework is constructed for the believer again to have an "experience of the terrible and good God".[35]

Even more specifically, Ringgren locates encounter with God within the worship service at the temple. For Ringgren, the recitals of theophany serve the function of recreating the event in the cultic festival so that it might be experienced anew by those who worship in the community.[36] By confining the notion of encounters with God to the temple and the worshipping community, Ringgren is able to interpret the language of the Psalter in purely symbolic ways. The result is the rather bland pronouncement that "To 'behold the face of God' is simply to visit the temple."[37] By confining new experiences of God to re-enacted theophanies which could be experienced only by the community as a whole and within the confines of the temple, Ringgren assumes that any report of "hearing" or "seeing" God is confined to the cultic service.[38] Ringgren reduces the metaphor "To behold the face of God" to mere formula, devoid of the interaction with the culture that created and used it, thus robbing it of the element of growth which is so vital to a living metaphor.[39]

Like Mowinckel before him, Ringgren places great emphasis on the role of the community in the worship experience of the individual. This emphasis can be seen in the fact that even those Psalms which seem clearly to be laments of the individual can, at unexpected moments, turn to the concerns of the nation as a whole (Ps. 3:9; 25:22; 51:20-21; 88:8-9; 130:7-8). Ringgren's understanding of experiencing God can, however, be criticized on three points. Firstly, he assumes that God may be experienced fully and without restriction only in the context of the community at worship and that, conversely, being put out of the community results in the experience of being separated from God. But an attack by enemies does not always indicate, as Ringgren supposes, that the psalmist has been either cut off from the worshipping community or abandoned by God. In Psalm 41:10 the psalmist is betrayed by friends who proved to be enemies. But this is not, as Ringgren suggests, a case of the psalmist being separated from the worshipping community, with the result that he is also separated from God. God is not described as absent in Psalm 41 and there is no direct mention of the psalmist being abandoned by the

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34 Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of the Psalmist* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 25.
35 Ibid., 48.
36 Ibid., 90.
37 Ibid., 6.
38 Ibid., 17.
39 Sallie McFague rightly draws our attention to the fact that a metaphor that has lost its "shock value" ceases to be a metaphor at all and becomes a definition. (Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* [London: SCM Press Ltd., 1987], 35.) Ringgren's insistence that metaphors of God's presence cannot refer to experiences outside of the immediate cult serves to equate God's presence with the presence of the worshipper in the temple and the result is a definition and not a metaphor.

worshipping community. Verse 4 reads "The LORD sustains them on their sickbed; in their illness you heal all their infirmities", and verses 12 and 13 maintain that "By this I know that you are pleased with me; because my enemy has not triumphed over me. But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your presence forever." Ringgren's argument that the psalmist's sense of abandonment by God is strongly tied to his or her being put out of the worship community is not adequately supported by the evidence he provides.

Secondly, Ringgren makes no distinction between those experiences of the worshipper which are purely perceptual and those experiences which depend on something happening externally. For example, the prayer of Jehoshaphat in II Chron. 20:5-12 receives an answer both in the worship context in the form of a prophetic word from Zechariah (II Chron. 20:14-17) and outside of the worship setting in the form of a military victory (II Chron. 20:22-23). While the psalmist may encounter the face of God upon entering the temple, the two cannot be simply equated because the psalmist wishes not only to see God, but to be seen and answered by him.

Thirdly, Ringgren assumes, along with Mowinckel and Weiser, that the primary purpose of historical recital in the Psalms is to re-experience theophany. But, in the lament psalms, the psalmist does not seek to see or hear God, but to be seen and heard *by* God. References to seeing God are relatively rare in psalms of lament (Ps. 17:15),[40] but there are a number of calls for God to see the circumstance of the psalmist (Ps. 9:14; 10:14; 13:4; 17:2; 25:18-19; 31:8; 35:22; 59:5; 80:15; 102:20; 142:5). Likewise, the lament psalmist makes few references to wanting to hear God (Ps. 85:9),[41] but he or she calls upon Yahweh to hear with great regularity (Ps. 3:5; 4:2, 4; 5:2, 4; 6:9-10; 10:17; 13:4; 17:1, 6; 22:3, 22, 25; 27:7; 28:2, 6; 31:23; 38:16; 39:13; 40:2; 54:4; 55:2, 3, 18, 20; 60:7; 61:2, 6; 64:2; 69:14, 17, 18, 34; 77:2; 80:2; 86:1, 6, 7; 102:2, 3, 21; 130:2; 140:7; 141:1; 143:1, 7). The psalmist is not seeking to re-experience a past theophany within the worship service, but that God would see, hear, and answer.

Summary

The problem with understanding experiences of God to be purely cultic, aside from the fact that this assumes things about the ancient mind's concept of reality which cannot be proven or even adequately demonstrated, is that Israel did not live their entire life in the temple any more than we do. God's power to transform must also be real outside of the worship service, if the belief that Yahweh is a God who acts in answer to

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[40] Ps. 63:3 and 97:6 do speak of seeing God's power and glory. Also, the NRSV translates 42:3b "When shall I come and behold the face of God?", but the verb אראה is a Niphal imperfect, suggesting a passive sense, "When shall I appear before the LORD?"

[41] In Ps. 143:8 the psalmist waits to hear the hesed of the Lord.

prayer is to retain its credibility with the ones praying. A God who "acts" only in the festal myth is powerless to affect directly their lives outside of the cultic service apart from changes in themselves so that they become the sole agents for God's transformational and regenerational acts in history. The psalmist, though, expects God and not human effort to resolve his or her dilemma. Such restrictions on God's action do not appear in the Psalms themselves. Rather, they reflect a contemporary inability to expect to encounter God directly, apart perhaps from subjective experience in the context of worship. The Psalms bring the problems and demands of the world into the cult and they expect the saving and transforming power of God to reach beyond the experience of encountering God in the temple and for God to affect and transform their secular lives. What evidence is there, then, that the Psalter contains not 'cultic language' but ordinary language offered in a cultic setting?

3.1.4 Challenges to Cultic Uses and Origins of the Psalms

Worshipping God outside the temple

Criticism of the notion that the Psalms where purely cultic in origin and use is by no means new. H. Luden Janson argued in 1937 for a didactic role of some psalms in the synagogue and temple and S. Holm-Nielson suggested in 1960 that a psalm could fulfill both a cultic and a didactic function. And indeed Mowinckel himself later modified his position, acknowledging that a number of psalms were non-cultic in nature.[42] There are a number of scholars in more recent scholarship who reject the notion that the Psalms have their origin and use in an exclusively cultic setting which can be disconnected from secular experience. Westermann, while conditionally accepting Gunkel's argument that the Psalms are essentially cultic in origin, resists the notion that praying community's use of the Psalms can be isolated, indeed quarantined, in the cultic context.[43] He argues, instead, that Israel's worship arose from the memory of God's dealings with the nation in

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[42] Brevard S. Childs, "Reflections on the Modern Study of the Psalms," in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God*, eds. Frank M. Cross, Wener Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976), 380. Childs argues that the forming of a Davidic canon in the Psalter through the addition of superscriptions illustrates a move away from a cultic to private setting as David's humanity and ordinariness are emphasized.

> The psalms are transmitted as the sacred psalms of David, but they testify to all the common troubles and joys of ordinary human life in which all men participate. These psalms do not need to be cultically actualized to serve later generations. They are made immediately accessible to the faithful .... The titles, far from tying these poems to the ancient past, serve to contemporize and individualize them for every generation of suffering and persecuted Israel.

Ibid., 384.

[43] Claus Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms*, tran. Keith R. Crim (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 155.

history and developed gradually in a wide variety of different places and settings,[44] and he maintains that the worship of Israel cannot be confined to a particular sector of the nation's life and experience, offering as evidence in support of his position the extreme diversity of subject matter in the Psalter.

> ... above all, this worship is not the function of an institution quite separate from Israel's ordinary existence; rather it is the very centre of it, embracing every department and sector of the national life. What makes the psalms so distinctive is that they mirror the whole of that life, from the Creator, through His creation and its history, down to the personal suffering of the individual.[45]

For Westermann, psalms of praise and lament serve to reflect, through the medium of prayer, on a broad range of life experiences.

> Goldingay reverses the order found in Ringgren asserting that
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> Praise and prayer belong first in life and derivatively in worship. The same is true of our hymns. Their power and their meaningfulness derive from their having emerged from real people's personal turning to God, with which our experience resonates even though we may not know precisely what their experience was.[46]

He points to the settings for prayer in the Old Testament, which can often be found outside of the temple (such as the labour camps of Egypt, the sufferings of Job on the ash heap, and the prayers of Jonah on the ship, in the belly of the fish, and under the vine), and to the content of prayer, which can bring into the temple concerns of daily life (such as Hannah's prayer for a child and Jeremiah's concerns over his prophetic ministry). Just as the subject matter of prayer is not restricted to questions of liturgy and form, so too the place where prayer is offered cannot be confined to the temple. While Goldingay may overstate his case in arguing that praise and prayer emerge primarily from life and only secondarily from worship, his observations make it clear, nevertheless, that not all of Israel's prayers have the *Sitz im Leben* in the cult.

Casting the question in an "either cult worship or private prayer" form creates a dichotomy which, while possibly helpful to the modern reader in his or her struggles to interpret language of experiences of God and God's action, does not seem to respond to a need in the text itself to separate the community's cultic life and the private, secular lives of individuals. This disagreement among scholars over whether the Psalms have their principle origin and/or use in private piety or public worship may, in fact, tell us more about our own struggles in a time when most concepts of church and community are

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[44] Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 21.
[45] Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, tran. J. R. Porter (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), 3.
[46] John Goldingay, *Praying the Psalms* (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books, 1993), 11.

breaking down than it does about the context in which the Psalms where originally written and sung.

Erhard Gerstenberger

Erhard Gerstenberger sees in the Psalms evidence of their origins in the religious experiences of individuals. He states that,

> Die hier und da noch durchschlagende Ansicht, Frömmigkeit und Erlebnistiefe des Einzelnen seien die treibenden Kräfte der Psalmdichtung, ist eher Nachhall der individualistischen Interpretation als Resultat gattungsgeschichtlicher Überlegungen.[47]

He rejects the notion that the wide range of experiences spoken of in the Psalter can be fully explained using a single cultic festival.[48] Gerstenberger argues that the psalm of lament arose from the more basic "petition pattern", which has its *Sitz im Leben* not in the cultic festival, but in the *zwischenmenschliche Bittsituation* or "situation of interpersonal prayer and petition."[49] He concludes, using social analysis of modern culture and a comparative study of the Psalter and Babylonian materials, that there is a distinct relationship between the "speech-form" and "action-form" of Israel's petition material. That is, what is said in individual petitions reflects the actual experiences of individuals.[50] These experiences are explored within the local context of a "primary group" and are placed in stylized form by the worship expert.[51] Like Gunkel,[52] Gerstenberger sees the development late in the history of Israel of small, "primary" groups which worship in the local communities. He associates the rise of such groups with the exile and the creation of the synagogue as the religious centre of community life. The Psalter in its final form, argues Gerstenberger, must be understood in the context of its use in late Persian and Hellenistic synagogues and not as a hymnbook of the second temple.[53]

One limitation of Gerstenberger's explanation, however, is that we know very little about the synagogue during the Second Temple period. The synagogue as a separate building does not appear to have been common before the end of the second century B. C.

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[47] Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Der bittende Mensch: Bitteritual und Klagelied des Einzelnen im Alten Testament* (Neukirchener: Verlag, 1980), 5. See also Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "Der Klagende Mensch," in *Probleme biblischer Theologie Gerhard von Rad zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Hans Walter Wolff (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag), 1971.
[48] Ibid., 6.
[49] Ibid.., 13.
[50] Ibid., 164.
[51] Ibid., 167.
[52] Herman Gunkel, *The Psalms*, 5.
[53] Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part 1: With an Introduction to Cultic Poetry*, eds. Rolf Knierim & Gene M. Tucker (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 28.

E. and little is known about the daily practice of worship in the synagogue, apart from its emphasis on the reading and study of the Torah,[54] so that Gerstenberger is trying to explain one unknown in terms of another unknown.

While Gerstenberger's argument for the use of some Psalms principally in smaller groups rather than in temple worship does find support in the Psalter, this does not necessarily indicate an exilic or post-exilic *Sitz im Leben*. Gerstenberger's thesis would seem to suggest that, prior to the exile, the religious life of the vast majority of Israelites was restricted to a few annual festivals and that they did not meet together for worship outside of this context. The existence of "high places" of worship in pre-exilic Israel demonstrates, however, that worship was not confined to the temple in Jerusalem. If, as Gerstenberger maintains, there is evidence in the Psalter for the origin and use of some Psalms in the small-group setting, why would the existence of such groups be impossible or even improbable while the first temple still stood? A late dating of such Psalms seems unnecessary in order to sustain Gerstenberger's argument that not all of the Psalms may be tied to the Jerusalem temple. The importance of his contribution is, rather, to demonstrate that the contents of individual psalms of lament cannot be separated from the secular experiences which first elicited them. Thus, while the evidence which Gerstenberger offers for a *Sitz im Leben* of the local "primary group" for many individual psalms of lament is far from conclusive, he does raise two serious doubts concerning the cult model of understanding the origin and function of the Psalms. Firstly, one or more cultic festivals seem inadequate to explain the life-setting of all of the Psalms material. Secondly, there is sufficient evidence for the individual and secular origin of a number of Psalms to place the burden of proof on those who would argue for an exclusively cultic origin and use of the Psalter.

The temple and its approach to worship were not necessarily central to the lives of many Israelites. Precisely because the temple was an important symbol of the monarchy and was a fundamental part of court life, the vast majority of people participated only rarely in that aspect of religious life.[55] The average Israelite lived far away from court and temple and her or his day-to-day practice of religious faith was probably far less governed by the formal Jerusalem cult than by other, more local factors. The question then is, do the Psalms reflect almost exclusively the efforts of the king's songwriters or do we also find in the Psalter elements of the religious life of those who were less well-connected to the temple cult and the king's household? If the Psalter was simply a deposit of Jerusalem court/temple psalms, we would expect the language of the Psalms to centre on cultic and royal concerns. The language of God's presence and

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[54] *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, 1992 ed., s. v. "Synagogue."

[55] Deut. 16:16 commands the male members of the population to appear before the Lord thrice yearly for the three principle festivals of Israel, but it seems unreasonable to restrict the religious life of the nation to the Jerusalem cult at the time of these three festivals.

absence in the Psalter is, however, too closely tied to a wide range of situations in the secular life of Israel to be completely restricted to cultic use.

Furthermore, the whole notion of a "cultic language" which is somehow distinct from the life experiences of those who write and sing the Psalms is not supported by the language found in the Psalter. While there seems abundant evidence for the use of the Psalms in Israel's cult, there is no compelling evidence which would suggest that the Psalms cannot also originate and find their use in the secular life experiences of those who write and sing them.

This has direct implications for our understanding of references to God's saving actions in the Psalms. A purely subjective change on the part of the psalmist, as a result of her or his petitions to God being accepted, seems incapable of fully explaining the language of God hearing, judging, and delivering. Any explanation which assumes a specialized, non-literal understanding of expressions of God's presence to act and save in the Psalms is motivated, I would argue, not by a concern for ancient Israel's understanding of their prayer language, but by the difficulty of trying to interpret the language of God acting in a modern context.

3.1.5 Conclusion

The response which the psalmist sought in the psalm of lament could be no more symbolic or non-literal than the need which provoked the psalmist to pray. Thus, when we are told in a psalm that God has answered prayer, it is likely that such an answer was experienced not only in the context of the worship service, but also in the secular experience of the psalmist and, in particular, within the situation that prompted the lament in the first place. We must, therefore, ask the question how are such "answers" from God experienced both within and outside of the worship context? If the assertion "God has answered me" speaks of a reality beyond the immediate worship experience, how are we to understand God answering in the secular world beyond the temple gate? The most obvious problem in addressing these questions is that we do not have access to what happened after God answered prayer, beyond what the prayers themselves report. Any move beyond the actual contents of the Psalms themselves is highly speculative and the results which such a move may produce are, therefore, uncertain at best. The place to begin, then, is with an examination of the "before" and "after" which the Psalms record around the affirmation "God has answered me".

3.2 How is Presence Experienced?

In the second part of this chapter, I will consider the notion of God answering prayer which is found in the psalms of lament. In the first section I will consider the

transition from lament to praise commonly found in psalms of lament and will evaluate the hypothesis that a priestly oracle of salvation explains this shift within the psalm. The second section will examine the form of God's answer to the prayer of lament which is most often expressed in terms of restored life and the judgment of the psalmist's enemies.

3.2.1 The Transitional Moment -- The Move from Lament to Praise

The dramatic shift

In those psalms of lament which move from lament to praise, we see within the psalms themselves expressions both of God's silence, hiddenness, and absence and expressions of his presence to answer, save, heal, and judge. God's answer to the prayer of the psalmist, then, can be seen within the structure of the lament psalm itself. In many of the lament psalms a definite shift can be seen from lament, complaint, and petition to praise for deliverance. The expectation on the part of the psalmist that crying out to God will produce a result is, at times, realized within the text of the psalm itself as the psalmist commences to praise God for an assured future salvation or, indeed, for a salvation already experienced by the psalmist. In this section I want to focus on the shift in many of the psalms of lament from petitioning God for salvation to praising him for an accomplished deliverance, in order to understand better how the psalmist experienced God's answer to prayer.[56]

According to Westermann, the way in which petition and praise are paired in the Psalms of Israel is unique. He maintains that in Babylonian psalms the gods are praised in preparation for petition, while Israel moves from petition to praise after the petition

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[56] Brueggemann catalogues various attempts to understand this internal transition which can be seen in a number of Psalms. For Joachim Begrich ("Das priesterliche Heilsorakel," *ZAW* 52 [1934]: 81-92) , the answer from God comes in the act of speaking the liturgy, almost as though it were recognized or discovered. F. Küchler (Brueggemann refers to "Das priesterliche Orakel in Israel and Juda," in *Abhandlungen zur semitischen Religionskunde und Sprachwissenschaft, W. W. Grafen von Baudissin zum 26. September 1917 überreicht von Freunden und Schülern, BZAW* 33 [Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1918]: 285-301.) identifies the moment of transition from lament to sudden praise with God speaking (Ps. 12:5; 60:6; 91:15-16; 108:7). S. B. Frost ("Asseveration by Thanksgiving," *VT* 8 [1958]: 380-390.) sees the change in the act of announcing praise and thanksgiving. John Wevers ("A Study in the Form Criticism of Individual Complaint Psalms," *VT* 6 [1956]: 80-96.) claims that it is as the name of Yahweh is spoken that the movement of the psalm is reversed. (Walter Brueggemann, "From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life," *Int* 28 [1974]: 9.) To the list which Brueggemann provides can be added Tony Cartledge's suggestion that the act of speaking a conditional vow of praise functions "... to motivate God to action and to instill confidence in the petitioner by sealing a special sort of relationship between them." "Conditional Vows in the Psalms of Lament: A New Approach to an Old Problem", in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm.*, eds. Kenneth G. Hoglund et al., (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 86. John McKay suggests that some psalms of lament reflect a situation of keeping an all-night vigil and he associates the transition from lament to praise with the coming of the dawn. "Psalms of Vigil," *ZAW* 91/2 (1979): 229.

has been answered.[57] He goes on to describe the close tie between petition, which seeks to motivate God to save, and praise, which results from remembered instances of salvation in the past.

> There is no petition, no pleading from the depths, that did not move at least one step (in looking back to God's earlier saving activity or in confession of confidence) on the road to praise. But there is also no praise that was fully separated from the experience of God's wonderful intervention in time of need, none that had become a mere stereotyped liturgy.[58]

This movement between petition and praise is frequently presented within the psalm itself in a transitional moment, a moment when God "breaks through" and responds to the petitioner's request with a resulting shift from lamentation to praise on the part of the psalmist.

Brueggemann notes the difficulty involved in adequately describing this sudden movement within the psalm.

> When the psalm makes its next move, it is a surprising one. Things are different. Something has changed. We cannot ever know whether it is changed circumstance, or changed attitude, or something of both. But the speaker now speaks differently .... This movement from *plea* to *praise* is one of the most startling in all of Old Testament literature.[59]

It is in this dramatic shift, which is often so poorly described by those who experience it and yet which is at the very heart of many of Israel's psalms of lament, that we see the reflection of God's revelation and action. All too often, we are left to speculate as to the exact nature and form of God's in-breaking response. Often we do not know if it is the psalmist, God, the situation, or some combination of the three which changes.

The case against the "priestly salvation oracle"

One of the most widely accepted explanations for this transition within the text of the psalm was put forward by Joachim Begrich in his article "Das priesterliche Heilsorakel".[60] Begrich argues for the existence of a "priestly salvation oracle" in which the priest responds on behalf of God, declaring that God has heard the petition of the supplicant and has responded to save and bless him or her. Begrich identifies three basic elements in the salvation oracles of Second Isaiah, an expression of reassurance usually in the form of a "fear not" statement, the identification of the ones addressed by God in the oracle, and a justification for accepting God's reassurance, frequently introduced by כִּי.

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[57] Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 152.
[58] Ibid., 154.
[59] Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 56.
[60] Joachim Begrich, "Das priesterliche Heilsorakel," *ZAW* 52, (1934): 81-92.

The application of Begrich's observations to the Psalms raises three questions. Firstly, does the salvation oracle exist in the Psalter? Secondly, if salvation oracles are present in the Psalter, what is the function of such oracles in the shift from petition to praise in lament psalms, that is, are they sufficient to explain this move within the lament psalm? Thirdly, if they are related to this move from lament to praise, but are not sufficient to explain it fully, what is the nature of that relationship, that is, are they necessary in order to explain the move?

In addressing the first question of the possible existence of a salvation oracle, the main difficulty is the absence of clear examples of such an oracle in the Psalter. The difficulty in "seeing" a salvation oracle form is made explicit by Thomas Raitt, who states that: "It is only after a prolonged process of comparison of these units of speech that one begins to discern the patterns, the common themes, the typical expressions, the generic structural components beneath the confusing diversity of language."[61] Raitt, who believes that a salvation oracle form does exist, is nevertheless unable to disguise the fact that even to perceive its possible presence requires a certain creativity and flexibility of thought. Raitt is, thus, placed in the difficult position of ascribing great importance to something which, at best, appears only in fragmentary hints within the Psalter.

Edgar Conrad has questioned the applicability of Begrich's salvation oracle to the lament psalms. At the core of Conrad's objection is the lack of conformity between the structure of the oracle of salvation *Gattung* that Begrich distills from examples in Second Isaiah and examples of salvation oracles previously identified by Küchler in the Psalter (Ps. 60:8; 118:8 ff.; 21:9-13; 75:3f.; 12:6; 91:14-16; 81:9-12; and 95:8-11).[62] The three elements which appear most consistently in Begrich's *Gattung* are almost completely absent in Küchler's examples. Conrad's conclusion is that the *Gattung* identified by Begrich in Second Isaiah is not an oracle of salvation, but rather an expression of comfort offered by Yahweh to the exiles and characterized by the phrase "fear not", which is absent from the "salvation oracles" in the Psalter. Conrad's work strongly suggests that the exact form and presence of the salvation oracle in the Psalms cannot be adequately clarified using Begrich's study.

This leads us to the second question to be considered in this discussion. Even if we allow for the existence of such an oracle, in spite of the fragmentary nature of the evidence, the question would still remain, how do such oracles function within the

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61 Thomas M. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile: Judgment/Deliverance in Jeremiah and Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 129.

62 Edgar W. Conrad. "Second Isaiah and the Priestly Oracle of Salvation," *ZAW* 93, (1981): 239-240. (Conrad refers to F. Küchler, "Das priesterliche Orakel in Israel und Juda" in *Abhandlungen zur semitischen Religionskunde und Sprachwissenschaft, W. W. Grafen von Baudissin zum 26. September 1917 überreicht von Freunden und Schülern,* [Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1918]. 285-301.) In addition to those identified by Küchler, possible fragments of salvation oracles can be seen in Ps. 46:10 in which God instructs the psalmist to "be still and know"; Ps. 20:1-5 and 85:8-13 which express confidence that God will or has heard the psalmist; and Ps. 10:17-18 and 55:22, which offer an assurance of being heard.

psalms of lament? Is the salvation oracle sufficient in itself to explain fully the startling transition from petition to praise in the Psalms?

Brueggemann exemplifies those scholars who would argue that the salvation oracle is not sufficient in itself to evoke an experience of God. He does see the sudden change from lament to praise as being given vocal expression by the priest or elder in an oracle of salvation, but he argues that the experience that something has changed does not originate in the proclamation of the liturgical leader. The effectiveness of the word is dependent on "something happening" on the level of objective experience.

> The break point of the lament form which turns *from plea to praise* is of course a literary phenomenon, but it does not illuminate how we receive the new experience of orientation. It simply gives expression to it. The question of how the move is made is not a literary, but a theological matter. Israel sings songs of new orientation because the God of Israel is the one who hears and answers expressions of disorientation and resolves experiences of disorientation .... The songs are not about the "natural" outcome of trouble, but about the decisive *transformation* made possible by this God who causes new life where none seems possible.[63]

The move from lament to praise is not a "natural" and expected outcome, so that the simple declaration of salvation by itself is not sufficient to account for this move. Thus, for Brueggemann, although a salvation oracle is expressed in the context of the lament psalm and may prove to be the vehicle for "hearing from God", the recital of such an oracle does not, by itself, produce the experience of being heard and answered by God.

Key to understanding the function of the salvation oracle in the lament psalm is the question of the relationship of liturgical language about God and experiences of God. If the oracle of salvation were sufficient in itself to produce an experience of God's response and presence, then it would be reasonable to say that the liturgical language of such an oracle produced the experience of being heard. But the psalms of lament do not move from language toward experience, but rather, they begin by introducing a new experience, namely the experience of God's absence, which is in sharp contrast to the expectation of his presence. Thus, the psalms of lament present an interplay between experience and language.

This is not to say that experience always leads language. Language can and does produce religious experiences. The limits of language's ability to create experience, however, can best be illustrated by a critique of George Lindbeck's notion of the nature of the formation of doctrine. Lindbeck outlines a "cultural-linguistic" approach to the formation of doctrine in which the experiences of a religious community do not lead them to formulate doctrines, but rather the religious language of a community determines the shape and range of experiences open to that community. According to this understanding, "... a religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic

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63 Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 124-125.

framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought."[64] Religious language creates a gestalt out of which experiences arise. "A comprehensive scheme or story used to structure all dimensions of existence is not primarily a set of propositions to be believed, but is rather the medium in which one moves, a set of skills that one employs in living one's life."[65] Experiences, says Lindbeck, do not create the text, but rather it is necessary to have the text in order to have religious experience. "In short, it is necessary to have the means for expressing an experience in order to have it ...."[66]

There are a number of limits to Lindbeck's model, however, when it is applied to accounts of religious experience in the Psalms (as well as in other biblical materials) and to the use of a salvation oracle to evoke experiences of God. Firstly, as has already been argued, the absence of any clear example of an oracle of salvation in the Psalter suggests that language is less important to the formation of religious experience than Lindbeck argues. Secondly, Lindbeck's model excludes any new experiences which require truly new language to describe them. Ezekiel's description of his vision of flying creatures and wheels within wheels fails to communicate to the reader Ezekiel's experience of a celestial vision. Whatever Ezekiel saw and experienced, his language was finally inadequate fully to communicate his vision to the reader. He could only tell the reader what it was "like" using familiar images of creatures and wheels in new and strange combinations and settings. Thus, he had an experience for which he did not have adequate language and he was forced to struggle in an attempt to create new language out of older, more familiar categories. Thirdly, as I have stated above, the language of the lament psalm begins with a new and unexpected experience, the absence of God, and recalls past experiences of presence which call this new experience into question. The central crisis of the psalms of lament is the absence of God and his failure to act as he has in past experience. The psalmist is using language of present new experience (absence) and remembering contradictory past experience (God's acting to save) in order to provoke a new act of salvation (not simply to repeat past salvations). The psalmist's "doctrine of salvation" is being reformed not by a change of language, but by a change of language resulting from a new experience, the experience of God's absence. Experience does not seem to follow language in the psalms of lament, but rather the new experience of absence calls forth language of petition and the experience of salvation calls forth new expressions of praise. But this new praise is different from the old. It is a praise which holds implicitly a place for absence and petition. Lindbeck's argument assumes that the gestalt out of which experience-creating language arises was itself created *ex nihilo*. While language can and does lead experience, it is also true that experience can and does create new language.

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[64] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine, Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 33.
[65] Ibid., 35.
[66] Ibid., 37.

This interplay between language and experience describes a qualifying limit on any liturgical response to a petition brought to God, namely, subsequent experience. The circumstance which leads the psalmist to petition God waits for the psalmist as he or she leaves the temple and a promise to resolve the problem must be accompanied by a change in circumstances, otherwise the "answer" given in the context of worship would have to be continually re-evaluated and re-expressed in non-literal terms. For example, the assurance of salvation delivered to Hezekiah by Isaiah (Isa. 37:33-35) would finally have been unconvincing if the Assyrians had not withdrawn from Jerusalem (Isa. 37:36-38). In the same way, the affirmation in Ps. 71:24 "... those who tried to do me harm have been put to shame, and disgraced" would be meaningless if not accompanied by some experience which serves to confirm the conviction and confidence of the psalmist that God had accomplished this act of judgment.

This need for an external "working out" of an assurance of being heard, however, does not diminish the reality and importance of the experience within the context of the cult that "God has heard, seen, and answered". Westermann observes that, while the oracle of salvation is not recorded in the psalm of lament, the petition that precedes it and the praise that follows it are. The now absent salvation oracle "comes in the middle" and is a vehicle through which the word of God is proclaimed, transforming the state of the petitioner.

> Gunkel rightly said that the oracle of salvation as such is not a sufficient explanation of these Psalms .... In addition a real change must have taken place in the one speaking. It is therefore not the fact of the oracle as such that created this special type of Psalms of petition, but the word which in these oracles came from God to the one petitioning and lamenting.[67]

Westermann points to Ps. 28:6, "He has heard the voice of my supplications," as an example of the psalmist's response to the salvation oracle and suggests that the word from God heard in and through the oracle is an assurance that God has heard and, by implication, that he will respond to save. Westermann's solution to the problem of what happens to change the psalmist's prayer has the advantage of accounting for the psalmist's experience of being heard by God in the worship setting, without the need for an immediate change in the psalmist's outward circumstances at the moment of prayer. To Westermann's argument must be added, however, the observation that a promise of being heard is insufficient in and of itself. Subsequent objective experience must show that the circumstance that caused the lament has changed and that God has acted to save.

This leads to our third question, namely, if we assume that salvation oracles exist in the Psalter, at least in fragmentary form, and that these fragments testify to fuller and more extensively used oracles no longer contained in the text, how are we to understand

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67 Westermann, *Praise of God in the Psalms*, 65-70.

the relation of such oracles to the move from lament to praise in the psalm of lament? If the presence of a salvation oracle is not sufficient in order to explain the move from lament to praise, is it at least necessary in order to do so? Of the eight salvation oracles suggested by Küchler, only two are found among the psalms of lament (Ps. 12:6; 60:8) and only one of these is associated with a move from lament to praise (Ps. 12:6). To this example may be added two more, Ps. 55:23, which is an assurance of being heard, and Ps. 85:9-10, which is an expression of confidence on the part of the psalmist that God will save. Both would be appropriate as a response immediately following a salvation oracle and, therefore, offer evidence of such an oracle at the point of transition. All three offer an assurance that God will deliver the psalmist out of distress and each marks the beginning of praise after lament. The oracle in Ps. 12:6, "Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up," says the LORD; "I will place them in the safety for which they long," expresses confidence in a future salvation. The verbs continue to be in the imperfect; "You, O LORD, will protect us; you will guard us from this generation forever," and the Psalm ends with the danger unresolved; "On every side the wicked prowl, as vileness is exalted among humankind." Likewise, 55:23, "Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved," indicates a salvation which is still hoped for in the future and the Psalm ends with the verb still in the imperfect; "But I will trust in you." Likewise, Psalm 85:9-10 reads, "Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land." All three of these examples express confidence in a future salvation, expressed with the use of imperfect verbs. This is in marked contrast to the salvation oracles of Second Isaiah which express the basis for accepting the reassurance "fear not" using perfect tense verbs. Westermann argues that the use of perfect tense verbs to describe God's turning to and answering to save "... is clear proof that the oracle of salvation represents the answer to the suppliant's prayer ..."[68] and the absence in the Psalms of salvation oracles which represent God's answer as having already been accomplished suggests a less prominent role for such oracles in the Psalter.

Two observations can be made from these examples. Firstly, considering the relative frequency of transitions from petition to praise in the psalms of lament (4:7; 6:8; 7:10; 12:5; 13:5; 28:6; 31:21; 41:11; 54:4; 55:22; 56:13; 57:5; 59:16; 61:5; 69:30; 71:22; 85:8; 94:22; 109:30; 130:7; 140:12; 142:76), it is remarkable that there are only three clear pairings of an oracle of salvation fragment or indicator with this transition. It seems highly unlikely, therefore, that the oracle of salvation can provide the primary explanation for

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[68] Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, tran. David Stalker (London: SCM Press, 1969), 73. This feature of the salvation oracle or "promise of salvation" is discussed more fully in Claus Westermann, *Prophetic Oracles of Salvation in the Old Testament*. tran. Keith Crim (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 42.

this move from petition to praise. Indeed, the fact that examples of the salvation oracles which appear in the Psalter cannot be strongly identified either with the lament psalm in general or with the point of transition from lament to praise, suggests that they are not a necessary part of such a transition. Secondly, in each of the three instances that do connect this transition from petition to praise with an oracle of salvation, that salvation is reported as a future hope and not something that the psalmist experiences as already received. Therefore, the notion that it is the salvation oracle itself which produces this move in the psalmist seems doubtful. The fact that none of the three examples noted above result in an expression of praise for salvation already accomplished also adds weight to the argument that the salvation oracle may not be considered sufficient in itself to explain the perception that God has answered prayer.

While our understanding of the form and use of the priestly oracle of salvation remains incomplete, a number of conclusions can be drawn from the evidence that does exist for such oracles "behind" or "in the middle of" the Psalms. Firstly, there is general agreement that the psalmist rarely ever gives us direct access to the transformative event itself. Secondly, while a salvation oracle may certainly call attention to this shift, it is insufficient by itself to bring about and sustain a move from lament to praise. The uttering of a salvation oracle may be merely a formal liturgical event which does not convey that sense of God's speaking to the worshipper which is needed to bring about an assurance of being heard. Furthermore, objective experience must, at some point, "catch up with" the promise that God has heard and that he has saved, is saving, or will save. The fact that the needs presented by the psalmist are often specific and concrete, arising out of a particular crisis situation, suggests that an assurance of being heard must be followed by the fulfillment of the implied promise that God will act to save. Thirdly, the virtual absence of salvation oracles in the Psalter, together with the lack of any clear association between oracles of salvation and the move from lament to praise, suggests that they were of secondary importance to the psalmist and that they are, therefore, not necessary in order to explain the shift from lament to praise. Finally, while we may try to reconstruct the part that "came in the middle," the psalmist consistently draws our attention *away from* the moment of transition and *toward* the resulting change in his or her circumstance as a result of being heard by God. Thus, the next question to be addressed is, when God does answer, how is the result of that answer experienced and described by the psalmist? What happens after God answers?

3.2.2 When God Answers Prayers of Petition

There is, for the psalmist, the expectation that any assurance of having been heard by God, possibly in the form of an oracle of salvation, must be followed by a change in the circumstances of the psalmist or in his or her relationship with God that

will confirm that God has, indeed, heard and responded. But what kind of change does the psalm writer expect? What would constitute "being heard" for the psalmist? The psalms of lament do not all conclude with the expectation that God will intervene to save, but, in some cases, also go on to describe the result of God's salvation.

By far the most common context for the abrupt transition in the psalm of lament from petition to praise is an attack on the psalmist by enemies. Indeed, of the 23 lament psalms which include a move from petition to praise, all but three (Ps. 4:7; 85:8; 130:7) refer directly to an attack on the psalmist by enemies and evildoers. Thus, after the move from petition to praise, the psalmist frequently describes a renewed confidence that God will save and judge in the future (Ps. 55:24; 56:10; 94:22-23; 140:13-14) or, indeed, that he has already heard, seen, delivered, and judged (Ps. 6:9-11; 13:6-7; 28:6-7; 31:8-9; 61:6), on the assumption that the use of the perfect verb tense refers to events that have already transpired. In most cases the result of God having heard the petition is two-fold, the psalmist is delivered from distress and the enemy who brought about that distress is judged. Psalm 54:9 is typical of this pattern: "For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies." Deliverance and the overthrow of the enemy often go hand-in-hand.

In describing this deliverance from distress, frequently in the lament psalms, the crisis which confronts the psalmist is portrayed as a threat to life (Ps. 6:5-6; 13:4; 28:1; 31:13; 69:16; 94:21), and salvation from distress is compared with the psalmist being raised again from Sheol (Ps. 56:14; 54:5; 71:20; 94:17; 116:3, 8). One form that the psalmist's report of having been heard takes, then, is to declare that his or her life has been restored by the one who creates and sustains all life (Ps. 54:6; 56:14; 61:7; 71:23; 109:31).

Fundamental to the notion that God can act to bring new life in the present is the recital of who God is and what he has done in the past. He has the power to bring new life now because he is the creator and sustainer of life from the very beginning. When reciting God's mighty saving acts in history, Israel frequently hearkens back to God's first act of "history", the creation. A very notable difference between modern and ancient interpretations of historical recitals in the Psalter is that, whereas modern readers frequently distinguish between creation and the history of the nation of Israel, the psalmist makes no such sharp distinction. For example, Ps. 136 does not separate God's acts of creating the world from his acts of creating the nation of Israel.

> ... who made the great lights, for his steadfast love endures forever;
> the sun to rule over the day, for his steadfast love endures forever;
> the moon and stars to rule over the night, for his steadfast love endures forever;
> who struck Egypt through their firstborn, for his steadfast love endures forever;
> and brought Israel out from among them, for his steadfast love endures forever;...
> (Ps. 136:7-11).

What we think of as creation and history appear seamlessly as one continuous history. The sharp distinction between mythic creation saga and the salvation history of the exodus is a modern addition to the study of the Old Testament reflected in the fact that, in the NRSV, KJV, JB, REB and NIV, there is a paragraph break between verses 9 and 10.[69] In Psalm 77:17-21 imagery of the exodus and primal creation are completely intermixed and are, at times, virtually indistinguishable. For Israel there was not a sharp distinction between God at the beginning as creator and God's ongoing activity as national and individual saviour.[70]

The creation is not simply a past event, but is also a present happening, so that it is something that God not only initiates, but something that he must sustain in ongoing creation.

> These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
> When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die
> and return to their dust.
> When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.[71]

Thus the psalmist appeals to the creator-God to sustain life in the face of death and to bring the psalmist up from Sheol. It is important to note, though, that this is a theological rather than an exegetical connection. Nowhere in the Psalter does the psalmist refer to God as creator as a basis for appealing to him to save the psalmist from Sheol. In the context of lament, however, referring to God's creative acts serves the purpose of demonstrating his ability to save the psalmist from the attacks of enemies (Ps. 74:10-23; 89:6-13, 51-52).

The psalmist is not content, however, with being delivered from that which threatens his or her life, but also calls on God to judge the enemies who have threatened that life. C. S. Lewis argues for a difference in the way in which justice and judgment are understood in Christian and in Jewish contexts. He states that:

> The ancient Jews, like ourselves, think of God's judgment in terms of an earthly court of justice. The difference is that the Christian pictures the case to be tried as a criminal case with himself in the dock; the Jew pictures it as a civil case with

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[69] von Rad describes these two sections as "... side by side, yet wholly unrelated the one to the other." (Gerhard von Rad, "The Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, tran. E. W. Trueman Dicken [Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966], 133.)

[70] Or, as Patrick Miller has expressed it, "It must be recognized, therefore, that the distinction between God as creator and God as Lord of history is more a convenience for the sake of systematizing our theological categories than it is a real distinction." *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 74.

[71] Ps. 104:27-30.

> himself as the plaintiff. The one hopes for acquittal, or rather for pardon; the other hopes for a resounding triumph with heavy damages.[72]

Lewis states that "Christians cry to God for mercy instead of justice" while the Jews "cried to God for justice instead of injustice".[73] The psalmist does not want only life restored, but also justice.

On some occasions, the psalmist recognizes that his or her own sin makes him or her vulnerable to the judgment of God. Thus, the psalmist prays, "Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions" (Ps. 25:7; cf. 25:11, 18; 38:4-5, 19; 39:9; 41:5; 51:2-6; 130:3-4). But, as Fredrik Lindström has effectively demonstrated,[74] God's absence and failure to judge cannot be consistently tied to the failure of the psalmist to keep covenant, and at times the psalmist will protest his or her innocence (Ps. 44:18-19; 59:4-5), with the result that God's justice is called into question. Psalm 73 struggles with this question overtly, but implicit in every complaint in which the psalmist refuses to accept responsibility for his or her suffering by acknowledging sin is the questioning of God's justice. Inherent in the questioning of God's presence is the betrayal of trust implied by a God who fails to maintain a saving relationship. For God to answer prayer, then, is for him to redress injustice (Ps. 6:11; 7:15-17; 10:5; 12:6; 41:12; 54:7, 9; 55:24; 57:7; 69:33-34; 71:24; 94:23; 140:13). Thus, the outward signs that God has heard and responded to the appeal of the psalmist are that the psalmist is saved from the enemies and life and justice are both restored.

3.2.3 Conclusion

The move from lament to praise in the psalms of lament is a startling one and the Psalms themselves tell us little about what prompts this abrupt shift. The argument that an oracle of salvation, delivered by the priest, lies behind this transition and is sufficient to account for it is not adequately supported in the text of the lament psalms. At best, such oracles play merely a supporting role. The psalmist seems intent on directing our attention away from the moment of transition and focusing it on the results of God's answering the prayer of lament.

The experience of God answering the petition of the psalmist in the prayer of lament should be understood on two separate but related levels. First of all, there is the shift within the psalm from lament to praise, which describes a change in the prayer of the psalmist and implies an experience of being answered by God. Secondly, because the lament psalm serves to bring a specific need before God, whether it be the need of the

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72 C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1958), 10.
73 Ibid., 12.
74 Fredrik Lindström, *Suffering and Sin: Interpretations of Illness in the Individual Complaint Psalms* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994), 435.

original writer of the psalm or of those who later applied the psalm to their own circumstance, God's answer must transcend the bounds of the worship setting in order to transform that circumstance in the life of the person or persons praying which caused them to present their petition to God in the first place.

By far the most common complaint of the psalmist is a threat to life brought about by the attack of enemies and the wicked. Thus, to say that God has answered the prayer of lament is to say that God restores life and judges the enemies of the psalmist, both within the liturgy of prayer and, by implication, in life-experiences outside of the temple.

For the modern reader, the move between the experience of God answering within the temple liturgy and the related experience of God answering prayer (or not answering prayer) in life-experiences outside of the worship context, is difficult to make. For the psalmist, answered prayer demanded that life be restored and the wicked be judged, not in a general and abstract sense, but in the particular situations which prompted Israel to offer up laments to God. But how can we, in the modern world where God is no longer believed by many to act in salvation and judgment, interpret the language of answered prayer in the Psalter?

3.3 Bridging the Gap Between Worldviews

In the third part of this chapter, I will discuss the difficulties involved in understanding how God's answer to the prayer of lament affects the life of the one praying outside of the confines of the cult, that is, how the power of God to act reaches beyond the walls of the temple.

3.3.1 Moving God Outside the Temple

The power of language to effect change

The psalms of lament petition God for action. But how does God act? And how is God's action experienced by the worshipper whose petition has been heard? If, as I have argued above, God's saving response includes but also goes beyond the subjective experience of the worshipper, how is it possible to speak of God acting to save outside the cult? While a number of scholars speak of the renewed experience of the presence of God only within the cultic encounter, some writers see the biblical language itself as providing a vehicle for God's action in the secular world.

One such approach looks at the power of language to effect change. Dale Patrick argues that the God of action in the Old Testament is simply a literary device. Within the human imagination, God is rendered by the biblical writer as a "dramatis persona" and

God acts only through this vehicle of literary imagination in his self-revelation to Israel.[75]

Patrick states that:

> The authors of Scripture employed artistic means to represent a human world in which God is an active participant. It is a sign of their success that the reader is able to enter this world imaginatively to such an extent that it seems utterly natural. Only when we step out of that world and begin to question the possibility of miracles and other divine interventions does the 'constructedness' of the biblical world become apparent. If we can surmount our critical skepticism and arrive at a 'post-critical naiveté,' we can enter this world again but in full awareness that it is an artistic and intellectual achievement.[76]

Patrick correctly identifies the problem of the modern reader. That reader can freely enter the world of the text through a suspension of disbelief, but he or she is not free to draw the text into the modern world unchanged. Assumptions that we cannot accept anything as real which is outside of our own direct experience, that God does not act directly in our lives, and that he cannot intervene directly in human history because that would disrupt the chain of cause-and-effect which makes modern historical method possible, prevent such a move. For Patrick, the language of God acting is never anything more than a literary depiction which we are invited to entertain at a purely imaginative level. God's "acting" has only that power to influence and transform that we invite it to have. We enter and leave the mythical world of literature, taking with us only that which can fit through the door of the modern definition of what is "real".

There are four aspects of Patrick's understanding which require comment. Firstly, he projects the assumptions of modernity uncritically onto the biblical writers, claiming that they are consciously engaged in speaking of God's acting as a purely literary device and not as a description of experience or literal expectation. Although Patrick acknowledges that the ancient reader would accept the notion of God intervening in history, he nevertheless maintains that such references to God's intervention in the biblical text may only be understood as a literary device for engendering in the reader the general notion of God's presence.[77] Thus, Patrick has the psalmists creatively responding to a problem caused by an assumption of modernity, namely that reports of God's intervening in history cannot refer to events outside of the literary imagination, when there is no evidence in the texts themselves that such was the understanding of reality held by the psalmists. Secondly, Patrick assumes too easily that we can truly enter into the world of the psalmist while laying aside all that would prevent us from seeing her or his world. It is precisely because Patrick cannot suspend his own disbelief in the miraculous and in the intervention of God in the life of the psalmist, however, that the

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75 Dale Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 135.
76 Ibid., 63.
77 Ibid., 78-79.

text appears "constructed". That perception of constructedness is only apparent *after* we introduce modern presuppositions to our understanding of the text. We view the text as a literary construction precisely because we cannot lay aside our presuppositions and view the text in the context of a different worldview. Thirdly, because, according to Patrick's model, the biblical text can in no way challenge the assumptions of modernity, nothing can come to us from the text which has not been completely pre-formed by our modern worldview. As a result, we cannot seriously entertain the tension, present in the lament psalms, between remembered presence and experienced absence. The text suggests that the psalmist "believes" the historical report of how God acts; thus the crisis for the psalmist is not that God cannot respond, but that the relationship which the psalmist has enjoyed with God in the past appears to have changed. The assumption that the psalmist shares modern presuppositions prevents the modern reader from fully appreciating the crisis of relationship that God's silence represents for the psalmist. Finally, Patrick's approach illustrates the fact that we are able to bring out of the biblical world only those things which fit within the assumptions that we bring into the biblical world. Patrick is unable to bridge the gap between the ancient and the modern worldview because he does not fully appreciate the extent to which these two worldviews are different.

The creative imagination

Walter Brueggemann gives God a more active role in influencing the world through human imagination. He argues that the language of the Psalms themselves is a creative force: "... Psalms 'make a world.' They create, evoke, suggest, and propose a network of symbols, metaphors, images, memories and hopes so that 'the world,' in each successive generation, is perceived, experienced, and practiced in a specific way".[78] Such world-making language is a creative act which mirrors the creative action of God. Brueggemann asserts that

> ... in the Psalms the use of language does not *describe* what is. It *evokes* to being what is not until it has been spoken .... In using speech in this way, we are in fact doing in a derivative way what God has done in the creation narratives of Genesis. We are calling into being that which does not yet exist (cf. Rom. 4:17).[79]

Such speech does not alter the "ontology of God", but does alter "the life-world in which we encounter God."[80] For Brueggemann, speech offers the imagination an alternative

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[78] Walter Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment*, 21.
[79] Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 1986), 28. See also Brueggemann's *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 1986.
[80] Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 25.

version of reality which can compete with the dominant reality offered by the established political and religious forces of society. He defines this speech-generated imagination as,

> ... the capacity to generate, evoke, and articulate alternative images of reality, images that counter what hegemonic power and knowledge have declared to be impossible. The counterversion (sub-version) of reality thereby deabsolutized and destabilizes that 'the world' regards as given, and invites the hearers of the text to recharacterize what is given or taken as real.[81]

This "new imagination", in turn, creates for us new experiences of reality. Brueggemann states that "... *language leads experience*, so that the speaker speaks what is unknown and unexperienced until it is finally brought to speech. It is not this way until it is said to be this way."[82] Thus, for Brueggemann, God is not confined to cultic encounter, but we ourselves move out of the worship service with God and his presence is experienced in the world through us as we work to transform the world to conform to the alternative image of reality which the biblical narrative has created for us. Cultic liturgy and, in particular, speech is the mechanism for re-experiencing God both in the worship service and in secular life.

Such language not only creates new worlds and realities, according to Brueggemann, it challenges and destroys old ones. Historical recital challenges the reality of a world which denies that God has the power to step in, destroying the old and bringing newness. God's mighty, saving acts are rehearsed in order to overthrow a world order which is intent on keeping God safely out of the picture. For Brueggemann, the recital of the liturgy is a highly subversive act, because it falls outside of the control of the dominant social order's reasoned construction of reality. "These Psalms of historical recital characteristically assert that reason is not autonomous and that knowing is allied with remembering, praising, trusting, confessing, and petitioning."[83] Thus, Brueggemann has suggested a way of "getting God out of the cult" using the recital of God's acts in the past in order to create in us an "alternative imagination" as to what is possible for God in the present.

But is this the way in which the psalmist understood God to act in the world? Does the language of the Psalms suggest that the psalmist saw the hand of God working exclusively or even predominately in human actions? While asserting that God is directly involved in acts of new creation, Brueggemann places great emphasis on human participation with God in that creation through the power of speech which shapes new imaginations and leads to new experiences of reality. The result is that, for Brueggemann,

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81 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 68. See also Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 1978.
82 Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 53.
83 Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment*, 44.

divine action can be difficult to distinguish from human action. What we say about God's acting is really what we say about our own action as we are led by God.

In this sense, Brueggemann diverges from the language found in the psalms of lament, for the psalmist expects God to transform a situation over which he or she has no control, while confessing his or her own helplessness to act (Ps. 18:17-18; 61:2-5; 124:1-5; 142:5-8). The emphasis for the psalmist is on what *God* does and not on what *we* do in cooperation with God. This is at odds with Brueggemann's understanding of the ways in which God's salvation is realized in the world and seems to reflect the modern assumption, not found in the text itself, that God may only act indirectly, through human action. Brueggemann's model may function well in a post-Enlightenment world which is unwilling to speak in terms of God intervening directly in human history, but it does not fully describe the expectations for God's action recorded in Israel's prayers. When God seems absent, the psalmist asks " Why do you hold back your hand; why do you keep your hand in your bosom?", while the modern reader of the Psalms may well ask "Why have I not acted to change the situation?" Brueggemann takes seriously the notion that God's saving action reaches beyond the temple liturgy to affect the secular world, but he stops short of considering what form that action might take on those occasions when it is not mediated through human action.

The limits on poetic language in the context of lament

The language of the Psalter is poetic language, rather than prose narrative. Although Kugel has argued persuasively that there can be no absolute separation between poetry and prose in Hebrew poetry,[84] one feature of language which seems more at home in poetry is the use of figurative or representational language. This is certainly the case in the Psalms, so that, to borrow Patrick Miller's observation, "One cannot read a Psalm without being literally struck figuratively."[85] It can be argued, therefore, that, while the Psalms may refer ostensibly to particular circumstances and experiences of reality, they need not be limited to a literal interpretation which is tied to those circumstances and experiences. So, for example, John Roffey maintains that "In recognizing the second-order reference reality of the psalms as poetry, we are freed from the danger of limiting the psalms to a moment in history."[86] It should, however, be remembered that the Psalms are a particular kind of poetry, namely speech offered to God before the congregation which is initiated by a circumstance of crisis and which calls for a change in circumstance. This feature of lament Psalms poetry place limits on the

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[84] James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1981.
[85] Patrick Miller, "Meter, Parallelism, and Tropes: The Search for Poetic Style," *JSOT* 28 (1984): 104.
[86] John W. Roffey, "Beyond Reality: Poetic Discourse and Psalm 107," in *A Biblical Itinerary: In Search of Method, Form and Content, Essays in Honor of George W. Coats* ed. Eugene E. Carpenter (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 76.

extent to which the poetic language of these Psalms can be disassociated from the life-experiences of the ones praying.

Adele Berlin defines poetics in a very broad sense indeed, as serving to "find the building blocks of literature and the rules by which they are assembled."[87] Berlin has argued for the representational nature of biblical narrative generally in the sense that narrative is a realistic (but not a real) artistic presentation of something. As an artistic representation, biblical narrative is free to alter particulars in order to more truly represent the nature of that which is portrayed. As an artistic reprentation, the narrative account cannot be considered to be an exact replica of the thing portrayed. It is difficult at times, however, to identify precisely what Berlin means by "real". It would indeed be difficult to see the biblical text as "real" in the sense that Berlin is defining it, as a precise replica of the thing presented rather than a representation of the thing. Berlin has not, however, made a clear distinction between real (actual) versus representation and real (historical) versus fictional. The artist, while free to interpret the subject of his or her work, is nevertheless constrained by that which is being represented.[88] The psalmist certainly speaks in representational language and that language intrudes on the "historical recitals" found in the psalms of lament, but that is not the same as saying that he or she is completely disinterested in the relationship between the event being recalled and the poetic rending of that event. "Reality" intrudes on the psalmist at two points, at the point of the external circumstance which has created in the psalmist a crisis in his or her understanding of relationship with Yahweh and at the point of the event being recalled creating in the psalmist the expectation that God will, in some sense, reproduce the recalled act of salvation in the present. It is the constraints placed on poetic language by the circumstance of lament which must be more carefully considered and articulated.

Ellen Davis applies Paul Ricoeur's notion of "poetic language" in her study of Psalm 22. Following Ricoeur, Davis classifies as poetic all language which serves to "redefine" reality.

> ...poetic language (in partial contrast to ordinary or scientific discourse) is not a means for reporting the evidential condition of the world or for negotiating on the basis of conventional understandings. Rather, the poet exploits the creative potential inherent in language itself to work 'imaginative variations ... on the real'. The poetic text offers a *mythos*, a fictive representation that discloses new features of a world previously taken for granted. It demands of its audience a high level of imaginative engagement, not only with the language of the text, but, more deeply, with the reality of which it refers. The reader or listener who cooperates with the poetic text is drawn into a metaphorical process in which the

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87 Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1983), 15.

88 Long discusses the possibilities and limitations of understanding biblical history as art. See V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, ed. Moises Silva (Leicester: Apollos-Intervarsity Press/ Zondervan Publishing House), 1997.

> world is not so much replicated as transfigured in the vision that poet and audience come to share.[89]

For Davis, the use of poetic language in Psalm 22 allows for a freedom of expression which permits the writer to explore and express his or her God-forsakeness in terms more vivid than "reality".

Ricoeur speaks of the "world of the text" which abolishes any connection between the first-order reference or truth value of the event of which the text speaks in favor of a new second-order reference in the consciousness of the reader which expands his or her perception of what is possible in the world of the reader outside of the text. He furthermore sees this world of the text as constructive in that it shapes the reader's understanding of truth. For Ricoeur, religious poetic language serves to expand the realm of the possible and is often manifested in a deeper self-understanding.[90]

It is my contention, however, that the context of the lament psalm sets limits on this poetic freedom. Having explored and described his or her suffering using a broad range of poetic hyperbole, the psalmist must eventually integrate the language of the psalm of lament with the circumstance which first prompted that lament. In a similar way, while the historical reciting of Israel's past dealings with Yahweh certainly could be freely adapted and distorted to fit the need of the one praying or even simply invented, that recitation is brought in contact with the life experience of the one praying, creating an expectation for similar action by God in the present. Thus the "truth claims" of such recitals are tested and the range of their possible meanings is thereby limited in the process of lament prayer. The situation which first caused the psalm of lament to be prayed, or which stimulates its reappropriation to a fresh context, both offers an historical grounding for that prayer and limits the range of meanings and interpretations available to poetic expression. So finally, the affirmations in Psalm 22 "he has answered me" or "rescued me" and "he has done it" become meaningless if they have no referent outside of the transfigured world of the poet's vision. The fact that the poet utilizes representational language of wild bulls, lions, and dogs to articulate his or her circumstance and need does not mean that he or she is free of the first-order referent, namely, the circumstance which first prompted the writing or readaptation of the lament prayer.

Thus, in the context of the lament, I would argue firstly that limits are placed on the psalmist's freedom to interpret the world of the text and the language which constructs it by circumstances outside of the text over which the one praying may have little or no control. Secondly, it should be mentioned that, whereas for Ricoeur the nature

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89 Ellen F. Davis, "Exploding the Limits: Form and Function in Psalm 22," *JSOT* 53 (1992): 95.

90 Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," *JR* 54 (1974): 71-85.

of new insight in the text seems largely internal and perceptual, for the psalmist external circumstances also intrude on these internal insights. The psalmist can explore non-literal language as a means of expression, "flooding his or her bed with tears" and "having his or her eyes waste away", but the sought-for outcome lies outside of the world of the text and the psalmist will only be answered when his or her enemies are "ashamed", "greatly troubled", and "turned back".[91] Thus, the problem which causes a psalm of lament to be prayed or reappropriated both defines the nature of and places limits upon the non-literal language used by the psalmist in his or her address to God.

Summary

In summary, Patrick successfully avoids some of the problem of moving between worldviews by restricting the realm of God's acting to an encounter which takes place within the human imagination, but he also imports modern assumptions into the text, without fully realizing the extent to which the text is distorted by a different worldview, so that it now seems contrived and constructed. In addition, Patrick's unwillingness to wrestle with the problem of differing worldviews places severe limitations on what he is able to draw from the text in order to apply it to a modern context. According to Brueggemann's model, speech changes the one praying, so that that person enacts God's salvation in the secular world, thus adding both a restriction on God's acting and an emphasis on divinely-directed human action not found in the Psalter. Both writers illustrate the divergence of worldviews between ancient Israel and the modern world and the difficulty involved in moving between worldviews. They suggest that the way in which we understand God's saving response is very much dependent on the constraints of our worldview and is, therefore, fundamentally different from that of the psalmist.

3.3.2 Conclusion

Three observations can be made about the difficulties encountered in trying to understand the language of God acting from within a worldview that no longer accepts such language as literal. Firstly, it is not true that we can have no access to any worldview other than our own. Indeed, one of the basic assumptions of this present study is that some insights into different worldviews are possible. I have argued using the language and structure of the psalms of lament that the psalmist viewed the world in a different way from the modern reader and yet, by attending to the language of the Psalter and being aware of our own presuppositions, we can, to a certain extent, understand some of the ways in which the psalmist viewed his or her relationship with God in a different way from the children of modernity.

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[91] Psalm 6.

Secondly, because the worldview of the psalmist is different from that of modernity, we cannot simply project our own assumptions and presuppositions uncritically onto the writers of the Psalms. It is essential to be aware of and to articulate those presuppositions that make modern critical method possible and to realize that they are an unavoidable part of any modern consideration of the biblical text. This does not mean, however, that we must insist on the psalmist sharing in modern presuppositions and, indeed, this would be impossible for the psalmist as she or he is every bit as much a product of her or his own world as we are of ours.

Thirdly, the assumptions and presuppositions that we bring to the text will define the limits of what we are able to take away from the text. While the idea of God acting in human history is widely rejected by biblical scholars today, this idea is accepted by the biblical writers, as is particularly evident when we consider the language of the Psalms. The psalmists make frequent use of the remembrances of God's acts in the past in order to form an expectation of how God habitually acts and it is based on this expectation that the psalmists petition God to change their circumstances and end their lament. God's silence and absence challenges directly the version of reality offered in the historical recitals and personal remembrances of the psalmist.

In the next section, I will argue that the problem of God's absence and silence is, for the psalmist, a crisis of relationship. If God fails to save the psalmist and to judge the enemy, both of which indicate God's acceptance of the psalmist, then the basic relationship between the psalmist and God has changed. Either the way in which God relates to Israel as a whole has changed, as Psalm 77: 7-11 suggests, or, as the enemies argue in Ps. 71:10-11, the psalmist is no longer eligible to be treated as a member of the community for whom God acts to save and to vindicate. The principle question with which the psalms of lament struggle is not the present crisis which has provoked the lament, nor is it the modern question of who God is in the light of his silence. The absence and silence of God call into question the psalmist's relationship to him. It is with questions about this relationship that the psalmist confronts God.

3.4 When God is Absent, a Crisis of Relationship

The experiences of God's absence, silence, and hiddenness in the Psalms do not occur in a vacuum, but are expressed in relation to the remembrance of a God who was experienced as present. The first section of this part will discuss the importance of the dialectic between remembered presence and experienced absence for understanding the psalm writer's relationship with Yahweh. The second section will examine one of the more common expressions of God's hiddenness in the Psalter, the hiding of God's face. Section three explores the connection between the threat of death and the threat to Israel's relationship with Yahweh. In section four, I will note the strong tendency among a

number of biblical scholars to deny or relativize the experience of God's absence, thus dissolving the tension between remembered presence and experienced absence.

3.4.1 The Tension Between Presence and Absence

God is not always experienced as present to help and save Israel. The Psalms wrestle with the contrast between the presence of God which is remembered and testified to and experiences of God's absence in times of crisis and need. There exists in the psalms of lament a tension between these two opposing experiences of God which has been widely noted and commented on in scholarly literature. Robert Davidson, for example, describes this dialectic within the Psalms as " ... the tension between what the past affirms to be true and what the present seems to deny; ...."[92] Christoph Barth uses the analogy of an ellipse, with praise and lamentation forming two foci. The individual Psalms fall between these two foci and are related to both.[93] This tension is reflected in the fact that expressions of profound trust and grave doubt are present within the same Psalm and, indeed, as in the case of Ps. 22:2, within the same verse.

Craig Broyles denies any attempt on the part of the psalmist to dissolve this tension. The praise tradition of Israel and the circumstances of the psalmist which call that tradition into question are placed together and presented to God in the form of complaint, without any attempt on the part of the psalmist to resolve the contradiction inherent between them. It is God and not the psalmist who is expected to resolve the tension and yet it is also God who is seen as having withdrawn from the relationship he has with Israel. Thus, the psalmist is placed in the ironic position of appealing "to God against God".[94] The psalms of lament present us with a crisis of relationship which, as long as the lament continues, cannot be dissolved either in terms of a God who cannot be expected to act as he has in the past, so that the psalmist should cease lamenting, or in terms of a God who will surely always respond to the cry of the psalmist, so that there is no genuine element of fear and doubt for the psalmist. The psalmist is confident that Yahweh is a God who acts to save and yet is confronted with doubts because Yahweh has not acted to save in the present circumstance.

At the heart of the psalm of lament is the psalmist's ability to appeal to the God of tradition and memory on the basis of his past relationship both with Israel and with the psalmist, while, at the same time, questioning that very relationship which is the basis for appeal. The lament psalms are able to hold in sustained tension both trust in God and

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[92] Robert Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt: Exploring an Old Testament Theme* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 8.
[93] Christoph F. Barth, *Introduction to the Psalms*, tran. R. A. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 17.
[94] Craig C. Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms*, (Sheffield, England: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press, 1988), 224.

evidence which argues that such trust is misplaced. Samuel Balentine comments on the importance of this tension as it appears in the psalms of lament.

> This uncertainty is in fact the very stuff of lament, and it is vital that it not be obscured by an emphasis on the so-called movement from the lament to praise which often occurs in lament psalms. Under the influence of this emphasis the lament has come to be interpreted less like a lament and more like another form of thanksgiving. Such an understanding, however, deprives Old Testament studies of a basic insight into an inevitable dimension of the relationship between God and man, i.e. the experience of doubt and despair which comes when one feels oneself abandoned by God. When the balance is not struck between the promises of God and the realities of the present situation, then doubt inevitably sets in. The realities of the situation may indeed change, doubt may recede, and lament may in fact move toward thanksgiving; this is not to be denied. But the possibilities of what may happen in the future can never fully offset the agony of despair and uncertainty which characterize life 'in the meanwhile'. In other words, the hope for future restoration, while it may be a source of confidence that things will eventually turn out for the better, is continually checked by the frustration of having to endure the present circumstance. This is life 'in the meanwhile': life lived in the period between what has happened in the past and what is hoped for in the future. This is the position of the supplicant in the lament about God's hiddenness. He senses the experience so keenly precisely because he knows that God has not always been hidden in the past; his petition for divine intervention frames his hope that God will not always be hidden in the future. But in the meanwhile he can only wait and endure and plead 'how long O Lord?' In a real sense the significance of the shift from lament to praise cannot be fully appreciated until the uncertainty of the struggle which precedes it is given proper attention.[95]

Thus, such scholars as Podechard who reduce the lament psalm to a psalm of "Declarative Praise", with a past lament recalled in order to add force to the praise section, deny completely the central element of the lament, namely the tension between the testimony of past memories and the present experience of reality.[96]

There is a strong tendency in the psalms of lament to move toward praise. With the possible exception of Psalm 88, there are no examples of psalms of lament which fail to include some element of praise. Balentine's point, however, is not a denial of that tendency toward praise, but rather a reminder that we must not lose the sense of uncertainty and doubt which precedes that praise. The genuine threat of absence and the uncertainty that it causes is a vital part of relationship with God. The fact that lament moves toward praise does not mean that such praise can ever be completely free of the doubts raised by God's silence and absence.

3.4.2 The Hiding of God's Face

A key metaphor for describing the presence and absence of God is his פָּנִים or "face". The metaphor פָּנִים is often accompanied by the use of other anthropomorphic

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[95] Samuel Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 166.
[96] A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, vol. 1, (London: Oliphants, 1972), 38.

descriptions of God, such as "eye" and "seeing" (Ps. 10:44; 11:17; 17:2; 34:16-17; 143:2), "ear" and "hearing" (Ps. 17:1-2; 22:25; 34:16-17; 69:18; 143:1-2), and "hand" and "arm" (Ps. 10:11-12; 31:16-17; 44:4; 89:14-16; 95:5-6; 143:67). The פנים of God is frequently associated with petitions for salvation, deliverance, blessing, and protection (Ps. 27:8-9; 30:9; 31:18, 22; 61:5; 62:10; 67:3; 80:4, 5, 9, 11, 21; 119:70). The hiding of God's face and his forgetting (Ps. 10:11; 13:2-3; 44:25) and sleeping (Ps. 44:24) are also related images. Thus, פנים is related to and can represent a broad field of metaphors used to describe God's presence and action.

The absence of God is commonly described in the Psalms as God hiding his face. Psalm 102:2-3 places the phrase "do not hide your face" after "hear" and "let my cry come" and before "incline your ear to me" and "answer". These verbs suggest a sequence of getting God's attention, so that he will answer the cry of the psalmist. In Psalm 13, the psalmist parallels "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me for ever?" with "How long will you hide your face from me?", and he calls upon God to "consider", "answer", and "give light" (Ps.. 13:2, 4). The enemies in Psalm 10 believe God to be absent. "They think in their heart, 'God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it.'" (v. 11). But the psalmist calls upon Yahweh to "rise up", to "lift up", and to "not forget" as a remedy to the accusation of the wicked. Thus, the פנים of God is associated with his seeing, hearing, and remembering the psalmist in his or her plight. The assumption of the psalmist is that, before the פנים of God, all wrongs will be redressed and lament will be ended.

Psalm 30:8 links God's פנים with strength for the psalmist: "By your favor, O LORD, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed." In Psalm 69:15-19 the threat is more clearly one of death and undoing. To sink in the mire, fall into deep waters, be overwhelmed by floodwaters, be swallowed up by the deep, and have the Pit shut its mouth upon the psalmist result from the hiding of God's פנים. The relationship, then, is a dependent one, with the psalmist drawing life and strength from God.

Underlying almost every Psalm which speaks of God hiding his פנים is a note of protest. Indeed, the question most frequently associated with the phrase "hide the face" in the psalms of lament is the question "Why?" Thus, Balentine criticizes the notion that God's hiddenness can be reliably associated with the psalmist's sin, concluding instead that hiddenness is a part of the very nature of Israel's God.[97] Lindström, in a detailed look at the language of the Psalms, effectively demonstrates that abandonment cannot be consistently tied to human sin any more than God's blessings can be consistently associated with human merit. He concludes that separation, which results in suffering and lament, comes from God and not from a human source and that it is every bit as

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[97] Balentine, *The Hidden God*, 175.

surprising and unpredictable as are the basic gifts of existence given by God as a sign of his presence.[98]

Balentine and Lindström successfully refute the notion that any breakdown in the psalmist's relationship with God may automatically be associated with human failure. In those instances when the psalmist denies responsibility for God's silence, the question remains "Why has God changed his manner of relating to the psalmist?" The psalmist protests an unexpected and unexplained change in his or her relationship with God. Balentine's answer that this is simply God's nature, and Lindström's that both God's presence and his absence are unfathomable and are part of the mystery of God, might suggest that the psalmist should resign her- or himself to a kind of passive fatalism. This, however, is not the tone of the psalms of lament. They are intent on petitioning God to attend to the distress of the psalmist and to restore life.

In summary, two things may be observed from those psalms which describe God's absence to save in terms of him hiding his face. Firstly, the psalmist is under threat because the active intervention of God which sustains life and provides protection has been withdrawn or hidden. Relationship with Yahweh is not optional for Israel, but is essential for survival. Secondly, the psalmist frequently sees God as responsible for withdrawing from relationship and demands to know "Why?" Why does God place the psalmist in a position of utter dependence and then withdraw his life-sustaining presence?

3.4.3 Silence and the Move Toward Death

God's silence in the face of a threat to the very life of the psalmist forces the psalmist to re-evaluate his or her relationship with God. But how serious is the threat to relationship and how far does the psalmist pursue his or her protests to God? Tom Milazzo identifies the core question of such protests as the question of God's very existence. For Milazzo, the questioning of God's existence is present throughout the Old Testament in the form "Why in the presence of God is there death?" In a move very reminiscent of Paul Tillich,[99] he speaks of the association between death and fullness of life. In the Psalms, says Milazzo, life exists on a spectrum which stretches between "absolute death" on the one hand and "existence in its fullness" on the other. The move toward life always takes place in the presence of and under the threat of death.[100] For Milazzo, the silence of God in the face of the suffering and death of innocent people creates an "unresolvable problem". Israel has, for Milazzo, been cheated; they have been

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98 Lindström, *Suffering and Sin*, 435.

99 Milazzo makes no reference to the theology of Paul Tillich, but his notion of a spectrum of existence is very much like the notion of "standing out of non-existence" found in Tillich's *The Courage to Be*.

100 G. Tom Milazzo, *The Protest and the Silence: Suffering, Death, and Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 140.

led to the threshold of relationship with a God who refuses to come out into the light and respond to their cries and sustain their life.[101]

The value of Milazzo's treatment of the problem of God's absence is that, by refusing to avoid or in any way to soften the force of God's absence in view of the relationship which he himself has initiated, Milazzo crystallizes for us the terrible dilemma with which Israel was faced. It is not the suffering of the psalmist at the hands of his or her enemies, but the underlying implication of broken relationship which is uppermost in the cry of lament. Milazzo's argument does not acknowledge the move from lament to praise in the lament psalms, so that he mistakenly believes the psalmist's question to be the question of God's existence. Contrary to the testimony of the psalm writers, Milazzo maintains that God is forever silent and that, therefore, "... we do not know if we suffer and die because God is impotent, because God chooses to take our lives, or because there is no God in the darkness."[102] But Israel testifies that God has "come out of the darkness" and dismisses Milazzo's first and the third option, so that psalmist's question is not "Can God save?" or "Does God exist?", but "Will God respond in love to save?" Milazzo helps us to avoid hiding from the unresolved and perhaps unresolvable problem of God's absence in the Psalms. By denying the testimony of Israel Milazzo has provided us with a question which is different from the one asked by the psalmist, but he has certainly identified the dilemma faced by the psalmist in its starkest form. How can a trusting relationship continue in the face of God's silence in the time of need? Because Israel's relationship with Yahweh is basic to their existence, the threat of death is also a threat to the relationship between Yahweh and his people.

3.4.4 The Denial of Absence

The tension between God's loving presence and those experiences of his absence which seem to call that benevolence into question is a difficult one to sustain, not because it is not clearly present in the text, but because it is as uncomfortable for us today as it was for Israel. Thus, it is not surprising that a number of authors try to "explain" the absence of God in ways which dissolve this tension, or at the very least, which rob it of its devastating power.

Brueggemann, for example, maintains that "Israel's insistent lament (which may go unanswered) is finally as much an affirmation of God's *hesed* as is the doxology. Israel does not for a moment doubt Yahweh's *hesed*, nor does Israel doubt its own claim on Yahweh's *hesed*."[103] Thus, for Brueggemann, all expressions of Israel's doubts and questions are finally relativized in the face of remembered expressions of God's *hesed*. But

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101 Ibid., 47.
102 Ibid., 165-166.
103 Brueggemann, "The Psalms as Prayer," in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 57.

this statement is only possible to make in hindsight and does not fairly represent the full dilemma of the psalmist at the time of the lament. If Yahweh's *hesed* is never genuinely doubted, then neither can lament be genuine.

Donald Gowan tries to avoid the problem of God's absence by translating the question "Where is God?" to "Where is God's blessing?" "The absence of God they are lamenting is neither nonexistence nor physical distance, but the absence of his blessings, and the absence of blessing is called his wrath."[104] The psalmist, however, does distinguish between but cannot separate God's presence and God's blessing, as the use of the word פנים demonstrates. To attract God's attention so that he turns his פנים to the psalmist is also to guarantee life and blessing, but this is not to say that blessing and the פנים of Yahweh are synonymous. The question for the psalmist when God is absent is not "Has God's blessing been withdrawn?" but "Does the absence of blessing signal that relationship with God is severed?" The psalmist is not interested foremost in God's blessing or in the crisis of the moment being resolved, but in what the absence of blessing and resolution signals about his or her relationship with God.

Gowan's argument requires the denial of the wrath of God as a positive, destructive force. The psalmist, however, certainly does not interpret God's wrath in this way.

> Your wrath has swept over me;
> your terrors have destroyed me.
> All day long they surround me like a flood;
> they have completely engulfed me.
> You have taken my companions and loved ones from me;
> the darkness is my closest friend.[105]

While it is hoped that God will be present to save, he can also be present to judge and destroy. The fact that the psalmist, at times, moves inconsistently between God's absence to save and his presence to destroy reflects his or her uncertainty about that relationship which, quite suddenly, is not as stable and predictable as it was thought to be.

Terence Fretheim denies any possibility of divine absence, speaking instead of different "intensities" of God's presence. He states that "The absence of God would appear never to mean more than the loss of one intensification of presence or another. The structural absence of God, however, never seems to be considered as a possibility in the Old Testament."[106] According to Fretheim "... human experience, especially human receptiveness or sin, can affect the intensity of the divine presence."[107] Divine wrath, for

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[104] Donald Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1994), 8. See also J. Arthur Baird, *The Justice of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, (London: SCM Press, 1963), 47-48.
[105] Psalm 88:17-19.
[106] Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: an Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 65.
[107] Ibid.

Fretheim, is the experience of a diminished intensity of presence resulting from a human pushing away of God. Thus, as in the case of Gowen, wrath is no longer something which God actively expresses but is little more than human perception of one's distance from God.

Hans-Joachim Kraus tries to avoid the problem by placing the momentary experience of the absence of God within the larger context of his presence over time.

> The Psalms speak of the hiddenness of Yahweh only in relation to the certainty of his revelation and his presence. It is only the God who reveals himself and is present with his people who can hide himself. Hiddenness is an aspect of his revelation. This is made especially clear in Ps. 22:3-5. That God 'is silent' can be said only there where he has spoken and will speak again (Ps. 50:3). Therefore the certainty reigns that 'he has not hid his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him' (Ps. 22:24).[108]

By placing the individual experiences of absence in a larger context, Kraus relativizes the reported experience of absence in individual psalms. But there are a number of problems with Kraus's approach. In the first place, such over-views are denied to the psalmist. The psalmist does not have Kraus's advantage of hindsight. Secondly, the "larger context" of God's promise to Israel need not extend to guarantee the salvation of every individual. Psalm 102 illustrates the fact that the psalmist may have confidence that God's salvation will continue for Zion, without necessarily being assured that he or she will share in that salvation personally. The Psalm begins as a classic lament of the individual, but soon shifts to talk about Yahweh's faithfulness to Zion and ends:

> "O my God," I say, "do not take me away at the mid-point of my life,
> you whose years endure throughout all generations."
> Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,
> and the heavens are the work of your hands.
> They will perish, but you endure;
> they will all wear out like a garment.
> You change them like clothing, and they pass away;
> but you are the same, and your years have no end.
> The children of your servants shall live secure;
> their offspring shall be established in your presence.[109]

The psalmist may, indeed, hope to be included among the "children of your servants" and "their offspring," but, at the end of the Psalm, this is still an open question. What begins as a personal lament ends in a confident declaration that the relationship between Yahweh and Israel is as eternal as Yahweh himself. Thus, while the psalmist is confident of the permanence of God's relationship with Israel, he can still call on God to "... answer me speedily in the day when I call. For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones

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[108] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, tran. Keith Crim (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 39.
[109] Psalm 102:25-29.

burn like a furnace. My heart is stricken and withered like grass; ...."[110] The challenge to the individual psalmist's right to be considered part of the community which Yahweh acts to save can also be seen in the accusation of the enemies in Psalm 71:10-11: "For my enemies speak concerning me, and those who watch for my life consult together. They say, 'Pursue and seize that person whom God has forsaken, for there is no one to deliver.'" If Yahweh fails to answer, then the enemies of the psalmist are proved right. Kraus mistakes a confidence on the part of the psalmist that God's relationship with Israel will continue with a confidence that the psalmist will always benefit from that relationship.

A final problem with Kraus' argument is that it makes the assumption that past experiences of how God related to Israel act as a guarantee that God will always continue to act in the same way in the future, that is, that God's relationship with the psalmist is inevitably consistent and unchanging. But Psalm 77 struggles with this very question and ends without any clear resolution. God's past saving acts provide a strong case for believing that God will act to save in the present, but by assuming that such salvation is always assured, Kraus reduces the lament to a mere introduction for praise. The psalmist hopes and believes that God will act as he has in the past, and therefore the psalmist reminds God and him- or herself of his past saving acts, but there is no indication in the lament portion of the Psalms that this hope is, in fact, an unshakable certainty.

In summary, various authors have tried to soften the crisis of the lament psalm by denying, at least ultimately, the absence of God. For Brueggemann, the assurance of God's *hesed* is so firmly fixed in the heart of the psalmist that no serious doubt about his finally acting to save can be entertained. Gowan tries to maintain God's presence when he appears to be absent by equating the perception of God's presence with his blessing. Fretheim reduces divine presence and absence to varying intensities of human experience. Kraus finds, in the testimonies of God's saving acts in the past, irrefutable proof that God will always act the same in the present and future. Kraus is not willing to consider the possibility that the psalmist may no longer be included in the community for whom God acts to save or that God may have changed his manner of relating to the psalmist and/or Israel, but the psalmist can and does explore such possibilities. It is important to note that the psalmist is able to separate the question "Does God still act to save his people?" from the question "Can I still be included amongst those for whom God acts to save?" and to explore both questions. The assurance that God will respond to save Israel as a whole does not completely remove the doubts of the psalmist concerning her or his place in Israel and, at least in Psalm 77, the psalmist even entertains the question, "Has God changed the way he relates to his people?" The experience of God's absence is

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[110] Ps. 102:3-5; cf. Ps. 90:5-8, 13.

a genuine one for the psalmist and the psalms of lament confront God in the silence and plead, persuade, and demand that he answer.

3.4.5 Conclusion

Four things may be said about the place that God's silence and hiddenness plays in Israel's relationship with him. Firstly, silence and absence are an important element of knowing God. Those psalms of lament which result in new acts of salvation invite the psalmist into a fuller understanding of who God is in relation to Israel. Praise after lament is not like praise which has never experienced doubt. Such praise adds to its understanding of God the memory of periods of silence and abandonment.

Secondly, relationship with God is not an optional extra for Israel, but is essential to their continued existence. Israel is dependent on God for survival. The question of continued relationship is at the heart of the psalms of lament and the psalmist demands to know why God has not maintained his part of the relationship.

Thirdly, the crisis of the lament psalm is, at its core, a crisis of relationship. Experiences which call into question God's presence and faithfulness to bless, save, and judge are indicative of a more fundamental crisis for the psalmist, the possibility that something has gone wrong with his or her relationship with God. God has initiated a relationship with Israel, but the hiddenness of God has forced the psalmist to reevaluate that relationship.

Fourthly, the psalmist's relationship with God is an open one. Presence is never a given for the psalmist, so that the continuance of relationship remains always in doubt, even, to a certain extent, in the midst of the praise which follows lament. The ongoing testimony of Israel is that God acts to save. Nevertheless, just as there is no act of lament which is completely devoid of praise, so too, there is no act of praise which can be completely free of the memory of God's silence and absence. For the psalmist, there always exists the possibility that the answer to the question "How long, O LORD?" may be "Too long!", and that Yahweh may not answer in time to draw the individual lamenter up from Sheol.

3.5 Summary

How, then, can we understand the tension that exists in the psalms of lament between the presence and absence of God? To deny that God has acted in the past to save and that he can act again in similar ways is to rob the psalmist's present experience of God's silence of its power to wound. Likewise, to disregard or dissolve too quickly the tension between remembered presence and the genuine possibility that God is absent to save would be to fail fully to grasp the devastating power of these texts of lament. Israel's

relationship with Yahweh is built on memories of his saving acts and words. But even in the midst of praise, experiences of silence and absence can be qualified, but they cannot be forgotten. Memories of silence and hiddenness become part of Israel's ongoing testimony to God's saving words and acts. Indeed, the remembrances of Israel are a primary resource for confronting God in the midst of the silence. The community's story of life lived in the presence of a God who saves is a regular resource for the psalmist in the face of experiences of absence and, as I will argue in chapter four, the psalmist seeks to find her or his place within the testimony of Israel.

But God is also present in the conversation, if only as a silent partner. In despair and confusion the psalmist alights on memories of who God has been to Israel in the past and, in testifying to that identity and understanding of God, the psalmist calls out to the silence, weeping for, pleading for, and sometimes demanding an answer from God. When the psalmist testifies that God has answered and he or she praises, the experiences of lament and of new-found praise both become a part of the growing body of testimony of who this God is that is in relationship with Israel. The psalmist is in the business not just of recalling testimony, but of making it.

In chapter four, I will examine seven psalms which provide examples of the psalmist's use of remembrance as a basis for approaching God in the silence. I want to look in particular at the ways in which the testimony of Israel's relationship with God in the past affects and is affected by their experiences of God's silence, hiddenness, and absence in the psalms of lament.

Chapter Four

The Use of Memory and Testimony in the Psalms of Lament

4.1 Israel's Remembering

The act of remembering is of key importance for the nation of Israel. Israel's memories are neither myth nor history, although they may contain elements of either or both. They are accounts which describe and define who Israel is as a people, who Yahweh is as their God, and how the relationship between Yahweh and his people functions, based principally on what Yahweh is reported to have done and said in the past. Because Israel is a nation "created" by Yahweh, in the sense that their identity is drawn from their relationship with Yahweh, attacks against the nation as a whole or against an individual within the nation are seen as attacks against the people of Yahweh. When Yahweh is silent or absent to save in the face of such attacks, the relationship between Israel and their God, which is attested to in the nation's remembrances, is threatened. A common response to such a threat on the part of the psalmist is to recite those memories which, in great part, define the limits and conditions of his or her relationship with Yahweh.

Just as the recital of memories is a key resource in many of the psalms of lament, so too, the public testimony to God's acting to save the psalmist is an important element of the move from lament to praise. By "testimony", I mean a perception or understanding of reality which is believed by the person testifying to be true on the basis of their personal experience, and which is on that basis reported to others. While testimony is a belief which often cannot be objectively and conclusively proven and which may be mistaken, it is not the same as opinion in that it requires some form of evidence external to the one testifying, in this case, those events and experiences which bring about reports of past and present experience.

One motivation offered to Yahweh to induce him to save in times of distress is the promise that, when the psalmist is delivered, he or she will testify to God's deliverance before the great assembly. In gratitude for God's deliverance, the psalmist may offer sacrifices, pay vows which were made at the time of crisis, sing praises, and offer a public declaration before the congregation of what Yahweh has done and how he has delivered the psalmist. This last response in particular builds on the act of remembering, because the public declaration of Yahweh's acting to save the psalmist is

itself an act of traditioning which adds to the remembered testimony of who Yahweh has been for the nation and the psalmist in the past. There is, then, in many of the psalms of lament, a move from the present experience of God's silence or abandoning, to past remembrances of experiences of God's presence, to future acts of traditioning in which present experience and past memory inform each other, often in the light of some new experience of God.

In seeking to understand the notions of God's presence and absence held by the psalm writers, I will examine a number of psalms which directly contrast experiences of God's absence to save with remembered experiences of his presence to save in the past. In order to illustrate and explore the various elements which arise in the context of this contrast, I have selected seven psalms which 1) testify to God's absence or hiddenness or silence or failure to save and which 2) utilize remembrance as a primary resource for responding to that experience of absence. The first criterion essentially defines the psalm of lament in that lament arises from a circumstance of need to which God has not yet responded to save. Leaving aside the question of whether or not the individual psalm form in fact represents and is symbolic of the larger community, there are 44 psalms of the individual which offer up a prayer of lament[1] and 15 laments which are offered on behalf of the community.[2] Of these 59 psalms which contain an element of lament, 15 also meet the second criterion for selection and utilize memories of God's saving acts in the past as a resource in appealing to God to deliver again, thus creating a contrast between expressions of God's absence and presence.[3] This is a substantial percentage of the body of lament psalms, but to this it should be added the observation that any lament which contains a note of protest implies a contrast, and indeed a contradiction, between expectations based on memories of the past and present experience. Thus, the contrast between remembered presence and experienced absence is strongly represented in the psalms of lament.

Due to the constraints of space, I have chosen to look in detail at only seven Psalms, Psalms 22, 44, 40, 71, 143, 74, and 77,[4] because they illustrate both the frequency

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[1] Ps. 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 9; 13; 17; 22; 25; 26; 27; 28; 31; 35; 38; 39; 40; 41; 42; 43; 51; 54; 55; 56; 57; 59; 61; 64; 69; 70; 71; 77; 86; 88; 89; 94; 102; 109; 130; 140; 141; 142; and 143.

[2] Ps. 10; 12; 44; 60; 74; 79; 80; 83; 85; 90; 106; 108; 123; 126; and 137. The idea of a definitive list of psalms of lament is misleading because numbers of such psalms contain a mixture of lament and various other psalm forms and it becomes a question of perspective and emphasis as to whether such a psalm should be classified as a psalm of lament or a hymn of praise or a psalm which offers thanks for God's deliverance or a wisdom psalm. For the purposes of this present consideration, I have identified not only those psalms which are clearly characterized by lament, but I have also included all psalms for which lament is a substantial element of the prayer.

[3] Ps. 9; 22; 40; 42; 44; 71; 74; 77; 80; 85; 89; 94; 106; 126; 143. Thus the phenomenon under consideration, the utilization of remembrance in response to situations of lament, occurs in 10% of the Psalter as a whole and more than 25% of the psalms of lament.

[4] Although there is substantial controversy concerning the origin of the psalm headings and general agreement that they cannot be relied upon to provide accurate information regarding the original composition of the psalms that they introduce, it is nevertheless

and diversity of the use of this strategy for approaching God in the silence. Each makes use of Israel's memory as a resource in the midst of lament and each reflects on different facets of Israel's understanding of the relationship between who God was in the past, who he is in the present, and who he will be in the future. Psalm 22 expresses the movement from past memory to present deliverance to future testimony. Psalm 44 seeks Yahweh's assistance in battle. Psalm 40 explores the relative places of testimony and sacrifice as responses to deliverance. Psalm 71 reflects on the pious life of an individual who has already walked through "many troubles and calamities" with Yahweh and who draws on those experiences in order to do so yet again. Psalm 143 explores the special relationship with Yahweh enjoyed by his people which results in expectations of preferential treatment. Psalm 74 reflects on the experience of the destruction of the temple and, presumably, of exile. Psalm 77 explores the possibility that finally the memories of Israel are made null and void by God's continued silence and that God has fundamentally changed in his dealings with the psalmist and his or her community. To these it would be possible to add others, such as Psalm 9 which moves back and forth between memory, confident testimony to God's deliverance, and pleas for God's help. Psalm 89 explores the permanence of the Davidic covenant and the possibility that that covenant may be at an end. In Psalm 42 the psalmist is cut off from God and the temple and is the object of taunts from his or her enemies. Psalm 80, which utilizes the image of Israel planted as a vine and then abandoned by God, is a call for God to reestablish his people. Psalms 85 and 126 recall a restoration of the people to the land by God in the past as a basis for asking him again to restore his people. Psalm 94 has the tone of a wisdom psalm and the writer recalls past instances of God's protection from the wicked in order to undergird his or her prayer that they be cut off in their wickedness. Psalm 106 recalls not the past saving acts of God, but his past mercy and forgiveness in the face of Israel's rebelliousness and asks God to forgive and save the current generation. In the interest of space I have chosen what I believe to be a representative sample of those lament psalms which utilize a contrast between experience and memory as a means for approaching God. The diversity of the themes, structures, and placements within the Psalter of the psalms selected serve to underline the importance of this contrast as a strategy for exploring the psalmist's relationship with God in a wide range of different situations and experiences of lament.

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useful in this present study to note the diversity of headings in the psalms selected. There are three psalms to David, two to Asaph, one to the Korahites, and one anonymous psalm. Among those psalms which meet the criterion for study but which will be excluded from closer examination for considerations of space, there are a psalm of David, two to the sons of Korah, one to Asaph, one contemplation of Ethan the Ezrahite, one song of ascent, and two anonymous psalms. Thus it seems clear that the use of memory as a response to experiences of God's absence to save which is considered in this present study cannot be confined to a single strand or strata of the Psalter's development.

In the examination of lament psalms which follows, I will focus on four elements which are commonly found in and which appear to be fundamental to the psalmist's use of memory in the context of lament:[5] the tension between experienced present and remembered past, the call for God to act in the present as he has in the past, the importance for the psalmist of finding his or her "place" in the memories of the praying community, and the necessity for remembrance to be followed by public testimony as God responds to the pleas of the psalmist. In this first element the psalmist uses memory to create a tension between experienced present and remembered past, which functions to motivate God to act again to save in the present as he is remembered to have acted in the past. For these memories to be motivational, they must be shown to be in conflict with the psalmist's current experience of God's silence, hiddenness, or absence. The second element of the psalmist's use of memory rests on the underlying assumption which makes an appeal to memory valid, namely, that Yahweh is consistent. The tension between experienced present and remembered past can only be sustained if Yahweh proves to be consistent, acting in the present situation as he is remembered to have acted in the past. Thirdly, attention will be drawn to the psalmist's attempts to "find his or her place" within the recited memories of Israel. The psalmist is not content to say that Yahweh has acted to save Israel in the past or that he acts in general ways to bless. The psalmist presents the specific needs which have prompted the lament and seeks for Yahweh to address those needs as he has addressed the needs of the community throughout his relationship with Israel. A final point of focus is the importance of public testimony, both as a means for drawing on the memories of the praying community and as a means of carrying on the traditioning process once Yahweh acts to deliver.[6] In confronting the lament situation, the psalmist is not simply drawing on the community's memories as an end-product of the traditioning process, but he or she is adding to those memories, thus reinforcing and transforming the community tradition. Thus, as I will argue in chapter five, it is possible to see an interdependent relationship between those psalms of lament which draw on community memories and those psalms which offer

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[5] Limitations of space preclude an exhaustive exegesis of the seven psalms under consideration and I will be passing over a number of important textual issues which, while important to the overall understanding of the texts, do not directly influence the features of those psalms currently being studied.

[6] Although not included in the two criteria for psalm selection in this present study, the adding to and adapting of the community's memory through public testimony as a result of or in expectation of a new saving act by God is closely connected with the act of remembrance as a resource in lament. Of those psalms which meet the criterion for study, four include the element of public testimony for God's salvation: Ps. 9, 22, 40, and 71. Also, praise offered publicly after God responds to a crisis is a common element in the Psalter: Ps. 18, 30, 32, 34, 66, 116, 118, and 124 which further illustrates the connection between the circumstance of lament and the bringing of God's saving acts before the community. Closely allied with the offering of praise is the paying of a vow of praise before the congregation; 22:26; 26:12; 35:18, 28; 43:4; 54:8; 56:13; 61:6, 9; 79:13; 116:14, 17-19.

testimonies of recent deliverance from a circumstance of lament, thereby "adding to" Israel's memories.

4.2 Text Studies

4.2.1 Psalm 22

Structure

Psalm 22 has received a great deal of attention from biblical scholars, in no small part because of its application to the passion of Jesus in the New Testament. In this present study, however, I will be considering the rhetorical functioning of the psalm in its context within the Psalter, without considering the possibility of prophetic intent or awareness on the part of the author.

Psalm 22 consists of two main parts, a lament of the individual in verses 2-22 and a declaration of deliverance and praise in verses 23-32. There is a quite pronounced shift between verses 22 and 23 from lament to praise which has led some scholars to suggest that this Psalm was originally two or more separate works (Duhm, Cheyne, Briggs). This assumption is, however, by no means necessary in order to make sense of the psalm, and, more recently, a large number of scholars view the Psalm as a single work (Anderson, Kraus, Rogerson and McKay, Weiser, May, Craigie, Eaton).[7]

Prinsloo divides the psalm not into two parts, but into four stanzas (2-11; 12--22; 23-27; and 28-32) and provides a number of structural arguments for the interconnectedness of stanzas I and II and stanzas III and IV.[8] His argument for the unity of these two pairs is, however, less effectively made. He points to the repetition of the theme of הלל in the first and third stanza and the fact that stanzas III and IV "cancel" the lament of stanzas I and II. This points, however, only to a rather loose relatedness between the two larger parts of the psalm.

Ellen Davis has argued for the theological unity of Psalm 22 which she maintains is organized around the theme of praise. Davis points to the hourglass shape of the psalm as it moves from the remembered ancient past of the community as a whole, to the more recent past experience of the individual psalmist, followed by the spread of

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[7] Walter Brueggemann, arguing for the unity of Jere. 30:12-17, points out that God making two opposite movements within the same poem ("plucking up", "tearing down", "building", and "planting") is essential to understanding the theological thrust of the passage. He cautions against separating questions of literary method (i.e., fragmenting a passage according to perceived changes in movement) and theological motivation in considering the movement of a piece of biblical poetry. "The 'Uncared For' Now Cared For (Jere. 30:12-17): a Methodological Consideration." *JBL* 104/3 (1985), 419-428.

[8] G. T. M. Prinsloo, "Hope Against Hope -- A Theological Reflection on Psalm 22," *OTE* 8 (1995): 67-68.

praise after deliverance first in the local congregation and then throughout the entire world.[9] The author of Psalm 22, while he or she may originally have drawn on pre-existing component parts, has created a new structural and theological unit in the composition of the psalm and Davis' argument illustrates the impossibility of separating Psalm 22 again into component parts without doing damage to the theological message of the whole.

Structurally the psalm opens with the anguished cry אלי אלי למה עזבתני, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and ends with the confident assertion כי עשה, "that he has done it". Verse 22bβ provides the central pivotal point for the psalm, with the highly controversial עניתני, which is best translated "you have answered me". Craigie has argued for the liturgical importance of this expression as the response on the part of the one praying which triggers the move from lament in verse 2-22b to thanksgiving for deliverance declared first by the individual sufferer (vv. 23-27) and then by the congregation as a whole (vv. 28-32).[10]

The text of the psalm may be divided into eight sections: the questioning and accusing cry of the psalmist (vv. 2-3); the contrasting testimony to God's dealings with the ancestors (vv. 4-6); the mockery of men against the psalmist (vv. 7-9); an expression of past and present trust by the psalmist (vv. 10-12); a description of the psalmist's distress (vv. 13-19); an evocation calling upon God to deliver and save (vv. 20-22); a commitment and call to praise in the congregation (vv. 23-27); and a call to universal praise and worship which transcends race, national boundary, and time itself (vv. 28-32).

Verses 2-3

In the opening line, the reader is immediately confronted with the central conflict of the psalm. Four times the psalmist addresses his words to "my God" (vv. 2, 3, 11), a term which indicates a level of relationship and even intimacy between the psalmist and Yahweh. Yet juxtaposed to this expression of personal involvement with God is the crisis which has resulted from the silence and abandonment of God. The intimate declaration "My God, my God" is called into question immediately by the assertion that God has "forsaken me", is "far from helping me" and is "(far) from the words of my groaning". "I cry by day" is set against "you do not answer".

God being far away (v. 2 רחוק, vv. 12, 20 רחק) appears as a theme throughout the first half of the psalm.[11] Also the accusation that Yahweh does "not answer"

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[9] Ellen F. Davis, "Exploding the Limits: Form and Function in Psalm 22" *JSOT* 53 (1992), 100.

[10] Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), 198.

[11] Ridderbos sees these three uses of רחק as marking the beginnings of the three sections into which the lament may be divided. Nic. H. Ridderbos, "The Psalms: Style-Figure and Structure," *Oudtestamentische Studiën*, vol. 13 ed. P. A. H. De Boer (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1963), 59. Heinemann, however, notes the absence of "far" at the crucial break between 21 and 22 (22 and 23 MT) and makes the more moderate suggestion that "far" can be better

לא תענה (v. 3) becomes important structurally when we arrive at the main transition point in verse 22bβ.

Verses 4-6

After beginning by addressing Yahweh as "my God", the psalmist recalls his past dealings with Israel. In contrast to the present experience of the psalmist, his or her ancestors were delivered from their afflictions. The thrice-repeated affirmation that they "trusted" Yahweh in verses 5 and 6 underlines the importance of trust for receiving God's salvation and deliverance.[12] It is precisely because they trusted in Yahweh that the ancestors experienced his deliverance.

Jepsen defines the root בטח as "to feel secure, be unconcerned"[13] and Oswalt notes that "It is significant that the LXX never translates this word with πιστευω 'believe in' but with ελπιζω 'to hope,' in the positive sense 'to rely on God' or πειφομαι 'to be persuaded,' for the negative notion for relying on what turns out to be deceptive."[14] The psalmist underlines by the use of repetition the relation between trust in Yahweh and being delivered and not put to shame.

Verses 7-9

Yet in this section, the trust of the ancestors is contrasted with the psalmist's supposed confidence in Yahweh (גלל is used here in the place of בטח), which has become a means for his or her being mocked. The psalmist's basis for expecting God to respond, his or her trust in God, is being questioned. The psalmist is a "worm", "scorned", and "despised" by those who "mock", "make mouths", and "shake the head". The implicit accusation of the mockers is that "If he or she truly leaned on Yahweh, Yahweh would deliver him or her". They express no doubt as to Yahweh's ability to deliver nor do they question his deliverance of the ancestors, so that, if Yahweh does not deliver the psalmist, it is because Yahweh does not delight in him or her. Since the psalmist's argument is that deliverance for the ancestors came because they trusted and the psalmist has also trusted from the moment of his or her birth, the accusers of the psalmist may also be suggesting that the psalmist does not trust in God as the ancestors

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understood as a catchword which links the first two major sections of the psalm (2-11 and 12-22). Mark H. Heinemann, "An Exposition of Psalm 22," *BS* 147 (1990): 286-308.

12 As Anderson has pointed out, the psalmist appears to be using the thrice repeated "trust" to underline the condition on which God may be expected to save. A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms* vol. 1, (London: Oliphants, 1972), 187.

13 Alfred Jepsen, "בטח", Botterweck, G. Johannes and Ringgren, Helmer, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* vol. 2 tran. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing House, 1975), 89.

14 John N. Oswalt, "בטח" Harris, R. Laird, Archer, Gleason L., and Waltke, Bruce K. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 101.

did, that he or she has, in fact, not "committed his or her cause to Yahweh", precisely because God has abandoned and not saved.

The mockers of verses 9-10 are not here identified as enemies, as are the "bulls", "lions", and "dogs" of verses 13-19, and it may simply be that, as in the case of Job's friends, the suffering of the psalmist has caused those who are near to him or her to suggest that the psalmist has abandoned his or her trust in God. The psalm writer also seems to subscribe to the assumption that those who trust in Yahweh are delivered, since his or her principal argument against God's forsaking is the trust both of the ancestors and of the psalmist him- or herself (vv. 10-12). The conventional wisdom that "those who trust in Yahweh will be saved" is challenged by the psalmist's experience of abandonment. The psalm writer believes the conventional wisdom, so that his or her argument is that, like the ancestors, he or she has trusted in Yahweh from his or her mother's womb.

Verses 10-12

After reciting the historical experience of those who trust in Yahweh and the accusations against the psalmist that he or she is not delivered because Yahweh does not delight in him or her, the psalmist makes his or her case before God. The psalmist's argument is not, as one might expect, that Yahweh does, in fact, delight in him or her, but that the psalm writer has been consistent in trusting Yahweh, just as the ancestors were. The psalmist's own personal history has been one of trust from the time of his or her birth, and God has been a direct cause of that trust.[15] The psalmist is arguing for her or his trust in God, in spite of the evidence to the contrary and the counter-assertion of those who mock. In arguing his or her case, the psalmist repeats the "my God" and "do not be far" themes. Because of God being far off, "trouble is near".

Again, the fact that the psalmist's "defense" is not "Yahweh delights in me", but "I have trusted in Yahweh", suggests that the accusation brought against the one praying is not simply that Yahweh does not delight in him or her, but that he or she has not trusted in Yahweh as the ancestors have. If that is the case, the "he leaned on Yahweh"[16] of those who mock the psalmist is not a statement of what they believe to be the case, but is an accusation against the psalmist. If the psalmist had leaned on Yahweh, he would

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15 Heinemann notes the effect of the four-fold use of birth imagery which serves to emphasize the long-standing nature of the psalmist's relationship with God. "Psalm 22," 292.

16 The NRSV, following the MT, reads גָּל as an imperative, amending the third-person, masculine, singular pronominal suffixes of "deliver" and "rescue". It is preferable however, to read גָּל as a perfect, in accordance with the other verbs in the verse. This reading is supported by the LXX and by the allusion to this verse in Matt. 27:43. Cf. J. W. Rogerson and J. W. McKay, *Psalms 1-50* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 100; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, tran. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 292; Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 196.

have brought about his or her escape; if Yahweh delighted in the psalmist, he would have snatched him or her away. Because Yahweh has done neither, both assertions about the psalmist's relationship to Yahweh are cast into doubt. The writer of the psalm chooses to respond by arguing for that which would cause Yahweh to delight in him or her, namely, that the psalmist has leaned on and trusted in Yahweh.

Verses 13-19

Having appealed to the tradition of God's saving action toward Israel and asserted the psalmist's own place amongst those who trust in God, the psalm writer then embarks on an extended and highly metaphorical description of his or her distress. The imagery of fierce animals attacking the psalmist suggests that the language of being poured out like water, bones out of joint, heart melting, and mouth dry may as easily refer to extreme fear, anxiety, or grief (Anderson) as to physical sickness (Craigie) and the exact nature of the psalmist's distress may only be speculated upon.[17]

Verse 16 raises some questions as the reading חשפחני suggests that God is among those enemies which are attacking the psalmist, a reading supported by Anderson.[18] The Codex Parisinus Latinus reads the verb as a third person plural, *deduxerunt*, which *BHS* suggests is derived from שפכחני[19] The Latin amends a more difficult reading and is almost surely not original , but it serves to underline the theological difficulty raised by suggesting God's involvement in the psalmist's suffering. The isolated mention of God in the midst of a long list of attacks by human foes is interesting, however, for its structural significance. In the midst of describing the immediate conditions which have led the psalmist to believe that he or she has been abandoned by God, we have a connection made between the "why have you forsaken me" of verse 2 and the "you have answered me" of verse 22. While God is not the immediate cause of the psalmist's suffering, he is ultimately responsible in that he could save the psalmist, but has chosen instead to abandon him or her.

The translation of כארי in verse 17b of the Masoretic text is extremely problematic. The Masoretic text's "like a lion (mauls?) my hands and feet" continues the hunting imagery of 17a and 14 and that of 21 and 22, but it would require that the verb be supplied. A number of ancient manuscripts suggest the alternative readings כארו or כרו which are supported in the Septuagint reading "they have pierced my hands and my feet." The NRSV follows along with the suggestion of Roberts[20] that the verb is כרה "to

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[17] Indeed, Heinemann points to the context of threatened violence and argues that the psalmist suffered both emotional and physical distress. "Psalm 22," 295.
[18] Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, vol. 1, 190.
[19] K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, eds., *Biblical Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1984), 1104.
[20] J. J. M. Roberts, "A New Root for an Old Crux, Ps. XXII 17c," *Vetus Testamentum* 23 (1973): 247-252.

be shrunken, shriveled," a suggestion based on the Akkaidan and Syriac cognate *karû*, which means literally "to be short" and which is used in the context of physical illness. Many other suggestions have been offered, but with less textual support. While the exact meaning of this term remains open to speculation, the emanation followed in the LXX seems least drastic and, therefore, preferable. In any case, it does not directly affect the argument that I am pursuing, so that a more detailed discussion of the difficulties surrounding translation of this word will not be attempted here.[21]

Verses 20-22

The psalmist then calls upon God to "be not far", "help", "aid", "deliver", "save" and climaxes with the difficult reading עניתני, literally "you have answered me". Kraus has called attention to the placement of the verb ענה both at this key transition point and as part of the initial cry to God in verse three.[22] The "you do not answer me" has become "you have answered me" and the whole movement of the psalm shifts abruptly and completely from lament to praise.

There has been a wide divergence of opinion as to how best to translate this term in verse 22bβ. The LXX reads τὴν ταπείνωσίν μου, "my poor body" or "my lowliness", a reading which is possibly derived from the noun ענית.[23] One problem with translating עניתני "he has answered me" is that it breaks a supposed synonymous parallelism within verse 22. Thus, Terrien suggests that the הושיעני ("deliver me") of verse 22a must be balanced by a verb of parallel meaning like "protect me" or "deliver me" in verse 22b[24], a suggestion which has been followed in the NRSV's "from the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me." The assumption of a synonymous parallelism, however, requires that an emendation resulting in the present verb be identified and it seems simpler and more desirable to consider the verb in 22a, "save me" (הושיעני), to be a double-duty verb referring to the lion and the ox, with "you have answered me" standing apart for emphasis.

The strongest argument for maintaining the reading of the Masoretic Text, however, is structural. The repetition of the verb ענה in this particularly strategic place seems unlikely to be accidental as it functions to close out the lament portion of the psalm

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[21] The various proposed solutions to this unclear phrase have been clearly and concisely described by Heinemann ("Psalm 22," 296-97), with a more detailed consideration of the problem having recently been offered by Voll (Gregory Voll, "Psalm 22:17b: 'The Old Guess'," *JBL* 116 (1997): 45-56).

[22] Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 298.

[23] Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 197.

[24] Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1952), 155-156.

by resonating with the opening cry of "you do not answer" and by providing an explanation for the abrupt transition to praise.[25]

The abrupt change from lament to praise between verses 22 and 23 has excited a great deal of speculation among scholars as to the cause of the shift. As I have mentioned above, this shift is so sudden and complete that it has led some scholars to hypothesize the editorial joining of two originally separate psalms. Another extremely influential theory, based on the work of J. Begrich, is that this psalm is spoken liturgically in the temple and that verse 22bβ is immediately preceded by an "oracle of salvation" which is pronounced by the priest, but which, for some unknown reason, we do not have recorded in the psalm itself. This hypothesis is widely supported by scholars (Anderson, Craigie, Kraus). Conrad, however, has called attention to the difficulty involved in demonstrating the existence of such a *Gattung* even in the prophetic literature and the absence of any example of a "salvation oracle" in the Psalms themselves makes the assumption of such an oracle all the more speculative.[26] Rogerson and McKay suggest that the psalmist's meditation upon God's faithfulness to save in the past is sufficient to explain the change from lament to praise.[27] The psalm itself provides us with insufficient clues to speak with confidence about the exact form that God's "answer" took for the psalm writer, but the dramatic shift from lament to praise that follows underscores the importance of that answer for the psalmist.

Verses 23-27

The psalmist has experienced salvation and can now praise God for her or his deliverance. The psalmist "tells the name" and "praises" before his or her "brothers and sisters", that is, before the "congregation". He or she goes on to command the "fearers" of Yahweh and God's "offspring" to "praise," "glorify", and "stand in awe of" God. The motivation for praise (כִּי) is that Yahweh has "not despised", "not abhorred", "not hidden his face from", but has "heard" the cry of the poor. Clearly the psalmist places her- or himself in this category as one of the poor. This reference to the poor being afflicted, along with mention of them being satisfied in verse 27, suggests that these individuals, along with those who trust in Yahweh, have special claim on God's

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[25] The view that עָנָה in verse 22 forms an inclusion with verse three is also taken by John S. Kselman, "' Why Have You Abandoned Me?' A Rhetorical Study of Psalm 22," in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature*. David Clines et al. (eds.) (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press, 1982), 179 and Prinsloo, "Hope Against Hope," 68.
[26] Edgar W. Conrad, "Second Isaiah and the Priestly Oracle of Salvation," *ZAW* 93 (1981), 234-246.
[27] Rogerson and McKay, *Psalms 1-50*, 96.

deliverance. The poor are people affected by suffering and humiliation as well as by poverty.[28]

Like the waves caused by a pebble hitting the surface of a lake, the praise of God begins to spread. The psalmist will pay a vow of praise to Yahweh "in the great congregation", "before those who fear", with the "poor", and the "seekers" of Yahweh. Verses 23-27 thoroughly intermix and strongly identify the congregation of Israel with the poor. Along with the earlier theme of trust, this suggests a second key characteristic of those who would approach God and expect him to respond. The psalmist's efforts to convince God to act and save him or her centre around his or her efforts to identify him- or herself with those who trust Yahweh and with those who are poor and afflicted before him.

Verses 28-32

Beginning with verse 28 we have a shift from what Westermann calls "declarative praise", which extols what God has done for the psalmist, to "descriptive praise", which praises God for who he is in more general terms.[29] Now "all the ends of the earth" and "all the families of the nations" show God reverence. The motivation (כִּי) in verse 29 is not, as we might expect, because Yahweh saves from calamity, but because Yahweh has dominion and rules. Verse 30 expands the circle of God's worshippers again to include the "fat ones"[30] (those who are most full of abundance and life) and those who are dying. The psalmist repeats the image in verse 16 of death as going down to the dust (עפר). This contrast between fatness and death is reminiscent of the psalmist's own description of him- or herself as "poured out like water", "bones out of joint", "heart like wax", and "strength like a dried out pot". Verses 31 and 32 transcend the present. The coming generation will be told of the Lord and they, in turn, will declare his righteousness to those not yet born.

The motivation for this ongoing testimony of praise to Yahweh is found in the closing declaration כִּי עָשָׂה, "for he has done it". Thus the descriptive praise of the psalmist is interwoven with the declarative praise of the nations.

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[28] See Sue Gillingham, "The Poor in the Psalms", *ExpT* 100 (1988), 15-19. Heinemann points to the synonymous parallelism in verse 27 in which the poor are also those who "seek him" and understands the latter term to refer not simply to those who are in distress but to the entire assembly of believers, so that the entire assembly can be understood as afflicted. "Psalm 22," 305. This generalization seems, however, to place too much weight on the term "seeker".

[29] Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim and Richard Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 153.

[30] The NRSV's rendering of דִּשְׁנֵי־ as "all who sleep" misses the merism created by those who are fat (prosperous and full of life) and those who go down to death. See Kselman, "Why Have You Abandoned Me?," 190 and Prinsloo, "Hope Against Hope," 76.

Implications

The psalmist is caught between two contradictory poles: on the one hand there is the relationship which he or she has been taught to expect with his or her God and, on the other, the reality of the experience of God's abandoning silence. The psalm writer refuses either to deny the testimony of God's faithfulness to save in the past or to soften the reality of the present experience of abandonment and instead uses the obvious contradiction as a basis for petitioning God for change. The psalmist begins by denying those who would put her or him outside of the scope of intimate relationship with God. Only those who trust in Yahweh will be saved, but the psalmist declares, in the face of those who would question it, that his or her trust has not wavered. To do this, the writer of the psalm draws on two resources, the testimony of those ancestors who have trusted in the past and the psalmist's own personal history of trust from the day of his or her birth, which demonstrates that he or she continues to walk in the tradition of his or her ancestors. To trust God brings with it the experience of being delivered, so that the psalmist's efforts go toward including him- or herself among those who consistently put their trust in God.

The petition climaxes with the desired response from God at the end of verse 22. The only mention of other people (apart from the ancestors) up until this point has been of those who question the psalmist's right to expect help from God and those who are attacking him or her. But when the psalmist declares in confident praise that those who doubted were wrong, it is before the brothers and sisters, the congregation. A strong sense of community thus provides the context for the psalm.[31] But in the light of this understanding of "normal" Israelite experience, this distinction between verses 1-22 and verses 23-32 draws our attention to a key aspect of the problem the psalmist faces and a key aspect of the nature of the solution. The psalmist's afflictions have cut him or her off from the congregation, but when God answers, he or she is reinstated to his or her place within the community that testifies to the blessings of God. Thus the psalmist is arguing for his or her place within the community for whom Yahweh acts to deliver.

The psalmist is not concerned to tell us *how* God answered or *what* God said or did in his answer, but is intent instead on describing the *effect* of that answer. A great deal of scholarly speculation has pursued questions of the liturgical form of the answer mentioned in verse 22. As a result, an "oracle of salvation theory" has been brought into the psalm to stand silently in the background. But to judge from the psalm as we have it, the form of God's answer is unimportant to the psalmist. Perhaps it could distract from its result, which is a reaffirmation of the past, a change of place in the present, and a testimony within the community which extends throughout the world and into eternity.

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31 cf. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 202. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 300.

The psalmist declares the validity of the community's testimony, in the face of all evidence to the contrary.

After the transition point of verse 22, God's goodness and blessing now are not toward those who trust, as we might expect, but are directed to the afflicted and the poor. Thus we have the second resource that the psalmist has used previously and now identifies. Because of his or her experiences of isolation, abandonment, and fear, he or she can be counted among the afflicted and poor. It is precisely this group of people who have the most evidence at hand to disprove the claims of the praying community, and yet amazingly they have a greater claim on God than the rich and comfortable, that he will maintain the validity of those who have testified to his goodness. Experiences which call God's goodness into question also provide the basis for calling upon God to confirm that the community of faith "got it right". Those who are in the best position to affirm the memories of the praying community are not those individuals who have never experienced the contradiction of those memories, but rather those who have experienced most fully the contradiction between the realities of life and the memories of a God who transforms those realities.

The testimony of God's saving acts in the past, which formed the basis for the psalmist's appeal in the present, now moves into ever-widening testimonies of God's goodness and dominion throughout every nation, social class, and condition in life, and throughout all of time. The psalmist has cried out because some have tried to exclude him or her from the tradition of those who trust in Yahweh for deliverance and because, in the face of the enemies' attacks, God has remained distant and silent. With the salvation of Yahweh, the psalmist has *reentered* the ongoing testimony of God which will extend through the world and on into the future.

Psalm 22 is not simply about unjust suffering, but about having one's place in the congregation questioned by the reality of the experience of suffering and abandonment. The psalmist has not only been saved from the present distress, but has been reaffirmed as part of a people of testimony. The psalmist's place in the praying community, which was threatened, has been restored. The present reality of separation from that community has been resolved as the psalmist reenters the ongoing story of God and his relationship with his people.

4.2.2 Psalm 44

Structure

Psalm 44 may be divided into five sections. Verses 2-4 contain a recital of the conquest of Canaan which identifies God as the source of military victories for Israel. In verses 5-9 the psalmist affirms Israel's and his or her own confidence in God and recalls

past experiences of God's conquest of enemies. Verses 10-17 are a lament for defeat in battle. Verses 18-23 are a protest directed to God for withdrawing his support and an affirmation of Israel's loyalty. Verses 24-27 call on God to arise and save.

There is in Psalm 44 a dramatic shift from reciting God's past deliverances in 2-9 to lamenting his current abandonment of his people in 10-26. The form-critical assumption that a sharp shift in form necessarily indicates a separate origin for the different parts of a given psalm has been challenged with increasing frequency by recent scholarship. Loren Crow maintains that this sharp contrast is an intentional rhetorical device on the part of the psalm writer.[32] Crow argues for a chiastic structure to the psalm,

A Hymnic description of God's past aid (2-4)
B The present community's faithful trust in God (5-9)
C God's violence against the community (10-17)
B′ Community's innocence contrasted with God's action (18-23)
A′ Petition that God aid in the present (24-27)[33]

which places the focus on the shift to lament in verse 10. Crow maintains rightly that attempts to explain the differing tone of the latter part of the psalm in terms of later additions and redactions, as Briggs[34] does, miss the intentional rhetorical effect of the sudden move from trust to complaint. The primary contribution of Crow's study is to demonstrate that the writer who produced Psalm 44 as we have it, far from being a somewhat clumsy redactor of older materials, has carefully constructed Psalm 44 in order to produce the maximum dramatic effect on the reader.

Verses 2-4

Verse 2 begins with a rehearsal of Israel's victories during the conquest of Canaan, emphasizing the fact that it was God and not the military might of the nation nor the ability of a particular leader which was responsible for success in battle. While the expression "with our ears we have heard" could indicate an oral tradition, the practice of reading the law aloud before public assemblies would make an oral tradition unnecessary. Kraus argues for the handing down of the tradition in the setting of the family or clan.[35] Weiser, on the other hand, believes that the "hearing" refers to a recital of the *Heilsgeschichte* in the context of the cultic festival, which would have immediately preceded Psalm 44.[36] There is, however, no need to suppose that the tradition received

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[32] Loren Crow, "The Rhetoric of Psalm 44," *ZAW* 104 (1992): 394-401.
[33] Ibid., 394.
[34] Charles A. Briggs and Emilie G. Briggs, *The Book of Psalms*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1987), 374-383.
[35] Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 446.
[36] Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 355.

from the fathers would have been restricted to a single mode of transmission, to the exclusion of all others. Deut. 6:6-10 suggests a broad range of teaching situations in the family and clan, while Deut. 17:18-19 commands that the reading of the law be a daily discipline for the king and Deut. 31:10-11 speaks of its place in the festivals of Israel. The worshipping community that prayed the Psalter would be familiar with such recitals (Ps. 78:3; 105; 106; 114; 135:8-12; 136:10-22). Yahweh's deeds of old would have been available to and familiar to the entire praying community.

Verses 5-9

It is frequently assumed that the psalmist, as someone who can speak on Israel's behalf in the context of a military defeat, is either the king (Eaton, Rogerson and McKay, Craigie) or some other military or religious leader (Kraus, Weiser, Anderson). Mays argues for the personification of the congregation in the use of the first person singular in verses 5, 7 and 16-17, but the repeated shift back and forth between the singular and plural and the liturgical setting suggest a worship leader speaking on his or her own behalf, as well as on behalf of the nation.

This section opens by affirming that Yahweh is still "King" and "God" for the psalmist and the nation, just as he has been for their ancestors. The psalmist is seeking to establish continuity between the ancestors and contemporary Israel in their relationship with God. This is borne out in verse 7 by the denial, repeated from verse 4, that the bow and the sword are the source of military victory for the people. It is in God's name that the enemy is pushed back and trampled. Verse 8 uses the perfect tense to declare that God has "saved us from our foes" and has "put to confusion those who hate us". While this could be an instantaneous perfect, referring to a future, hoped-for salvation as though it were already accomplished, the context makes this unlikely. It seems improbable that verse 8 is an additional reference to God's victories during the conquest of Canaan, since verses 5-9 are in the first person singular and plural. It is far more probable that the psalmist is speaking in verse 8 of living memories of deliverances. Thus, in the second section, the psalmist is adding personally experienced testimonies of the nation and of him- or herself to the traditional recital of the victories of Israel's ancestors in order to affirm a continuity between the two and to imply that God should act for contemporary Israel as he did for the ancestors.

Verses 10-17

Verse 10 opens with the sharp contradiction between God's acts in the past, both in Israel's founding history and in the living memory of those present, and his failure to fight and give victory for Israel in the present. Coetzee describes this contradiction in

terms of the reversal of relationships. Whereas God is normally thought of as being favourable toward Israel and negative in his relationship with Israel's enemies, in the present situation those relationships appear to be reversed.[37] The abruptness of the contrast is underlined by introducing the section with "yet" (אף) immediately following a Selah at the end of verse 9, which serves to provide a structural break in the flow of the psalm. The assumption is not that God was defeated in combat by stronger gods, but that he did not take part in the fight. What follows is a detailed description of the defeat and subsequent humiliation suffered by the nation as a whole and by the psalmist personally as a leader responsible for the battle. The defeat is not seen as the result of the enemies' strength, but is something which Yahweh has done to Israel. On the day of battle, Yahweh did not show up for the fight.[38]

Psalm 44 is very much occupied with and addressed to God. Second person singular verbs and pronouns refer to God 27 times in the course of the psalm. Israel's problem is not with their enemies, but with a God who is not acting as expected. The lament of verses 10-17 has about it an undertone of protest. "You" have "rejected", "abased", "not gone out", "turned us back", "allowed us to be plundered", "given us to be slaughtered", "scattered us", "sold us cheaply", "made us a taunt", "a derision", "a scorn", "a byword", and "a laughingstock". The three elements which Westermann noted were common to all of Israel's lament psalms, namely God, the lamenter, and the enemies,[39] are present in Psalm 44, but the enemies play only a supporting role and the psalmist does not even dwell overmuch on him- or herself. The principle focus of Psalm 44 is God.

Verses 18-23

That the lament is, in fact, also a protest becomes clear with the declaration of innocence and loyalty in verses 18-23. Verse 18 begins a protest of innocence: "All this came upon us but we have not forgotten you or dealt falsely with your covenant." Psalm 44 is unique in that it is the only community lament which maintains Israel's lack of fault or responsibility before God. As various scholars have pointed out (Anderson, Weiser, Mays, Rogerson and McKay, Eaton), the argument of the psalmist is not that Israel is innocent of any sin, but that they have remained loyal to God, who now seems to have been disloyal to them. Israel has "not forgotten", "not been false", "not turned back", "not departed", "not forgotten", and "not spread out their hands to a strange god". The first two sections have provided Israel's understanding of how God characteristically acts

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[37] J. H. Coetzee, "The Function of Elements of Tension in Psalm 44," *TE* 21 (1988), 4-5.
[38] Crow sees "God as taking an active role in Israel's destruction," but this need not be the case. He need only withdraw his support and absent himself from the battle in order for the enemies to sweep in and take advantage of the situation. Crow, "Psalm 44," 397.
[39] Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*., 169.

and the third laments the fact that God has not acted to save in the present. After calling attention to the sharp dissonance between the past and present in the first three sections, this fourth section seeks to know, albeit implicitly, "why" God has acted this way. By denying any disloyalty which would make God's failure to act understandable according to the Deuteronomic tradition, the question is left hanging.

Verse 23 states that "Because of you we are being killed all day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter." This is seen by a number of scholars (Rogerson and McKay, Weiser, Kidner) as providing an explanation for the defeat of Israel, namely that being identified with Yahweh makes one the object of persecution and attack. Mays sees this verse as foreshadowing the theology of the suffering servant in Isa. 53.[40] Kraus finds vestiges of the notion that the righteous must suffer because of their association with Yahweh in Psalm 34:20, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD rescues them from them all," and in Psalm 22, in which the psalmist suffers without mention of guilt.[41] Paul refers to Psalm 44:23 in Rom. 8:36, interpreting it to mean that, by virtue of their association with God in a world which hates God, his servants will suffer persecution.

But is this the correct understanding of the phrase כי-עליך? Is the psalmist not simply saying instead that the defeat of Israel and its subsequent sufferings are God's fault, thus carrying on the affirmation of verses 10-17? In other words, is the psalmist saying "We are suffering for our association with you" or is he or she saying "We are suffering because you have failed to fight for us"?

Psalm 69:8 also contains the phrase כי-עליך and the context of verses 69:8-13 makes it clear in that psalm that the psalmist is suffering attacks from enemies specifically because of his or her relationship with God: "It is zeal for your house that has consumed me; the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me".[42] Indeed, there are a number of similarities between the language of lament in Psalms 44:10-23 and 69:8-13. In both the psalmist refers to him- or herself as a "byword" (מִשׁל) before the enemies and the phrase in Psalm 44:16, "and shame covers my face" (ובשׁת פני כסתני), is very similar to the phrase in Psalm 69:8, "that shame has covered my face" (כסתה כלמה פני). In addition, both passages share the words "reproach" חרף, "reproach" חרפה, and "shame" כלמה. At the very least, the notion of suffering the reproaches aimed at God is not alien to the Psalter and the similarity between the language of Psalms 44 and 69 lends weight to the interpretation "for your sake".

The problem in Psalm 44, though, is not that the enemies have attacked, but that God has not gone out with his armies. The harsh tone of verse 24, which calls on God to "rouse yourself!" and "awake," accuses God of being asleep on the job. It is God who has

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40 James Luther Mays, *Psalms*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 179.
41 Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 448.
42 Ps. 69:10.

rejected, shamed, given over, scattered, and sold cheaply. The psalmist is not seeking to understand the mystery of why Israel was defeated by their enemies. The psalmist already knows the answer. It is "because of you". The Old Testament scholars noted above seem to move too quickly and uncritically into New Testament theology in their interpretation of this phrase. The larger context of the psalm does not suggest the notion of innocent suffering because of association with God, but of innocent suffering because God has not fulfilled his role as the leader of Israel's armies.

If it is Yahweh who grants both victory and defeat in battle, then attacks against Israel are, in fact, attacks against Yahweh. Thus, the nation can say "We are attacked because we are in your army and we suffer defeat and humiliation when you do not rise up and defend yourself." Israel's relationship with Yahweh is a completely dependent one.

Verses 24-27

The final section calls God to action: "Rouse yourself", "do not sleep"[43], "awake", "do not cast off", "do not hide your face", "do not forget", "rise up", "come", and "redeem". The "Why do you hide your face?" of verse 25 echoes the "the light of your countenance did it" of verse 4. The shining of Yahweh's face (פנים) is associated with salvation (Ps. 31:17; 80:4, 8, 20), while the hiding of God's face diminishes the life-force: "When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust".[44] The basis for calling God to attend to the distress of the nation and to save them is "for the sake of your steadfast love (חסדך)."

Implications

The psalm opens not with a lament, but with a recital of Israel's experiences of victory in battle during the conquest of Canaan, which it attributes to God's active participation in the battles to defeat foreign armies and gods. The psalmist leads God "up the garden path" with what appears to be a psalm of praise which utilizes historical recital to celebrate Israel's dependence on God and God's faithfulness to save.

In the second section, the psalmist connects this traditional recital with the contemporary nation's own experiences of God's deliverance in war. The psalmist is careful to maintain that Yahweh is still Israel's God and King, just as he has been since the founding of the nation, and that he is the source of the psalmist's and the nation's

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[43] As Thomas McAlpine points out, the problem here is not simply that God falls asleep accidentally, like some lazy night-watchman, but that he is intentionally unavailable to save the one praying. McAlpine, Thomas H. *Sleep, Divine & Human, in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 196-199.
[44] Ps. 104:29.

own victories, rather than the bow and sword. Thus, the psalmist presents God with an unbroken tradition of God's deliverance of Israel in battle.

Only as the psalm unfolds does the reader discover the strong motivational function of the recital of remembered salvation. The psalm is not a psalm of historical recital or praise, but a psalm of community lament. The historical recital serves a particular rhetorical function within the lament, namely, to call to God's attention the divergence between past memory and present experience.

The third section calls out in lament because of a defeat suffered in battle. Because it is God and not military might that brings victory, God is also responsible for Israel's defeat. He has not accompanied his armies into battle, so that there can be no victory. The purpose of verses 1-9 can now be seen to be preparatory for the lament. In the light of the long tradition of God's fighting for Israel and ensuring their victories, the "yet" of verse 10 acts as the pivot-point, putting the contrast between remembered past and experienced present in sharp relief.

The fourth section strongly insists that Israel has been loyal in their covenant relationship with Yahweh, thus denying a ready explanation for the change in God's action toward Israel. There is no question of covering over any fault or speaking hypocritically, for all is visible to God. Israel's disloyalty and sin cannot be offered as an explanation for God's failure to fight for Israel. Implicit in the protestation of innocence is the question "Why has God done this?"

As the lament unfolds, there is a growing antithesis in the psalm between "us" and "you". The enemies are not the psalmist's problem, but are merely present to exploit Israel's helplessness, which results from the real problem, namely a threat to their relationship with Yahweh. Because Yahweh does not act as he is expected to act, it is Yahweh, and not the enemies, who rejects, shames, makes like sheep for food, scatters, sells, makes a reproach, a mocking derision, a byword, a shaking of the head, crushes, and covers over.

The psalmist's understanding that it is a problem in Israel's relationship with Yahweh which is at the centre of their suffering does not, however, cause the nation to abandon that relationship. God is still Israel's only possible source of victory. The call to "rise up!" and "awake!" which closes the psalm is based on the testimonies of God's salvation in the past and his responsibility for the present.

The closing basis for appeal is God's hesed or "steadfast love", and so the psalm comes full circle.[45] The relationship which Israel has enjoyed with Yahweh in the past is still their basis for appeal to Yahweh in the present national crisis. The contrast between

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[45] Crow suggests that this ending serves to unify the poem by referring back to the past saving deeds of God mentioned in the opening of the psalm. "Psalm 44," 400. This is at best, however, a loose structural inclusion as the motivation for God's saving of the ancestors in verses 2-4 is his "delight" or "favour" (רצה) rather than his "steadfast love".

remembered past and experienced present causes Israel to ask, and indeed to ask in protest, "Why, O God?" At the close of the psalm, God's hesed is appealed to in order to try and heal the damaged relationship between Yahweh and his people.

4.2.3 Psalm 40

Introduction and Structure

Psalm 40 has two distinct parts, an expression of individual declarative praise for past deliverance in verses 2-11 and of individual lament in verses 12-18. This sharp distinction, together with the fact that much of the individual lament is reproduced with only minor changes as Psalm 70,[46] has led some authors (Dahood, Kirkpatrick, Kraus) to assume that Psalm 40 was originally two separate psalms. While Psalm 70 is shorter and might, therefore, be assumed to be older than Psalm 40, it is also possible to argue that Psalm 70 has borrowed from Psalm 40. Craigie, for example, maintains that Psalm 40 is pre-exilic and is a liturgical song presented by the king on behalf of the people. With the exile, Craigie argues, Psalm 40 was no longer usable in its present form and Psalm 70 was a post-exilic "salvaged psalm" which no longer required the king to represent the nation.[47] Whether or not Craigie's understanding is accurate, he demonstrates that the shorter psalm need not necessarily be the older psalm.

Ridderbos has pointed out that many of the structural elements found in a typical psalm of lament are absent from 40:14-18 (which is in turn duplicated in Ps. 70), so that the resulting lament is composed almost entirely of prayers and requests.[48] Other authors (Anderson, Brueggemann, Eaton) have pointed to the shared vocabulary and similar structure of the two halves of the psalm as evidence for considering Psalm 40 to have been an original composition. Psalm 40 is unusual in that it begins with thanksgiving and then moves to lament. This is, however, not unique in the Psalter (cf. Ps. 9, 27, 44) and the move from thanksgiving to lament, instead of the reverse, does not make a convincing argument for Psalm 40 being originally composed of two separate psalms. Indeed, the tension which this creates, more than any other feature, argues for the unity of these two parts. Whether the psalmist drew from older materials in the construction of the psalm or Psalm 40 was later fragmented and reapplied in a new situation, the two portions of Psalm 40 are rhetorically interdependent, functioning

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[46] Though the changes are minor, Weiser points out that they are not insignificant. The psalmist has added the notion that "The Lord will think of me," which for Weiser reinforces the connection with the thanksgiving in the first half of the psalm. (Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* [London: SCM Press, 1962], 341.)

[47] Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 314.

[48] Nic. H. Ridderbos, "The Structure of Psalm XL," *Oudtestamentiche Studiën*, vol. 14, ed. P. A. H. De Boer (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 298-299. Ridderbos also notes that if Ps. 40:2-12 were originally a free-standing thanksgiving psalm, it would have a most unusual form, ending as it does with an expression of trust.

together to establish and maintain a tension between who God has been in the past and his slowness to act in similar ways in the present situation. If Psalm 40 does, in fact, draw on pre-existing materials, it is not possible to separate out these materials without dramatically changing the meaning of the psalm as a whole.

Psalm 40 may be divided into four sections. Verses 2-6 offer a testimony of past salvation; verses 7-11 speak of offering this testimony before the congregation, rather than a dependence on sacrifice as the correct response for deliverance; verses 12-16 are an individual cry of lament; and verses 17-18 are a prayer that those who seek Yahweh may rejoice in anticipation that the cry of lament will be answered.

Verses 2-6

Psalm 40 begins with declarative praise for a salvation from distress experienced in the past. The exact nature of the distress is difficult to identify with any certainty. Craigie has assumed that the psalmist is the king, speaking on behalf of the nation, so that the distress, for Craigie, would be a military crisis.[49] But even if we accept Craigie's assumption that the psalmist is, in fact, the king speaking on behalf of the nation, other national crises, such as a coup attempt, could just as easily provide the occasion for the cry for deliverance. We do not have sufficient information in the psalm itself to identify the past crisis with confidence, nor, I would suggest, is such an identification necessary or particularly important. It is, for the psalmist, the act of reciting the descriptive praise about Yahweh which becomes important to the lament which follows.

The psalm begins with the verb קוה ("wait"), repeated in the Piel first as an infinitive absolute and then as a perfect. קוה is a verb commonly associated in the Psalter with the psalms of lament, occurring in a lament psalm for 10 of its 14 appearances in the Psalms. Its presence at the beginning of the psalm suggests an air of expectancy on the part of the psalmist. The "roaring pit" and "muddy mire" may best be understood as referring to the nether world. In 7 occurrences in the Psalter of the word בור, 6 are associated with sickness, death and Sheol (cf. Ps. 28:1; 30:3; 88:4, 6: 143:7). The phrase שיר חדש or "new song" appears 6 times in the Psalter (cf. Ps. 33:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1) and only once more in the Old Testament in Isaiah 42:10. The singing of a "new song" in Psalm 40 serves an important function within the faith community of Israel, so that "many shall see it and shall fear and trust in Yahweh."[50]

The identity of the רהבים ("proud ones") and the meaning of כזב ("lie") are uncertain. Dahood has argued for a connection between "the proud one" (רהבים) and the sea monster Rahab, which he understands to mean "the Proud one". Similarly, he

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[49] Ibid., 315.

[50] A number of scholars (Anderson, Kidner) have called attention to the word-play between "they shall see" (יראו) and "they shall fear" (ייראו).

translates שׂטי כזב (literally "those who turn aside to a lie") as the persons who turn to "fraudulent images", proposing a parallel to דבר-בליעל or "wicked thing" in Ps. 101:3, which he in turn interprets to refer to idols. Thus, he renders רהבים as "pagan idols" and כזב as "fraudulent images".[51] Dahood's translation is highly speculative and demonstrates the fact that the precise meaning of רהבים in this context is unclear. Eaton has suggested "false gods",[52] while Kidner believes it to be a reference to the Egyptians.[53] Rogerson and McKay translate the term as "brutal and treacherous men".[54] In view of the uncertainty of the precise intent of the psalmist, it is best to preserve the ambiguity of the term and to translate it literally as the NRSV does.

In verse 6, the psalmist recalls the things that Yahweh has done and speaks to him of his נפלאותיך ("your wondrous works"). The wondrous works of Yahweh may refer to the exodus (Craigie), or to the psalmist's personal experience of deliverance, or, indeed, to both (Rogerson and McKay). The absence of any clear reference to the exodus elsewhere in the psalm, however, makes it, at best, an underlying allusion and places the emphasis of the psalmist's praise on personally experienced deliverance.

Verses 2-6 introduce the psalm with an account of individual declarative praise. As yet, there is no hint of the coming lament and Psalm 40 appears to be a typical psalm of declarative praise, but the reader will soon discover that this praise serves a particular purpose, namely, to prepare the way for lament by providing a basis of appeal to Yahweh through his past saving acts. Proclamation plays an important role in the motivational function of this praise section. The psalmist is not simply recalling the events of a past salvation, but he or she is singing a "new song", "proclaiming", and "telling" of this salvation. Verses 10 and 11 suggest that this act of speaking is a testimony to God's saving acts offered before the "great congregation".

The reason for singing, declaring, and praising is so that "many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD", which suggests that proclamation of what Yahweh has done is an important responsibility of the individual who has experienced God's salvation. It is not enough simply to thank God for his saving acts, but it is essential to testify before the community so that others may benefit from the experiences of the one praising Yahweh.

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[51] Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II: 51-100* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968), 243-244.
[52] John H. Eaton, *Psalms* (London: SCM Press, 1967) 114.
[53] Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72 : an Introduction and Commentary on Books I and II of the Psalms* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 159.
[54] J. W. Rogerson and J. W. McKay, *Psalms 1-50*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 192.

Verses 7-11

Many scholars agree that verse 7 does not suggest an attack on or dismissal of the sacrificial system (Anderson, Craigie, Eaton, Rogerson and McKay), but it does relativize the importance of sacrifice.[55] Psalm 51 affirms that God does not delight in sacrifices, but in a "broken and contrite heart". Nevertheless, when the attitude of the person sacrificing is right, the psalmist says "... then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar."[56] Whereas Isaiah 1:10-17 relativizes sacrifice by placing it over against community obedience to God, Psalm 40 makes a different point, namely that sacrifice alone is an insufficient response to God for deliverance and that the person who experiences such a deliverance must testify of it before Israel. The place of sacrifice in the coming appeal to God in the latter half of the psalm is suggested by the immediate context. The affirmation that God does not desire sacrifice divides two sections which speak of testifying of God's saving acts to the assembly.

The pairing of sacrifice and testimony as a response to salvation is also prominent in Psalm 66. Psalm 66 is a psalm of praise after deliverance, and, as a result of having been delivered by Yahweh, the psalmist will both offer sacrifice (vv. 13-15) and testify of his or her deliverance before those who fear God (vv. 16-19). Psalm 69:31-32 maintain that Yahweh will prefer praise to an ox or a bull. Psalm 50 denies that Yahweh hungers and thirsts for sacrifices and Psalm 50:14, 23 read "Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving (תודה), and pay your vows to the Most High .... 'Those who bring thanksgiving (תודה) as their sacrifice honour me; to those who go the right way I will show the salvation of God.'" In the context of God's deliverance, sacrifices are an insufficient response in and of themselves.

The expression אזנים כרית לי (literally "you have dug ears for me") is unclear. Kidner rightly rejects the idea that this is a reference to the practice of piercing the ear lobe of a servant who wishes to be permanently attached to his or her master after seven years of service (Ex. 21:6), noting that the plural "ears" makes such a reading difficult. He suggests instead a parallel in Isa. 50:4f.; "Morning by morning he wakens-- wakens my

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[55] Nigel Courtman points out that, with the exception of Ps. 40:7 which offers a formal listing of types of sacrifice, there is no reference to atoning sacrifice in the Psalter and, conversely, when the psalmist does confess sin, there is no mention of an atonement ritual. Courtman has therefore argued that, for the psalmist,

> ... The primary significance of sacrifice ... lay outside the realm of atonement and, conversely, atonement was largely achieved by means other than sacrifice (e.g., Ps. 25, 32, 51, 103, 130). In particular, due weight must be given to the roles of prayer, confession, contrition, and even instruction (cf. 25:8-9; 32:8-9).

"Sacrifice in the Psalms," eds. Roger Beckwith and Martin Selman, *Sacrifice in the Bible* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1995), 55.

[56] Psalm 51:21.

ear to listen as those who are taught..."[57] Dahood suggests "make my ears receptive"[58] and Rogerson and McKay "thou wouldst have given me ears to hear."[59] The conventional understanding of this verse is that Yahweh communicated to the psalmist, through the influence of the prophetic writers, the importance of a right attitude and of personal obedience in order to make a right sacrifice (cf. Ps. 51:21; Isa. 1:10-17; Amos 5:21-24), but I will argue below that what the psalmist understood was the relationship between sacrifice and the proclamation of God's saving acts. The sense of verse 7 in relation to its immediate context seems to be that the psalmist received instruction and insight from Yahweh about the relative unimportance of sacrifice which is not accompanied by a public declaration of praise for God's goodness, mercy and deliverance.

It is difficult to determine exactly what the phrase "... in the roll of the book it is written of me" refers to. Some scholars believe this to be a reference to the deuteronomic law (Craigie, Kirkpatrick), while Kidner suggests the possibility of a coronation decree.[60] Another suggestion has been that the psalmist has written his or her prayer of thanksgiving on a scroll which is then presented at the temple in the place of a sacrifice (Kraus, Mays). Mays goes so far as to suggest that "It was in these circles of temple singers and prophets in the Isaiah tradition that sacrifice was relativized in favor of praise and proclamation of the LORD's saving righteousness (Pss. 40:6; 50:7-15; 69:30-33; cf. Isa. 66:1-4)."[61] Given the reference to Torah in verse 9, however, it seems more likely that Craigie and Kirkpatrick are correct and that the psalmist is referring to deuteronomic law.

But, if this is so, what was "written of me" in the Torah? The declaration of praise to God for past salvation in verses 2-3 and the affirmation in 10-11 that the psalmist both has proclaimed and will continue to proclaim the goodness of Yahweh, suggests that he or she has understood from Yahweh and through reading Torah his or her own place in the larger relationship between Yahweh and his people. The psalmist was not delivered because of personal merit, but God's act of salvation on the part of the psalmist in the past is part of the larger story of who God is and how he acts toward his people. The psalmist is part of that heritage and has a responsibility to proclaim his or her own experiences with the God who saves Israel before the congregation, thus adding to the ongoing testimony of who the God of Israel is.

The psalmist continues to develop the notion of utilizing declarative praise as testimony and, in verses 10 and 11, he or she adds the element of testifying before the

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57 Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 159..
58 Dahood, *Psalms I*, 246.
59 Rogerson and McKay, *Psalms 1-50*, 189.
60 Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 160.
61 James L. Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 170.

"great congregation". The psalmist has "told", "does not restrain lips",[62] "has not hidden," has "declared", and "not hidden" before the great assembly. The content of the psalmist's proclamation is God's "deliverance", "faithfulness", "salvation", "steadfast love", and "faithfulness".

The motivational function of the declarative praise preceding the presentation of the lament is three-fold. Firstly, it serves to motivate God to save by pointing out the way in which he has traditionally acted in the past. There is, then, a disparity between what the tradition reports about God and his lack of action in the present. Secondly, the psalmist argues that he or she has responded appropriately to his or her own past experiences of God's saving acts. By speaking and declaring publicly how God has acted to save the psalmist, he or she has placed him- or herself firmly within the salvation tradition and has responded appropriately before God, not just with sacrifices, but with declarative praise. Thirdly, the psalmist's praise serves as public testimony to God's saving acts before the great congregation. The testimony serves an edifying function, so that "Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD", but it also serves the function of providing additional motivation for God to save. The complaint of the psalmist is not private, but is presented before the entire congregation, together with the psalmist's expression of confidence that God will save. Thus, Yahweh's reputation is placed at risk. The implication is that, if Yahweh does not save, no one will continue to fear and trust him.

Verses 12-16

Verse 12 begins the individual lament. In verses 12-16 the psalmist prays for two types of action, salvation from his or her enemies ("do not withhold your mercy", "your steadfast love", "your faithfulness", "deliver me", "make haste to help me") and the judgment and humiliation of those enemies (that they be "put to shame", "confused", "turned back", "brought to dishonour", "appalled"). Verse 12 calls on God not to withhold his compassion (רחמים) and echoes verse 11 by praying "let your steadfast love (חסד) and your faithfulness (אמת) keep me safe forever". The juxtapositioning of these last two terms ("steadfast love" and "faithfulness") in the closing verse of the declarative praise and in the opening verse of the lament, together with the psalmist's argument that he or she has continually been in the care and protection of Yahweh, serve

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62 The NRSV, along with the AV, translates the imperfect verb phrase לא אכלא as a perfect, "I have not restrained", preferring to make it consistent with the other verbs in verses 10-11. The NIV, REB, and JB, however, translate a present tense verb; cf. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 312; Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 422; Rogerson and McKay, *Psalms 1-50*, 189. The presence of the imperfect serves to add the promise of ongoing testimony to the psalmist's past offering of testimony and should not be obscured in translation.

to highlight the disparity between the remembered tradition and the present circumstance.

Verses 17-18

Verses 17-18 provide a summary and conclusion for the psalm. The "rejoice" (שׂוּשׂ) and "be glad" (שִׂמְחָה) of verse 17 echo the "blessed is the man" of verse 5. The saying continually "Great is the LORD!", suggests the content of the testimony before the great congregation in verses 10-11. The Lord, whose thoughts (מַחְשְׁבֹת) toward his people are beyond number, will think (חָשַׁב) of the psalmist. "My help" (עֶזְרָה) and "my deliverer" (פַּלָּט) and "do not delay" echoes the "deliver me" (נַצֵּל) and "make haste to help me" (עֶזְרָה) in verse 14. Structurally the "I wait patiently" of verse 1 is carried through with the "do not delay" which closes the psalm, thus providing a bracket for the lament as a whole.

Implications

The structure of Psalm 40 serves an important function in presenting its message and is, therefore, a strong argument for the compositional unity of that psalm. By beginning with declarative praise which affirms how God has acted to save the psalmist in the past, the lament which follows is seen in sharp contrast to the remembered tradition of God's saving actions. The singing a "new song", "proclaiming", and "telling" offer a declaration of who God is which will later be placed in contrast with God's present silence and slowness to act. Furthermore, the declarative praise, while individual, is not private. It is offered before the great assembly, together with the psalmist's affirmation that Yahweh is a God of "saving help", "faithfulness", "salvation", "steadfast love", and "faithfulness". These past expressions of God's relationship have been proclaimed before the whole community of Israel and not just to the individual psalmist. The psalmist's ability to turn to the accounts of who God has been in the past as a resource for calling on God to act in the present depends on his or her position as a member of the community for whom Yahweh acts to save and, thereby, on his or her position within the larger story of Yahweh's relationship with his people over time. The psalm writer seeks to understand the present situation in the larger context of Yahweh's dealings with his people.

The remembering of past saving acts serves overtly to provide motivation for Yahweh to save again in the current distress. By making a public declaration before the great congregation of who God is, the psalmist is "putting God on the spot." The question now, not just for the psalmist but for Israel as a nation, is "Will God act to save again as he has in the past?" As a result of his silence, God's reputation is being called into

question by those who exalt themselves over the psalmist. When the enemies are ashamed, abashed, driven back, and humiliated, God's own reputation and the relationship that he has with his people will be reaffirmed.

The psalmist's affirmation that the importance of sacrifice is relative, particularly in the context of preparing to petition God for deliverance, suggests that he or she has gained an insight into the place of declarative praise or public testimony in the worship of the community. The prophets explore the relationship between sacrifice and personal obedience to God, but the psalmist is here adding a different element which might easily be missed, the relationship between sacrifice and proclamation as a response to God's deliverance. The unexpected presentation of the lament immediately follows the psalmist's insistence that he or she "has told", "will not restrain lips", "has not hidden", "has spoken", and "has not concealed". The psalmist may boldly call upon Yahweh to save and to judge because, when Yahweh did so in the past, the psalmist was faithful to declare it before the great assembly. Psalm 40 suggests two things regarding public testimony about God before the assembly. Firstly, such testimony was considered to be a responsibility, indeed an obligation, of the one who received God's blessing, rivaling even the importance of offering sacrifice.[63] Because the psalmist's relationship with Yahweh depends on his or her participation in the community for whom Yahweh acts to save, there can be no private expressions of praise for salvation. The one who experiences Yahweh's salvation must declare it before the great assembly. Secondly, the individual who faithfully declares Yahweh's saving acts has a basis for approaching him in the future when enemies rise up against her or him. The psalmist has not only drawn from the tradition of a saving God, but has found his or her place within that tradition, thus adding to it. As someone speaking from within that tradition, the psalmist may approach Yahweh and call for a fresh act of salvation. Any new act of salvation must be publicly declared, so that it may be added to the growing testimony of who Yahweh is in relation to his people. Just as remembering God's saving acts of the past is a crucial part of approaching God to save in the present, so too the response to salvation must be a public declaration that Yahweh is a God of saving help, faithfulness, salvation, and steadfast love so that many will see it and will fear and trust in Yahweh.

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[63] Davis identifies two functions which this obligatory testimony serves within the community, firstly to repair any damage to the community's relationship caused by the challenge to faith with which the psalmist has struggled and secondly to "extend the horizons of the community's vision". Davis, "Exploding the Limits", 101.

4.2.4 Psalm 71

Structure

Psalm 71 may be divided into seven parts. Verses 1-4 call upon God to be who he is supposed to be, that is, who he is traditionally reported to be, and to deliver the psalmist from the wicked. Verses 5-8 provide a motivation for God's deliverance, a life-long trusting relationship between God and the psalmist. Verses 9-13 continue the appeal for deliverance and present as an additional motivation the counter-testimony of those enemies who deny that God is still interested in and involved with the psalmist: the presence and nearness of God is sought, which will result in the condemnation of those enemies who would offer such a counter-testimony. Verses 14-16 declare trust in God and praise his mighty deeds of salvation. Verses 17-19 present a life lived in faithfulness, learning about God's grace and proclaiming it throughout life and into the future. Verses 20-21 speak of God's saving acts in the life of the psalmist and in verses 22-24 there is a transition to a praise which no longer seeks a future salvation, but which speaks of a deliverance that confirms the claims of the psalmist and leads to the condemnation of those who have testified falsely.

Verses 1-4

Verse 1 contains an appeal for deliverance, while verse 2 makes reference to God's righteousness, a recurring theme in the psalm (vv. 2, 15, 16, 19, 24), and introduces a string of imperatives, commanding God to act and to save. The imperative in verse 3 "Be to me a rock of refuge" (צור) is followed by the justification for speaking with such force to God, namely, "For (כי) you are my rock (סלע) and my fortress (מצור)". Verse 3 appears to command God to be what he already is. The strong emphasis on God's saving acts in the life of the psalmist in the past (vv. 4-6; 12-16; 17-18) suggests that this verse may be interpreted to say "Be who you are supposed to be, who I have been told you are and who I have experienced you in the past to be." The statement appears contradictory because it presents the tension between who God has been in the past and his apparent failure to be that God for the psalmist in his or her present suffering.

Kidner points out the close similarity between Psalm 71:1-3 and Psalm 31:1-3a (Heb. 2-4a). He sees in the variations between the two evidence of a change of emphasis by the psalmist. "This is sufficiently distinct from the passage in Psalm 31 to look like a deliberate variation, to stress the theme ... of what is familiar and habitual, introducing here the word 'continually', which will recur in verses 6 and 14."[64] The repetition of

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[64] Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72 : An Introduction and Commentary on Books I and II of the Psalms* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 251. Kraus finds in the repetition of

תמיד does indicate an important theme of the psalm. The fact that God is supposed to be continuous in his protection and that the hope and confidence of the psalmist remains unbroken is sharply contrasted with the present circumstance in which Yahweh is being inconsistent and failing to save. Kidner's argument is supported by constant references to the psalmist's past: "from my youth" (vv. 5, 17), "from my birth ... from my mother's womb" (v. 6); to his present: "all day long" (vv. 8, 15, 24); and to his future: "in the time of my old age" (v. 9), "even to old age and grey hairs", and "generations to come" (v. 18). The psalmist argues extensively for the unbroken continuity of his praise, trust, and testimony. Verse 4 brings to a climax the string of imperatives with "rescue me" and introduces the source of the psalmist's distress, an attack by enemies who are described as " the wicked", the antonym of "righteous".

Verses 5-8

Beginning with verse 5, the motivation for God's action is provided, marked by כי. God has been the "hope" and "trust" of the psalmist from his youth, from his birth, indeed, from the very moment that he emerged from his mother's womb.

The phrase "my praise is continually of you" establishes continuity of praise from the psalmist's youth even to the present. If the continuity of Yahweh's protection and salvation is in doubt, the psalm writer will not accept the argument that the reason for this divine inconsistency is human inconsistency. The assertion that "my praise is continually of you [from my mother's belly]" closes any holes in the psalmist's case before God, allowing him or her to expect and even to demand action.

Speech is an important element which permeates the entire psalm in the form of the psalmist's praise (vv. 6, 8, 14, 22, 23), in the accusing testimony of the enemies (vv. 10, 11), in the testimony of the psalmist to the mighty saving acts of God in the past and in the future (vv. 15, 16, 17, 18), and finally in the testimony offered of the personal deliverance experienced by the psalmist and the humiliation of his or her enemies (vv. 23, 24). Psalm 71 is overwhelmingly preoccupied with speech about what God has done, is doing (or failing to do), and will do in the future. There are two different modes of speech in the psalm, which are intermixed only in the last three verses. First, there are expressions of praise, which are the appropriate response for past expressions of God's grace (v. 6), a sustained refrain in the face of doubt (vv. 8, 14), and a jubilant response in praise and testimony to God's deliverance (vv. 22, 23, 24) elicited by God's ransoming the soul of the psalmist and bringing to shame his or her enemies, thus disproving their words. Over against these are the enemies' challenging words (vv. 10, 11), which claim

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Psalm 31:1-3a evidence for the use of a conventional formulation to be used upon entering the temple for asylum. (Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 72.)

that the psalmist is God-forsaken and cannot be included amongst those who may expect God to save them.

The phrase "I have been like a portent to many" has excited a great deal of debate among scholars. The Hebrew word מוֹפֵת ("sign") may be understood either positively or negatively.[65] While Weiser understands it to refer to a positive sign of God's rule[66] and Eaton to "God's marvelous works"[67], many scholars prefer to interpret it negatively (Rogerson and McKay, Anderson, Kidner). The term מוֹפֵת appears 5 times in the Psalms and only 35 times in the Old Testament. By far the most common use of the word (nearly half the occurrences) is in reference to the "wonders" shown to Pharaoh in preparation for the Exodus (Ex. 4:21; 7:3, 9: 11:9, 10; Deut. 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 29:3; 34:11; Ps. 78:43; 105:27; 135:9; Neh. 9:10; Jer. 32:20-21). In addition, מוֹפֵת can refer to signs used by prophets to substantiate their messages, both true signs (I Ki. 13:3, 5) and false ones (Deut. 13:1, 2). מוֹפֵת can also refer to God's judgments (Deut. 28:46; I Ki. 13:3, 5; Isa. 20:3) and to the fall of Jerusalem, along with the exile of God's people (Eze. 12:6, 11; 24:24, 27). Zechariah gives a מוֹפֵת of the forgiveness and restoration of Israel (Zec. 3:8) and Joel speaks of a מוֹפֵת of the end times (Joel 2:30). God's מפתים are also a motivation for praise (Ps. 105:5; I Chr. 16:12) and are a response to sickness (II Chr. 32:24, 31). Thus throughout, a מוֹפֵת reflects what God is doing. Interestingly, in Psalm 71:7 the psalmist is not explicitly stated to be a מוֹפֵת from the Lord, even though she or he clearly sees her- or himself as a portent from the Lord. Whether a portent for good or evil seems less clear: indeed, the psalmist him- or herself may, at this point, be unable to say whether he or she is a sign of God's judgment or of his saving power. The psalmist earnestly argues against the former and lobbies for the latter, but perhaps the uncertainty at this stage is intentional and reflects the psalmist's own doubts.

Verses 9-13

In verse 9, the psalmist pleads with God to continue his protection on into the psalmist's old age. Opinion is divided as to whether we must understand the psalm as being written by one who is now old (Dahood, Kidner, Weiser, Blackburn), or whether the reference to old age should be understood as a metaphor for neediness (Mays), or whether the psalmist is simply looking into the future, just as he or she has looked into the past in verses 5 and 6. There is some support for the last view in verses 17 and 18 where the psalmist's testimony of God's wondrous saving acts stretches from youth to

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65 Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, vol. 1 , 513.
66 Weiser, *The Psalms*, 498.
67 John H. Eaton, *Psalms* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 179.

old age and beyond, even to future generations. The emphasis here seems to be on the continuity of the whole life more than on identifying the age of the psalmist.[68]

כִּי marks the beginning of the enemies' testimony against the psalmist. I say testimony because the enemies will "speak", "consult together", and "say" in contrast to the "telling", "praising", "proclaiming", "singing", "shouting", and "talking" of the psalmist. Their witness is that God has "forsaken" and will not "deliver". This is counter-testimony because it claims that what God does for Israel, what God is in the "business" of doing, and what he has done for the psalmist in his or her youth; he is no longer willing to do for the psalmist. Either God has changed or the psalmist is no longer included in the testimony of Israel, but is "outside" of that story looking in. The evidence of the moment supports the enemies in their accusation that the psalmist has been forsaken by God and is, therefore, no longer under the sphere of his protection, and in verses 14-21 the psalmist offers his or her evidence that he or she is still included amongst those for whom God acts to save.

Verse 12 begins the psalmist's attack against those who claim that God has, in fact, forsaken her or him. Verse 12 continues crying out to God to "not be far" and to "hasten to help," while verse 13 calls for the enemies to be "put to shame and consumed". The judgment of the enemies is contingent on God being near to the psalmist.

Verses 14-16

I have chosen to divide verses 14-21 into three parts because of the move from general testimony to God's saving acts by the psalmist in verses 14-16, to the psalmist's own life story of testifying to the greatness of God in verses 17-19, followed by the psalmist speaking more specifically in verses 20-21 of occasions when God will have acted to save him or her. Thus, these three sections move from the general and universal in the past to the specific and personal in the future.

Verse 13 marks the end of the psalmist's pleas to God and verse 14 a move to anticipated praise. The psalmist will "hope continually" and "praise yet more and more", thus continuing to argue that his or her trust in God and testimony of God is unbroken. Because of that, the psalmist expects God to hear and answer his or her petitions. Verses 15-19 tell us the content of the praise, with references to "righteousness", "deeds of salvation", "mighty deeds", "righteousness", "wondrous deeds", "might", "power", and "righteousness", and with the concluding proclamation "you who have done great things, O God, who is like you?"

The various English translations of the Hebrew זכר in verse 16 seem inadequate. The NRSV's "praise" seems to dissolve the distinctiveness between זכר and תהלה (vv.

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[68] Cf. J. W. Rogerson and J. W. McKay, *Psalms 51-100*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 108.

6, 8, 14).[69] The Authorized Version opts for the more usual translation of זכר in the hiphil, "I will make mention", which avoids the logical contradiction of speaking of "remembering" in the future tense. Eising notes that the causative element of זכר in the hiphil is preserved in many passages by translating it "extol" or "proclaim," which both directs human attention to God and is itself an act of praise.[70] I would suggest translating זכר here as "commemorate" in order to preserve the notion of "thinking back" which seems to be such an important element in this particular psalm. The psalmist will not allow the future to become disconnected from the past, for it is precisely the continuity between past, present, and future which gives the psalmist hope.

Verses 17-19

The psalmist has declared God's wonders from his or her youth and will tell of his power in old age. In his or her youth, the psalmist was initiated into Israel's story. There is no explicit reference to the exodus tradition: however, the deeds of Yahweh were learned in youth and will reach out to future generations and will fill the whole world, reaching up to the high heavens. This suggests more than simply the personal experiences of an isolated individual, even those of the king. Nevertheless, even if the psalmist is a "nobody" in Israel, his or her own testimony will find its place in the larger tradition of the nation once God responds to his or her pleas. Yahweh's deliverance for the psalmist is part of the larger story of his mighty deeds which he has done throughout Israel's history and continues to do in the praying community.

That the content of the teaching that the psalmist received had to do with the deeds of Yahweh seems highly probable because of the context.[71] "You have taught me from my youth," "I have declared," "and even when I am old and gray-headed" seems to be an intentional attempt on the part of the psalmist to establish yet again the unbroken nature of his testimony of who God is and what God does. And the psalmist knits his own participation in this testimony to the larger context of God's saving acts for Israel.

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[69] Anderson also translates זכר as "I will praise", noting that the verb זכר ("to remember") when used in the causative form may be translated "to mention" (I Sam. 4:18) or "to pronounce" (Ps. 45:17 (M. T. 18), and in the judicial it may mean "to accuse" (Isa. 43:26). "In this verse, the mention of the righteousness of Yahweh is tantamount to praising his saving deeds (cf. 33:5), or giving him thanks." (Anderson, *Book of Psalms*, vol. 1, 516.)

[70] "זכר" in G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* vol. 4 (1980), 74.

[71] Rogerson and McKay point out that "It is not clear exactly what has been *taught*. It could be the story of God's *marvelous works* (see verse 16), or how to give praise (verse 15), or the discipline of faith through suffering that produces endurance and hope (verse 20; cp. Rom. 5:3-5), or perhaps a combination of all three, for tradition, worship and faith together constitute a fairly comprehensive picture of man's knowledge of and relationship with God." *Psalms 51-100*, 109.

The deeds of Yahweh will reach out to future generations and will fill the whole world, reaching up to the high heavens.

Kidner sees in verse 19f. a clear reference to the Exodus.[72] While his argument fits with the context of the use of the phrase "who is like you," that is, the God who has "done great things," the evidence for a clear allusion to the Exodus seems too tenuous. To support his argument, Kidner notes the reference to "watery depths" (תְּהוֹם) in both in Psalm 71:20 and Exodus 15:5, but the psalm writer is being delivered out of the תְּהוֹם, while the Egyptians were being cast into it. In addition, the psalmist speaks specifically of the "from the depths of the earth" (מִתְּהֹמוֹת הָאָרֶץ), not the watery depths. While Kidner's argument is certainly faithful to the context of Ps. 71:19, a direct reference to the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15 seems unlikely.

Verses 20-21

God's deeds which were first spoken of in general terms and which were learned and declared by the psalmist, now touch on the psalmist's own life experiences. God has "made me see many troubles and calamities", will "revive", will "bring up" from the "depths of the earth", will "increase honour", and bring "comfort". This, then, is not the first time in the life of the psalmist that the tradition has been placed in doubt by the "troubles and calamities" of life and the past resolution of that doubt has become material for a fresh approach to God in a new situation of lament. The psalmist here claims the saving power of God for him- or herself in his or her present distress.[73]

The double appearance of "again" (שׁוּב = "do something again" when it serves as an auxiliary verb)[74] in verse 20 precedes the psalmist's shift to the perfect tense in verses 23 and 24. Something is in the process of changing so that the psalmist moves from calling on God to save and vindicate, to promising future praise and testimony when God acts to save, to proclaiming that he has accomplished his salvation for the psalmist.

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[72] Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, pp. 252-253. "There is more than a hint of the exodus miracle in 19f., with the phrase *'who is like thee?'* from the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:11), and with the picture of deliverance from the 'watery depths' (... Ex. 15:5)."

[73] Kraus maintains that, "Even though individual verses seem to reflect "personal data" of the petitioner, we should have to assume that Psalm 71 is to be understood as a prayer formulary with which a definite type of oppressed person was able to bring his distress and petition before Yahweh" (Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, tran. Hilton C. Oswald [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993], 72). Such a conclusion seems, however, more to be determined by Kraus's assumption that the psalm's use as liturgy precludes its origin as a personal account than by evidence within the psalm itself. Kraus is doubtless correct in stating that Psalm 71 served as a formulary in liturgical worship, but this in no way precludes it having other uses or having its origin in personal experiences. Many hymns of the church (for example, "It is Well with My Soul" and "Just as I Am") arose out of circumstances of personal distress and suffering and serve as prayer language in other contexts than corporate worship.

[74] R. L. Harris et al., eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. II (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 909.

Verses 22-24

Verse 22 marks a shift from the anticipation and promise of future praise and testimony, to the promise of future praise and the affirmation that salvation has already occurred. The string of imperfect verbs "My mouth is filled with your praise" (v. 8), "I will hope continually" (v. 14), "My mouth shall tell of your righteous acts and your deeds of salvation" (v. 15), "I will come praising the mighty deeds of the Lord GOD, I will praise your righteousness, yours alone" (v. 16), "You ... will revive me again; from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again" (v. 20), and "You will increase my honor, and comfort me once again" (v. 21), reaches a climax with the introduction of perfect tense verbs in verses 22 and 23: "... my soul also, which you have rescued" and "those who tried to do me harm have been put to shame, and disgraced".

Some scholars do not see the transition from anticipated to experienced salvation as occurring within the psalm itself, but argue that this move from lament to praise refers throughout to an anticipated, but still future, outcome (Rogerson and McKay). Blackburn, for example, sees the shift as a psychological one, comparing it to the visualization of victory practiced by modern athletes prior to the contest.[75] This is, however, to miss the point of the climactic effect created by the closing perfect tense verbs. The shift to perfect tense verbs in the last two verses of the psalm represents the culmination in the move from plea to praise which began with the cessation of plea at the end of verse 13. The psalmist is not concerned to describe what happened or when. The psalmist's main concern is that God has maintained his or her words, while overturning those of the wicked and unjust, with the result that the psalmist "shouts" and "talks". The great threat to the psalmist was the enemies' accusation that the psalmist no longer had legitimate claim to the salvation that comes to those who are in a trusting relationship with Yahweh; that he or she was "God-forsaken". While the psalmist believes the accusations of verses 10 and 11 to be false, there remains an element of uncertainty and doubt as long as Yahweh delays in coming to deliver the psalmist and to destroy those who seek his or her life. Beginning with verse 14, however, the psalmist's remembering of the past and commitment to testifying before future generations grow in strength until he or she is able to affirm with perfect tense verbs "my soul was rescued" and "those who tried to do me harm have been put to shame, and disgraced". We do not know until this last section whether the psalmist is truly a "portent" of God's judgment or of his salvation, that is, whether the testimony of the enemies is a true testimony or not. As long as Yahweh continues to be silent and aloof, there remains the possibility that the psalmist is mistaken and that the enemies are right. Perhaps he or she really is God-forsaken, so that his or her sufferings offer a sign to those who see them of the consequences of being abandoned by

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[75] Bill Blackburn, "Psalm 71," *RE* 88 (1991): 244.

God. Whether or not the psalmist has experienced any change in his or her circumstances in the course of the psalm, by its end the uncertainty has been resolved. Because the psalmist can declare "you have ransomed my life" and "those who sought evil for me are ashamed and disgraced", his or her sufferings have been transformed into a sign of Yahweh's faithfulness to deliver and to judge.

The psalm writer's unbroken praise from his or her youth (vv. 6, 8, 14, 22) and his or her ongoing testimony of God's righteousness and mighty saving acts (vv. 15, 16, 17, 18) are no longer simply past memories. The psalmist's soul *has been* ransomed and the enemies *have been* made ashamed and disgraced, so that he or she may now testify to future generations. Also, because God has saved, everything else that the psalmist has claimed about God's relationship with him or her and with Israel has been legitimated. It is not simply the comfort of the moment, but the confirmation of this larger testimony which is the motivation for the psalmist's songs and shouts of joy.

The praise for "faithfulness" (אמת) in verse 22 answers the challenge of verse 3, "Be for me a rock of refuge". God's acting to ransom the psalmist falls within a stream of praise: I will "praise", "sing praises", "shout for joy", "sing praises", and "talk of your righteous help".

Implications

Psalm 71 begins with a contradiction between who God appears to be in the moment and who he has been experienced to be in the larger context of his relationship with the psalmist and with Israel. The tension between the experienced present and the remembered past is the central issue in the psalm and this tension is maintained until the conclusion in verses 22-24. The psalmist bases his or her appeal to God on the assumption that God should behave consistently. The writer of the psalm is part of an unbroken tradition of trust and praise and, that being the case, God should act to deliver just as he has always done in the past for those who place their hope in him.

Spoken testimony is central to the psalm. Two versions of the truth are being offered, one that the psalmist trusts Yahweh and the other that he or she is God-forsaken. The psalm writer appeals to Yahweh based on who he has been for the psalmist in his or her youth. The enemies do not claim that God does not save or that he did not save the psalmist in his or her youth, but rather they claim that the psalmist is now "God-forsaken" and that, therefore, there is no one to help him or her. The psalmist's speech, in the form of praise and testimony of God's saving acts in the past and (hopefully) in the future, serves to lobby God to be consistent with the psalmist's testimony of his or her past experiences of Yahweh. When God does respond by saving, the psalmist's version of reality is vindicated over the reality claimed by the enemies. The psalmist is not God-

forsaken but God-rescued, and the question of just what kind of "sign" the psalmist represents has been answered.

The climactic shift which begins in verse 14 and is apparent by the end of verse 23 is an affirmation of the psalmist's "place" in relation to God and to his or her enemies. Experienced reality has called into question the psalmist's claim that God is his or her rock and fortress and, although the psalmist argues tirelessly against the accusation that he or she is God-forsaken, there is within the psalm an element of tension and doubt which can only be resolved when God acts to ransom and to shame.

4.2.5 Psalm 143

Structure and Introduction

Psalm 143 may be divided into three sections. Verses 1-4 are a plea followed by a cry of lament which describe the attack of the enemy and the psalmist's drawing near to death. In verses 5-6 the psalmist is recalling past reflections on the deeds and works of Yahweh, ending with an expression of longing for Yahweh. Verses 7-12 continue the plea, utilizing again the image of drawing near to death, and developing the notion of the psalmist's trust in Yahweh. Dahood has suggested that Psalm 143 was originally derived from two separate psalms, now divided precisely in the middle by Selah.[76] Verses 1-6 and 7-12 are capable of standing on their own as two separate psalms, both of which open with the call for Yahweh to "answer me". Whether or not Dahood is correct, the second half of the psalm as we have it in the MT provides a much needed expansion and explanation of the central theme of the special relationship which exists between Yahweh and the psalmist. Also, Psalm 143 juxtaposes the pleas "do not enter into judgment with your servant" in verse 2 and "cut off my enemies, and destroy all my adversaries" in verse 12.

Verses 1-4

Verse 1 opens with the cry for God to "hear", "give ear", and "answer" because of his faithfulness (אמנה) and righteousness (צדקה). That the appeal is based not on the character of the psalmist, but on the character of God and the nature of the psalmist's relationship with God becomes evident in verse 2 where the psalmist appeals to Yahweh not to judge him or her according his or her merits, "for no one living is righteous before you". The psalmist appeals for both justice and mercy, that is, judgment for his or her enemies and mercy for his or her own sins. The basis for the appeal is the special relationship which allows the psalmist to say "you are my God" and "I am your servant".

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[76] Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III: 101-150* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970), 322.

This strategy for approaching God in the light of the sin of the people can be contrasted with that of Ps. 106 which uses a lengthy recital of the events of the exodus to demonstrate the constant rebelliousness and forgetfulness of the people. This long recital concludes with the "nevertheless" of verse 44. In spite of all the sin and rebelliousness of the people, Yahweh regarded distress, heard the cry, remembered covenant, showed compassion, and caused to be pitied. This mercy in the face of continuous sin is the basis for the plea in verse 47: "Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the nations". The argument of Ps. 106 is "Yes we have sinned, just like our ancestors, but you forgave them so forgive us as well." The argument of Ps. 143 is "no one is without sin, so do not even enter into judgment with us, but forgive the sin of your servants."

Mays has observed that the sentence, "The LORD enters into judgment with a person" occurs elsewhere only in Job and Ecclesiates (9:32; 14:3; 22:4 cf. Eccles. 11:9; 12:14) and that Job also contains a cluster of statements that no human being is righteous before God (Job 9:2; 15:14; 25:4; cf. 14:3; 130:3).[77] But, whereas Job argued that he had done nothing to deserve the suffering inflicted on him, the psalmist dispenses with any form of defence and appeals directly to God's grace.

In the New Testament, Paul reflects the language of verse 2 in Rom. 3:20 and possibly in Gal. 2:16 in order to argue for salvation by grace, rather than by works of the law. Psalm 143 assumes a relationship between Yahweh and the psalmist which allows him or her to pray both "answer me in your righteousness. Do not enter into judgment with your servant" and "in your steadfast love cut off my enemies, and destroy all my adversaries, for I am your servant." Both Paul and the psalmist affirm that their basis for approaching God is a relationship not based on personal merit, but whereas Paul explores the basis of this relationship (faith rather than works of the law), the writer of Psalm 143 simply asserts it. The central point of Psalm 143 is not the question of how one enters into a relationship with Yahweh or whether or not the psalmist should cast him- or herself on God's grace, but it is the affirmation, in the face of evidence to the contrary, that being in relationship with Yahweh means that judgment may be passed over for Yahweh's servants, while being reserved for their enemies, and that those who are in relationship with Yahweh will be saved from attacks by those who are outside of that relationship. Psalm 143 is a lament precisely because, in the present moment, Yahweh is not acting in grace to save. He is not behaving as though he were in a special relationship with the psalmist.

Verse 3 gives the reason for the appeal, an unspecified attack by enemies who seek to "pursue", "crush", and "cause to sit in darkness", so that the psalmist's spirit is

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[77] James Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 433. Isaiah 3:14 speaks of God entering into judgment with "the elders and princes of his people" and should be added to May's list.

faint and his or her heart is desolate. The imagery is of the psalm writer descending into the realm of death as a result of the enemies' persistent attacks and Yahweh's silence.

Verses 5-6

In verses 5-6, the psalmist "remembers" the ancient days, "thinks about" his deeds and "meditates" on his works. Kidner believes the psalmist to be making a general reference to both creation and the exodus[78] and Anderson maintains that the psalmist is referring both to the salvation history of Israel and, perhaps, to "God's providential care of the individual."[79] The reference to "ancient days" and the lack of any mention of specific events or memories in the psalmist's own life makes the last possibility unlikely. The psalmist offers no testimony of past deliverances and makes no references to past personal experience.[80] Likewise, the nature of the psalmist's appeal makes it unlikely that God's creation activity is being alluded to. In Psalm 143, the appeal is to the special relationship with Yahweh which the psalmist enjoys, but which is unavailable to the enemies. Thus the purpose of remembering in verse 5 is to reinforce the claim of the psalmist on God for protection; the claim of a servant on his or her master. This may suggest the exodus events and the Mosaic covenant, but the specific content of the memories remains unclear.

The psalmist can appeal for help in the present distress because of the special relationship established with Yahweh. He or she can stretch out his or her hands for deliverance. The image of the psalmist as a weary and parched land (כארץ-עיפה) underscores the dependent nature of his or her relationship with Yahweh. The phrase has no verb and can be literally translated "my soul like a dry land to you." The NRSV, possibly influenced by Psalm 63:2 ("O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water"), supplies a verb for verse 6b ("my soul thirsts for you like a parched land"), but such an addition is not necessary if we understand the verb פרשׂ ("stretch out") from the first half of the verse as a double-duty verb. פרשׂ is applied to נפשׁ only here in the Old Testament and , therefore, the exact meaning of the phrase is uncertain, but the appearance in the same verse of the more familiar פרשתי ידי אליך suggests the idea of supplication. Verse 8 contains the phrase "for I lifted (נשׂא) up my soul to you" which suggests a dependence on or placing trust in Yahweh. The lifting up of one's soul to Yahweh occurs only in the Psalter, but the lifting up of the poor person's soul to his or

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78 Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150 : A Commentary on Books III-V of the Psalms* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 275-276.

79 A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, vol. 2, (London: Oliphants, 1972), 928.

80 The expression "days of old" (ימים מקדם) appears two other places in the Psalter. In Psalm 44:1 it is used as a reference to the exodus experience, while in Psalm 77:5 the referent is less clear and may indicate either the exodus or an experience of the psalmist or both.

her wages in Deut. 24:15 suggests the notion of dependence. Thus, the image is of the spreading out of the hand and the soul to Yahweh in a dependent condition, like a parched land awaiting rain from Yahweh.[81]

Verses 7-12

Verse 7 renews the plea with "answer me" and "do not hide your face". Verses 7-12 contain a series of motivational clauses which serve to describe the nature of the relationship that the psalmist has with Yahweh: "for in you I put my trust", "for to you I lifted up my soul", "I have fled to you for refuge", "for you are my God", "for your name's sake", and "for I am your servant". The appeal for help, which verse 2 makes clear does not depend on the worthiness or innocence of the psalmist, depends instead on the nature of his or her relationship with Yahweh, which is described here in terms of the relationship between a king and a vassal.

The psalmist returns in verse 7 to the death imagery of verses 3 and 4 in order to describe his or her distress. Such imagery is appropriate here because the attack of the enemies threatens not only the physical life of the psalmist, but his or her relationship with Yahweh. Because the psalmist is in a special relationship with Yahweh, Yahweh is obligated to protect him or her. If the psalmist does, in fact, die and if his or her death cannot be justified by pointing to his or her sin, then the relationship between God and the psalmist (and by extension Israel) would have failed as a result of Yahweh's failure to protect his servant. The psalmist does not want Yahweh to enter into judgment, lest he find just cause for destroying his servant. For the psalmist to say "my life is crushed to the ground", "I sit in darkness like those long dead", "my spirit faints within me", "my heart within me is appalled", "my spirit fails", and "I go down to the Pit" in the context of the repeated affirmation of a relationship between servant and king is for him or her to say "your special relationship with Israel, O Lord, is about to be made null and void by my death."

Verses 8-9 contain a series of verbs in the perfect tense: "you caused me to hear," "I trusted," "you caused me to know," "I lift up," and "you delivered", which suggest that the psalmist is speaking now of a past experience in his or her own life. Just as the psalmist remembers the works and deeds of Yahweh in the ancient days in verse 5, now he or she adds his or her own past experiences of trusting in and being delivered by Yahweh, so that in the present distress the psalmist can say "I have fled to you for refuge." The return to plea in verse 11 makes it unlikely that verses 8-9 mark a move within the psalm from plea and lament to praise for deliverance. The psalmist is

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[81] Ps. 68:6-11 contrasts the rebellious who live in a parched land with the orphan, the widow, and the prisoner who are protected and provided for. Yahweh's theophany in the exodus wanderings takes the form of a rain shower which restores God's heritage and provides for the needy.

remembering a past deliverance as a basis for his or her plea for God to "revive", "bring from trouble", "put an end to", and "destroy".

The statement by the psalmist that "You caused me to hear your kindness in the morning" has been interpreted by McKay to refer to an act of vigil kept by the psalmist through the night, which ends with the dawn, when God comes to deliver the supplicant from trouble.[82] Verse 8 may, indeed, allude, either literally or figuratively, to such an image of the psalmist waiting through the darkness for the coming of God's deliverance with the morning light. A number of scholars support the notion that this expression of God's salvation took the form of a priestly salvation oracle (Allen, Eaton, Kraus, Mays), but as I have argued in chapter two, the salvation oracle, though entirely possible, is not a necessary part of being answered by God. Dahood argues that the dawn symbolizes resurrection and immortality and that the psalmist is, in fact, boldly requesting of Yahweh eternal life.[83] This would seem to require that the death imagery in 3-4 and 7-8 be taken literally, but there is no evidence to suggest that this should be the case or, for that matter, that a request to be rescued from death may be equated with a request for eternal life. It is possible, in view of the reflection on past experience of Yahweh's saving in verses 8-9, that the phrase "You caused me to hear your kindness in the morning" refers to the psalmist's youth when he or she experienced Yahweh as faithful to save.

Verse 9b is very difficult to translate clearly. The MT's כסתי or "I have covered" makes no sense in this context. Jerome's translation of *protectus sum* would suggest a Pual pointing of כסתי, resulting in the passive "I have been covered", but the literal translation of אליך כסתי would then be "to you I have been covered", which is incoherent. The LXX reads κατέφυγον or "I have fled for refuge". One medieval manuscript[84] reads חסתי or "I have sought refuge," while another[85] contains נסתי or "I have fled". Both are presumably later variations from the MT and, therefore, provide no evidence in themselves. Either Hebrew word could be translated by the Greek κατέφυγον, resulting in the NRSV's reading "I have fled to you for refuge." נסתי is slightly preferable as an original reading because the mistaking of כ for נ rather than for ח in the Masoretic Text is more plausible.[86]

The nature of the special relationship between Yahweh and the psalmist is again underscored in verses 11-12. The psalmist asks God to revive and bring out "for your name's sake" and "in your righteousness (בצדקתך)", and he or she also asks God to "cut off" and to "destroy" the enemies "in your steadfast love (בחסדך)". God is being called

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[82] J. W. McKay, "Psalms of Vigil," *ZAW* 91 (1979): 229.
[83] Dahood, *Psalms III*, 325.
[84] Kennicott ms. 224.
[85] Kennicott ms. 180.
[86] The structural similarity between כ and נ, as opposed to ח, holds true not only in the Masoretic lettering, but is also consistently present in the examples of Old Hebrew, Samaritan, Old Aramaic, and Aramaic-Hebrew which can be found in *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. by A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1910.

upon to revive the life of the psalmist not because he or she is just or worthy, but for the sake of Yahweh's name and reputation in his relationship with the psalmist.

At the close of the psalm, the psalmist repeats the reference in verse 2 to him- or herself as "your servant" (עבדך), but, whereas in verse 2 the affirmation of the servant-master relationship served as a basis for praying "do not enter into judgment", the same reason is given in verse 12 for praying "put an end to my enemies and destroy all those who are hostile to my soul". The logic of verse 2 is that the psalmist should not be judged for his or her sins because "no one living is righteous before you", but this same plea for grace rather than justice does not extend to the enemies of the psalmist. The difference is not that the enemies' sins are more worthy of condemnation, but that they cannot say of Yahweh "we are your servant" and "you are our God", that is, that they do not have the same special relationship with Yahweh that Israel and the psalmist do.

Implications

Remembering in Psalm 143 does not result in the psalmist being saved or in the plea being transformed into praise. The psalmist remembers, meditates, and muses on the events that define Israel's relationship with Yahweh in order to have the courage and confidence to pray for salvation in the form of deliverance for him- or herself and judgment and destruction for the enemies. The psalmist's own experiences of God's faithfulness to deliver in the past make it possible for him or her to say with confidence "O Yahweh, I have fled to you for refuge." The psalmist has not yet been heard and delivered by the end of the psalm, but he or she can pray with boldness because he or she can say "for you are my God ... for I am your servant."

Remembering in Psalm 143 serves an important function. The psalmist meditates and muses in order to justify the prayer "Do not enter into judgment with me, but destroy my enemies." By reaffirming the relationship which exists between Yahweh and the nation of Israel, the writer of the psalm has equated a threat to his or her own life with a threat to that relationship. Whereas in Psalms 22 and 71 the place of the psalmist in the praying community is questioned, there is no suggestion of any such doubt in Psalm 143. Thus, by being reminded of the special relationship that he has with the psalmist, Yahweh is reminded of his obligation to save his servant for his own name's sake. The psalmist does not doubt or question his or her relationship with Yahweh, so that he or she can recognize the attack of enemies as an attack on the name and reputation of God and can, therefore, ask confidently for life to be restored and for enemies to be destroyed.

4.2.6 Psalm 74

Structure

Psalm 74 is a community lament for the destruction of the temple, with some similarities in content to Psalm 79. The psalm can be divided into five sections. Verses 1-3a introduce the psalm with the question which is central for the psalmist: "Why do you cast off your people forever?" Verses 3b-8 describe the destruction of the temple by the enemies. Verses 9-11 repeat the question in the first section, "How long?," "Forever?" Verses 12-17 describe the power of Yahweh as creator who conquered the forces of chaos and established the cosmos. Verses 18-23 call God to attend to the attack both on his people and on his own reputation.[87]

Verses 1-3a

In this first section God's people call out to God, pleading with him to remember his people and his dwelling place. Though the immediate cause of the suffering of the psalmist is an attack by human enemies, ultimately the cause of the psalmist's suffering is that Yahweh could deliver, but has not (vv. 1, 11, 19). The psalm opens with two questions, "why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?" For the psalmist the question is not "Why have you rejected your people?", but "Why, having rejected your people, have you not now restored them?" This same plea is echoed in verse 10 by "How long?", "Forever?"

The psalmist directs two imperatives to Yahweh: "remember" and "direct your steps". Westermann has observed that the petition for salvation in the corporate psalms of lament is three-fold: "Hear me!", "Save me!", and "Punish them!"[88] "Hear me" in Psalm 74 is replaced by "remember" (vv. 2, 18, 22) and "do not forget" (vv. 19, 23). The petition in Psalm 74 is both a call to "not deliver over" and "not let be put to shame" and a call to "(not) hold back your hand", "(not) keep your hand in your bosom", and "fight

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[87] Graeme Sharrock has proposed a similar division of the psalm based on a chiasm derived from verb tense.

> 1-3 Imperatives (apart from introductory complaint)
> 4-9 Perfects (with supplementary imperfect in v. 9)
> 10-11 Imperfects
> 12-17 Perfects (with supplementary imperfect in v. 14)
> 18-23 Imperatives (and supporting jussives)

"Psalm 74: A Literary-Structural Analysis." *AUSS* 21/3 (1983): 211.

[88] Westermann refers to this type of petition as a "double wish" petition in which the cry for deliverance includes two elements, "save me" and "judge them". (Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 52-54.)

your own fight".[89] Yahweh is called upon to remember/not forget two things, his congregation, who are poor and afflicted, and the reproach of the foolish people, Yahweh's enemies who have destroyed the dwelling place of his name.

The phrases "acquired of old" and "redeemed as your property" suggest the exodus.[90] Tate believes this to be a reference to the creation, similar to that found in verses 13-17,[91] but the specific focus in verse 2 on the redeeming of Israel and not the creation of all humanity seems to make this understanding less likely.

Verses 3b-8

Whereas the first section focuses on the suffering of God's people, in the second section the attack against Yahweh's temple is described in graphic detail. The enemy "has destroyed everything", "roars", "sets up their emblems ", "hacks", "smashes", "sets fire to", "desecrates", and "burns." References to the enemy's attack on God's people ("We will utterly subdue them") are expressed in terms of their attack on the temple building. The affront of the enemy is against the place where God's name dwells. The psalmist is concerned with equating an attack on Israel with an attack on Yahweh.

Trying to determine the precise meaning of the phrase כל-מועדי-אל בארץ ("all the meeting places of God in the earth") has caused a great deal of debate among scholars. "Meeting places" is plural and, therefore, does not appear to refer to the same thing as מועד in verse 4. The word מועד may also be translated "appointed time" or "festival," but such a reading is precluded by the statement in verse 8 that the מועדים are burned. While there are references from the Maccabean period to the gate of the temple being burned (I Macc. 4:38; II Macc. 1:8; 8:33), there is no suggestion of the temple itself being burned, apart from the Babylonian destruction of the temple in 587.[92] A

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[89] The NRSV translation "plead your cause" for ריבה ריבך in verse 22 seems rather placid given the violent imagery of the enemies who have so decimated the temple and who are at present so boisterous and threatening. While ריב certainly can be understood in the sense of contend in a legal action [Francis Brown et al. *The New Brown -- Driver -- Briggs -- Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 936.], there is no allusion in Psalm 74 to God addressing or appealing to an authority higher than or outside of his own.

[90] George Buchanan offers an extended comparison between the terminology of Exodus 15 and Psalm 74, demonstrating effectively that the author of Psalm 74 utilized Exodus 15 as a type for his or her own commentary, but this is not the same thing as establishing direct reference and, as Buchanan acknowledges, Psalm 74 also contains references to primeval chaos. George Buchanan, "The Fall of Jerusalem and the Reconsideration of Some Dates," *RQ* 14 (1989-1990): 32-35.

[91] Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1990), 248.

[92] Numerous efforts have been made by scholars to identify the historical setting which occasioned the writing of this psalm. The mention of the burning of the temple offers support to a dating immediately after 587, but, as Buchanan points out, there are a number of difficulties with that dating: (1) the presence of prophets (Jeremiah and Ezekiel) even after the temple was burned, (2) the absence of synagogues or other places of worship this early in Israel's history, (3) no mention of religious persecution in the biblical accounts, and (4) the setting up of signs amidst the ruins of Jerusalem makes no

number of scholars support the notion that the reference in verse eight is to non-sacrificial worship centres outside of Jerusalem (Rogerson and McKay, Eaton, Tate, Gelston). Tate suggests that perhaps former "high places" were adapted to make worship sites which became the prototype for the synagogue.[93] Kidner believes that the expression refers to all of the different sanctuaries throughout Israel's history (cf. Shechem), which are now destroyed,[94] but there is insufficient evidence within the psalm to conclude that the psalmist is lamenting the destruction of all of Yahweh's places of worship throughout history. The precise meaning of this reference remains unclear; however, it strongly suggests the existence of some form of worship site, apart from the temple, at the time of the temple's destruction in 587.

The first two sections are tied together by verse 8, "They said to themselves, 'We will utterly subdue them'; they burned all the meeting places of God in the land." The focus of these two sections is the attack of the enemies on God's people and on God's temple and places of worship. This is, by implication, an attack on God himself, a notion which will be explicitly stated in the last section.

Verses 9-11

In the third section, while the enemies have set up "standards for a sign" (אותתם אתות) of their conquest in God's temple in verse 4, Israel does not see signs of their own (אותת) that God's rejection of his people and his sanctuary is coming to an end. The psalmist returns to the opening question: "How long?," "Forever?"

Anderson maintains that the reference to "our signs" in verse 9 must refer to the same thing as "their standards for signs" in verse 4[95], but the term אותתינו may also mean our "miraculous signs", "wonders", or other indicators of divine will and action. The reference, in the same verse, to the lack of prophecy seems to suggest that the signs which Israel seeks are more than simply the presence of military or religious emblems in the temple courts. The nation desires a sign that their reproach is ended from the one who is ultimately responsible for that reproach, Yahweh.

Roberts' argument that the three affirmations of verse 9, "no sign", "no prophecy", and "no one who knows how long", refer to the same phenomenon, the loss

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sense. Buchanan suggests that Psalm 74 was composed after the second destruction of the temple in 70 AD, thus avoiding these various objections. His argument is however, by his own admission, highly conjectural and would require a great deal more evidence to establish with any degree of confidence. Buchanan, "Fall of Jerusalem," 38-43. Thus, in spite of the aforementioned difficulties, a dating of immediately after 587 seems to fit the situation described in the biblical text most closely.

[93] Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 250. See also A. Gelston, "A Note of Psalm 74:8," *VT* 34/1 (1984): 86.

[94] Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72 : an Introduction and Commentary on Books I and II of the Psalms* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 267.

[95] Anderson, *The Book of Psalms* vol. 2, 542.

of confidence in prophecy during the exile, and that אֹת may, therefore, be understood to refer to signs which confirm an oracle, has much to commend it. According to Roberts' argument, the exile has lasted longer than the two years predicted by the false prophet Hananiah and the people are disillusioned with such prophets and their prophecies.[96] The meaning of אֹת seems to be better informed by its context in verse 9, than by the reference to the "standards" of the enemy in verse 4. Thus Yahweh responds to the destruction of his temple with silence.

Verses 12-17

The fourth section contains a recital of God's creation of the world. The relevance of the recital is given in verse 12, "Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the earth." The psalmist claims God as "my King from old", reaffirming both God's sovereignty over the created order and the psalmist's dependent relationship to him. The works of creation which are detailed in verses 13-17 are described as "works of salvation", suggesting that the reason for remembering God's creative acts in the context of a lament is to motivate God to destroy those who challenge his sovereignty by attacking his people and destroying his temple.

A violent battle with the primordial waters of chaos and the sea monster Leviathan results in God ordering the world. Yahweh the warrior-king "tears asunder", "breaks", "crushes", "gives for food", "breaks open", and "dries up." There is disagreement among scholars as to whether this recital refers to creation (Dahood, Eaton, Tate), the exodus (Kirkpatrick, Kidner, Cohen), or to both (Mays, Weiser, Kraus). Those scholars who have argued that verses 12-17 are primarily a description of the exodus understand the imagery of dragons, sea monsters, and Leviathan as symbols for Egypt and the reference to God "dividing the sea" as a reference to Israel's passage through the Red Sea. Tate points out, however, that פּוּרַרְתָּ also carries the meaning "break" or "shatter". He argues that this, combined with the absence of exodus references and the use of creation language, makes it far more probable that the psalmist is using the imagery of cosmic creation forces common to ancient Near Eastern creation mythology.[97] The reference to "working salvation" seems, at best, to refer only indirectly to the events of the exodus and there is no other direct reference to the exodus in verses 12-17. The psalmist is concerned to recount a creation mythology which depicts Yahweh, and not the gods of those who have destroyed his temple, as master of all creation. It is Yahweh

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[96] J. J. M. Roberts, "Of Signs, Prophets, and Time Limits: A Note on Psalm 74:9," *CBQ*, 39 (1977), 477.

[97] Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 251. While פּוּר in the hiphil carries the sense of break or frustrate, according to *BDB*, it appears in Ps. 74:13 as a Poel. Brown, *BDB*, 830. Even if the translation "split" or "divide" is prefered over Tate's suggestion, though, the accompanying imagery suggests creation imagery rather than the exodus crossing of the Red Sea.

and not a Babylonian god who has "established," "established", and "fashioned" the world.[98] The emphasis of the psalmist in verses 12-17 is on God's power as creator and, as a result, the recital is immediately relevant and comprehensible not just to Israel, but also to those who have destroyed the temple.

The phrase "you dried up ever-flowing streams" in verse 15 has likewise been variously interpreted to mean the mythical waters (Anderson, Kraus) or the crossing of the Red Sea or the Jordan (Rogerson and McKay). Neither explanation, however, gives proper attention to the antithetical parallelism with 15a, "You broke open spring and torrent." The image seems, instead, to be a demonstration of the complete mastery by Yahweh of all parts of creation.[99]

The statement in verse 17 that "You have fixed all the bounds of the earth" has been understood by Kirkpatrick to mean the division between land and sea[100] and Anderson has interpreted it as a reference to the separation of the seasons, providing a parallel with verse 17b.[101] While either interpretation is possible, neither is necessary in order to make the psalmist's point, namely that Yahweh controls completely the ordered world.

Verses 12-17 are concerned with Yahweh. The personal pronoun אתה is used seven times in the description of God's creation. The repetition of "You" in a creation story, which utilizes images normally associated with the gods of those who have destroyed the temple, emphasizes that it is Yahweh and not a Babylonian god who is creator and king. The psalmist has been intentionally selective in his or her choice of materials to remember and recite before Yahweh and has utilized imagery which stresses the supremacy of Yahweh over the enemies which threaten and reproach his name and his people.

Verses 18-23

The last section resumes the plea for God to deliver the people. Whereas verses 1-8 dealt with an attack by enemies on God's people and his temple, verses 18-23 deal with

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[98] Curtis has demonstrated that, when creation language is used in the Psalter, the dominant image is the subjugation by Yahweh of the waters. The psalmist refers to creation memory for a specific purpose, namely, to demonstrate Yahweh's mastery of creation. A. H. W. Curtis, "The Subjugation of the Waters Motif in the Psalms: Imagery or Polemic," *JSS* 23 (1978), 245-256.

[99] This is consistent with Emerton's suggestion that the primordial springs were created to drain off the chaos waters during the creation and he sees verse 15 as providing the transition between the attack of chaos in verses 12-14 and the positive work of creation in verses 16f., "... thus that the whole of Ps. lxxiv 15 describes the removal of the primeval waters from the earth." J. A. Emerton, "'Spring and Torrent' in Psalm 74:15," *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* Vol. 15 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), 129-130.

[100] Kirkpatrick, A. F. *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 447.

[101] Anderson, *Psalms*, 545.

the attack of enemies on God's people and on his own reputation. In verses 18, 22-23, the enemies reproach and spurn the name of Yahweh, lift up a hostile voice, and roar continually, so that he is called upon to "remember", "have regard for", "rise up", "fight your own fight", "remember", and "not forget".

In verses 19-21, it is God's people who are under threat. Yahweh is called on to "not deliver to the wild animals", "not forget", "look to his covenant", and "do not let be put to shame". The object of these pleas are "your dove", "your poor", the "downtrodden", "poor", and "needy," which may be identified with "your congregation" and "this tribe" in the first section. An attack against God's people is also an attack on his own reputation, thus verses 19-21 ask God to fight for his people, while verses 22-23 ask God to fight for himself and for his own reputation. Structurally, verse 18 repeats the theme of "remember" in verse 2 and the "scoff" (Prx) of the enemy in verse 10.

Implications

The basic prayer of Psalm 74 is for God to remember his people and the attacks of the enemy, so that he will act to put an end to their reproach. Yahweh's silence in the face of the destruction of his temple raises hard questions about his relationship with Israel. The central question of the psalm is not "Why have you rejected?" but "Why have you rejected *forever*?" The first half of the psalm asks the questions "will you reject forever?", "will your anger smoke?", "how long?", and "forever?". Yahweh is called upon to remember who he is and his relationship with his congregation, "acquired of old". As long as Israel are the people living in covenant with Yahweh, an attack on them is an attack on Yahweh.

The second section describes the destruction of Yahweh's temple. The enemy has not destroyed the temple by their own power, but Yahweh has allowed them to do it. By permitting the enemy such a victory, Yahweh's name has become an object of scorn and reproach. Finally, Psalm 74 is not about the temple, but about the congregation's relationship with Yahweh. The temple may be destroyed, but the question of the psalmist is "How long?", "Forever?" As long as the land is full of darkness and violence, the reputation of the God of the land is cast into doubt.

It is worth noting that the question of Israel's sin is nowhere considered in Psalm 74. The covenant and the relationship which Israel has had with Yahweh is not understood as conditional in Psalm 74. The argument of the psalmist is not "We are innocent", but is like the argument of Moses in Numbers 14:13-17, "If you destroy your people, the Egyptians will hear of it and will say, 'It is because he was not able to save them.'" The psalmist does not try to move and motivate God by telling him about what

will happen to his people should he fail to act, but by telling him what will happen to his own name and reputation among the nations.

The psalmist's response to God's silent acceptance of the destruction and pollution of his temple is to call on him to remember two things, the people that he himself redeemed and the reproach of the enemy. In verses 12-17 the psalmist recites the past saving acts of Yahweh. The object of his or her recital is not the exodus, but the creation of the universe and Yahweh's creating is described as "working salvation". The remembrance which the psalmist selects to recite fits the need. The threat to the nation through the destruction of the temple is personified in a people whose gods are gods of creation. By affirming that it is really Yahweh and not the gods of "those foolish people" who created the world, the psalmist seeks both to affirm God's power to save and to motivate him to save again as he has done in the past when he acquired his congregation and redeemed as his property this tribe. Thus, the psalmist calls on Yahweh to remember not only his people and those who reproach him, but to remember who he is.

The destruction of the temple and the humiliation of God's people call into question the mastery of Yahweh over his creation, so that the psalmist calls on God to "fight your own fight". What is under threat is not the temple, for that has already gone up in smoke, but the relationship between God and his people. It is, therefore, imperative for those praying Psalm 74 that Yahweh remember. The psalm closes with the continual roar of the adversaries in Yahweh's ears, challenging him to remember his people and to put an end to rejection.

4.2.7 Psalm 77

Structure

Psalm 77 may be divided into five parts. Verses 2-3 are a summary cry of lament. In verses 4-7 the psalmist continues the lament and specifically resorts to memories of ancient days before the time of crisis and doubt and, in verses 8-11, asks whether God has changed and now acts differently. The psalmist's conclusion is that the hand of the Most High has, in fact, changed. In verses 12-16 the psalm writer retreats into memories of God's deliverance of Israel in the exodus, and in verses 17-21 the imagery of primordial creation is mixed with that of the exodus. The psalm ends with the lament unresolved and with the psalmist reflecting on God's past salvation of Israel.

Verses 2-3

It is not immediately clear whether the psalmist is in the midst of an active lament or is rehearsing a past experience which has since been resolved. Psalm 77

contains no transition from petition to praise for being heard, such as is common in many lament psalms, but verse 3 contains a string of verbs in the perfect tense: "I sought", "was stretched out", and "refused to be comforted".[102] "I cry out" (ראצעקה) in verse 2 is a simple waw plus cohortative which should be translated in the present tense (compare the simple waw plus imperfect as cohortative in v. 4). The verb ראצעקה could be repointed as a waw consecutive, "and I cried out". Certainly this would be consistent with the string of perfects in the following verse, but the pointing is not that of a waw consecutive and the active lament of verse 4 and the continuance of the lament throughout the psalm suggests a present tense understanding of an ongoing cry, as opposed to the psalmist thinking back on a past distress. The "I cry out" of verse 2 is followed by the "I have sought", "my hand was stretched out", and "my soul refused to be comforted" of verse 3.

The word והאזין should be translated as a waw consecutive, "and he shall hear me", in accordance with its form, because the context of the rest of the psalm suggests that the lament remains unresolved throughout and that, therefore, being heard by God is still a future hope for the writer of the psalm. Indeed, the only evidence that the lament has been resolved would be if we were able to translate והאזין in the perfect, but the lack of resolution anywhere else in the psalm suggests the need to translate a waw consecutive. As was mentioned above, "I sought" (דרשתי), "was stretched out" (נגרה), and "my soul refused" (מאנה) in verse 3 are all in the perfect and suggest that the lament began in the past and is continued in the present by the imperfects in verse 4, "I think of God (אזכרה), and I moan (ואהמיה); I meditate (אשיחה), and my spirit faints (ותתעטף)." The cry of lament and petition goes unanswered in Psalm 77 and, as we shall see, this provides an essential context for the questioning in verses 8-11.

Many commentators have avoided the difficulties presented by the verb tenses in verse 2 and even among those who do discuss the problem, the precise meaning seems unclear. Kirkpatrick, for example, acknowledges that "The precise force of the tenses of the original is difficult to determine."[103] He treats והאזין as a waw consecutive, translating it in the future tense, "and he will give ear to me." Rogerson and McKay suggest the reading "I cried aloud to God ... he heard me," with the observation that "... this appears to contradict what immediately follows, in which the psalmist voices his sense of isolation from God. It is probably best regarded as a summary of the message of

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[102] There is a strong tendency to translate the perfect tense verbs in verse three and the imperfect verbs in verse four into a single tense in English, either as past tense (AV, NIV, JB, REB) or as present tense (NRSV) verbs. This, however, loses the contrast between perfect verbs in verse three and imperfects in verse four. Tate has preserved this distinction translating "have sought", "have been extended", "has not been comforted", "remember", and "ponder"; *Psalms 51-100*, 258. It seems desirable to maintain the distinction present in the original. Part of the content of the remembering and musing of verse 4 is the seeking which the psalmist has done in the past.

[103] A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 458.

the whole psalm."[104] The problem with this solution is that it assumes something not explicitly borne out elsewhere in the psalm, namely that the crisis of faith is, in fact, resolved in the psalm. The translation of this verb in the future tense is important to the direction of the entire psalm, because, by removing the only suggestion that God has responded to the psalmist, the lament remains unresolved throughout. Oddly, Kirkpatrick does not consider the lament to be unresolved, but understands the act of remembrance of past salvations to be sufficient in itself to answer the psalmist's lament.[105]

The verb נגר can be translated "pour out" as water, which has led some commentators to assume that the original noun was not hand (יד), as found in the MT, but eye (עין). Such a change is supported by the Targum and is followed by Kirkpatrick who suggests the reading "Mine eye poured down in the night, and slacked not."[106] Although BDB translates נגר as "pour out" on the four occasions that it appears in the Niphal,[107] at least one of these uses, Job 20:28, does not immediately suggest a water image; "The possessions of their house will be carried away, dragged off (נגרות) in the day of God's wrath." Thus, נגר in the Niphal may be used to communicate the idea of outward movement without necessaryly using a water image. This suggests that it is unnecessary to amend the noun יד and that the phrase ידי לילה נגרה may be translated "my hand was stretched out in prayer in the night". The general sense of the image is not significantly changed, however, by either reading.

Verses 4-7

This section introduces the psalmist's strategy for "dealing with" God's silence. The psalmist "considers", "remembers" (זכר), "communes", and "meditates". Faced with the silence of God which robs the psalmist of sleep he or she questions God's lack of response directly by filling his or her mind, heart, and spirit with memories of when God acted differently. While "days of old" may refer to the psalmist's own youth, the parallel phrase "years of ages gone by" and the direct reference to the exodus in the latter half of the psalm makes it unlikely that the psalmist is reflecting on personal experiences of God. The phrase שנות עולמים appears only here in the Old Testament, but Deut. 32:7 contains a similar phrase זכר ימות עולם בינו שנות דור-ודור: "Remember the days of old, consider the years long past ...," in the midst of the "Song of Moses" in reference to the formation of the nation of Israel in the wilderness wanderings, lending weight to the idea that שנות עולמים is intended as a reference to the exodus.

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104 Rogerson and McKay *Psalms 51-100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 137.
105 Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, 456-457.
106 Ibid., 458.
107 Brown et al., *BDB*, 620.

The Selah which ends verse 4 creates an unlikely separation in the flow of the passage. Whereas verses 2 and 3 provide a classic lament, verse 4 seems to belong to verses 5-7 which remember, muse, and search.

Verses 8-11

The psalm reaches its crisis point as the psalmist, in view of the contrast between how God is remembered to act in the past and how the psalmist is experiencing God in the present moment, asks a series of questions concerning the ongoing nature of God's relationship with Israel and the psalmist. Three elements of that relationship are called into question, God's blessing, his steadfast love (חסד), and his word. Verse 11 is at the centre of the psalm structurally, dramatically, and theologically.

Verse 10 ends with a Selah, which provides a break in the flow of the passage. Although the meaning of the Hebrew term "Selah" is unknown, nevertheless, the repeated use of "Selah" in the Psalms provides structural breaks and, after verse 10, serves as a dramatic pause to contemplate these dangerous and threatening questions before the psalmist comes to the painful conclusion, "the right hand of the Most High has changed." The word שנות may be translated either as a construct plural "the years of ..." which results in the somewhat softer translation "the years of the right hand" (AV, RV), or as an infinitive construct of שנה, "to change" (NRSV, JB, REB, NEB, TEV). The translation in the Authorized Version, "[but I will remember] the years of the right hand of the Most High," is easier in terms of structure, because the "Selah" between verses 10 and 11 would then divide the questioning and recollection sections, but this translation of שנות would require that a verb be supplied and seems motivated by a desire to take from the psalmist's mouth the devastating accusation that God has changed. The net result, however, is that the questioning of verses 8-10 does not reach its obvious conclusion and the suspicion that "God has changed" continues to be present implicitly rather than explicitly. The NEB and REB turn verse 11 into a question, like those found in the preceding verses, but this reading has a number of limitations. J. Emerton has pointed out that several of the questions in verses 8-10 are prefixed with the interrogative particle ה and points out that "One might have expected to find such a particle also in verse 11 to make it clear that a question is intended."[108] Also, changing the statement to a question, "Has the right hand of the Most High changed?", does not avoid the problem for the psalmist of doubting God's relationship with Israel, because the question goes unanswered in the remaining verses. Finally, the presence of the Selah at the end of verse 10 becomes less comprehensible if verse 11 is simply a continuation of the string of questions.

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[108] J. A. Emerton, "The Text of Psalm 77:11," *Vetus Testamentum*, 44/2 (1994), 191.

Although the best solution to the translation of שְׁנוֹת seems to be to opt for the completion of the build-up of questions with the affirmation "the right hand of the Most High has changed", it is conceivable that the author intends the possible double meaning as a word-play. The writer's liking for repetition, which can be seen in the thrice repeated זכר and שׁיח, and the use of שְׁנוֹת at the transition point between a series of questions which ask implicitly if God has changed and a renewed reflection on and remembering of the mighty works and deeds of Yahweh, suggests that the double meaning is both possible and, if present, intentional.

Weiser attributes the challenge of verse 11 to the human inability to understand God's dealings and sees in verse 12 a move to praise as the psalmist understands his or her error in verse 11.[109] Indeed, the assumption that Psalm 77 is a "resolved" lament and that, beginning with verse 12, the psalmist has shifted from lament to praise, is widely held among scholars (Emerton, Kraus, Tate, Kidner, Kirkpatrick, Mays, Weiser). While the holiness and greatness of God are praised in verse 14, however, the reasons for praise in the remainder of the psalm are still past, remembered events. There is nothing in the latter half of the psalm to suggest that the lament has been answered by God. It seems highly unlikely that verse 12 marks a shift from lament to praise for answered prayer, but it is rather a continuation of the strategy of appealing to God by recalling past saving acts.

Brueggemann sees the shift in verse 12 from predominantly "I" references in verses 2-11 to predominantly "thou" references in verses 12-21 as indicating a fundamental change in the understanding of the psalmist. He or she has abandoned concern for self and has refocused on the one who has been faithful to Israel in the past.[110] Brueggemann maintains that:

> Nothing has been resolved, but everything has been recontextualized .... That narrow religious agenda is however shattered. It is shattered by remembering, by awareness of God's incomparability, by reference to Israel's concrete history, but most of all it is shattered by the utterance, *Thou* (*'attah*)."[111]

His explanation, however, does not adequately address the return to the strategy of remembering. While the move from "I" language to "Thou" language may indeed mark a shift in the psalmist's address to God, he or she is still engaged in a use of memory to try and motivate God to save and still has nothing apart from memory with which to confront the conclusion that the right hand of the LORD has indeed changed.

The transition between verses 1-11 and verses 12-21 is a sharp one leading Anderson to argue that the psalm was originally drawn from two older sources, a lament (vv. 1-11) and a hymn (vv. 12-21).[112] Similarly, Dahood believes 18-21 to be an ancient

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109 Weiser, *The Psalms*, 532.
110 Walter Brueggemann, "Psalm 77 -- the 'Turn' from Self to God," *JPr* 6 (1983), 11.
111 Ibid., 13.
112 A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms* vol. 2 (London: Oliphants, 1972), 555.

poem which has been added to the newer section[113] and Duhm describes verses 17ff. as a "theophany fragment" which was added to the psalm but whose function is unclear.[114]

John Kselman has responded to those who would argue that Psalm 77 is a composite of separate older works with a five-point argument: the inclusions formed both by "giving voice" (קוֹל) in verses 2 and 19 and by "hand" in verses 3 and 21, the fourfold repetition of "remember" in verses 4, 7, and 12, the "fusing device" of the repetition of "meditate" in verses 4, 7, and 13, and a proposed structural chiasm in verses 9-21.[115] Certainly arguments for the separate origin of component parts of Psalm 77 based on form-critical analysis[116] are relativized by the strong unity, both structurally and theologically, of the Psalm as we have it in the Psalter. Kraus[117] and Weiser[118] are also representative of those scholars that argue for the original unity of Psalm 77 and this seems preferable because of the unresolved nature of the lament and the repetition of the strategy of remembrance. Little would be gained by adding to an earlier work without introducing some new element to the discourse which would resolve the lament or offer an explanation for God's silence.

Verses 12-16

In verses 8-11, the psalmist has considered the possibility that his or her darkest suspicions might be confirmed. God has changed and can no longer be expected to save as he has saved in the past. But, in spite of the evidence, the psalmist returns doggedly to testimonies of who God is for Israel based on who he has been. The verdict of verse 11 is a temporary one which the psalmist yet hopes will be overturned. The remarkable feature of Psalm 77 is that, while the strategy of remembering God's saving acts for Israel has thus far failed to motivate God to act and save, the psalmist still persists with this strategy. The psalmist is not simply lamenting, but is presenting his or her appeal and testimony before the community. The psalmist has no other choice, because if there is no

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113 Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II: 51-100* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968), 224.
114 D. Bernh. Duhm, *Die Psalmen* (Tübingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr, 1922), 297.
115 John S. Kselman, "Psalm 77 and the Book of Exodus," *JANES* 15 (1983): 57-58. Sebastião Armando Gameleira Soares makes a rhetorical argument for unity, maintaining that, regardless of any past history of redaction, the psalm that we have in the Psalter cannot function theologically were it to be separated into supposed component parts.

> A questão mais importante, no entanto, não é se o poema se constitui de dois blocos, originalmente, distintos. O que se deve esclarecer, agora, é como esses dois blocos se acham unidos Isto é, trata-se de esclarecer qual o efeito novo que produz no conjunto da peça o fato de esses dois blocos estarem unidos num único todo. Põe-se o problema, proproament, *estructural*.

"Salmos: História Poesia e Orasão: Uma Leitura do Salmo 77." *REclB* 46 (1986): 10.
116 Dahood, *Psalms II*, 224. Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 116, and Helen G. Jefferson, "Psalm LXXVII," *VT* 13 (2963): 91.
117 Ibid.
118 Weiser, *Psalms*, 530.

consistency between who God was and who he is, the very basis for the psalmist's appeal for deliverance has been taken away.

The psalmist "mentions", "remembers", "meditates", and "muses" specifically on the concrete actions of God; on his "deeds", "wonders", "work", and "deeds." Based on what God has done for Israel, the psalmist can identify the characteristics of God who is "holy" and "great" and who "works wonders", "displays might", and "redeems."

Verses 17-21

Verses 17-20 mix the passage of Israel through the sea with storm imagery, which possibly refers to the Red Sea deliverance as a creative event. God's dominion over the chaotic sea is complete. The waters see Yah and fear him. Though they continue to foam and rage, God walks upon them as upon dry land.

The closing reference to Moses and Aaron in verse 21 intermingles the imagery of creation in verses 17-20 with that of the exodus in verses 12-16. God "created" Israel in the exodus and if Israel's relationship with God has now changed, their continued identity and existence are threatened. The act of remembering here functions to remind both the psalmist and Yahweh who Yahweh is and who Israel is in relation to him. If the memories fail, the identity of both will be lost. The psalm ends amidst the memories of God's past saving, without resolution of the crisis that drew the psalmist into such recollections.

Implications

Psalm 77 is one of the most challenging and problematic in the Psalter. The writer of Psalm 88 wrestles with the same sense of anguish over God's lack of response, but here the writer pushes the argument of that psalm a step further. In Psalm 88 the psalmist is in unbroken lament because God is afflicting him or her and will not relent. Psalm 77 wrestles with the questions "Has God changed?" and, therefore, "Have the most basic elements of Israel's relationship with their God changed?" The psalm writer is forced to entertain the possibility that, indeed, he has changed and that the covenant relationship may be dissolved as a result. The writer of the psalm, however, refuses to accept this conclusion and the psalm ends with the psalmist persistently offering the testimony of God's past saving acts to challenge the perceived reality of the situation, but with no response from God to the assertion "the right hand of the Most High has changed." The psalmist looks into the abyss of a life without Yahweh, before retreating to the nation's most fundamental resource for addressing the silence, namely, the tradition of who Yahweh has been for Israel in the past.

The enemies are conspicuous in Psalm 77 by their absence. We are told nothing about the specifics of the crisis and our attention is directed wholly to two things, to the terrifying suggestion that God has changed in his relating to Israel and to the psalmist and his or her stubborn refusal to give up on the testimony of Israel's memories. The psalmist simply refuses to accept his or her own verdict and continues to hold up God's past to him, arguing by implication that God cannot change and must be consistent. The psalm ends with the problem unresolved. The contradiction between who God is experienced to be and who he is remembered to be cannot be reconciled and the psalmist will not let it be forgotten or covered over.

Psalm 77 demonstrates firstly that the basic question of the lament psalm transcends the crisis of the moment. Ultimately what is at stake is Israel's relationship with their God. A second observation is the central and foundational place that memory has in establishing and maintaining who God was and, therefore, who God is and how he should act. Memory is an overwhelmingly dominant feature of this psalm. In the face of every evidence to the contrary, the psalmist clings tenaciously to the memory of a God who does wonders, shows strength, and redeems from slavery. Verbs of remembering, זכר ("remember", "mention"), המה ("grumble"), חפשׂ ("search"), שׂיח ("muse"), חשׁב ("consider"), and הגה ("reflect") occur a total of eleven times in verses 4-13.[119] By the end of the psalm, the psalmist is still taken up with the act of remembering, for as yet Yahweh has not responded to his or her appeal. Tate has suggested that the psalmist is on the threshold of a new and deeper understanding in his or her relationship with God: "... it seems to me that the recontextualization and transformation in this psalm is incomplete; the speaker is at the threshold of a new understanding but has not entered, and the reader is left to ponder his or her own willingness to enter."[120] Thirdly, it should be noticed that the psalmist is trapped by his or her decision to stick with this God and these memories. Other people may turn to other gods if their patron god is not responsive, but Israel has nowhere else to go. The psalmist has wagered everything on the belief that this God and this collection of memories are true and he or she will not abandon these memories, even when all the evidence tells to the contrary. Psalm 77 is an act of commitment in the face of despair. The fact that the Psalter does not end with Psalm 77 suggests that this psalm does not have the last word.[121] By plumbing the

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[119] Remembering for the psalmist is not essentially an internal and, therefore, private matter, as Tate has suggested. (Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 274.) The "grumbling" (המה) of verse 4 and the hiphil rendering of זכר, "mention", in verse 12a both suggest that remembering is a spoken process, and though no mention is made of speaking before the congregation, the fact that Psalm 77 is a prayer in the Psalter suggests that such reflections were made in the midst of the praying community.

[120] Ibid., 276.

[121] Brueggemann suggestions that the bounding of the Psalter between expressions of obedience in Psalm 1 and unconditional, imperative praise in Psalm 150 provides a framework for exploring experiences of doubt and contradiction, such as that encountered in Psalm 73. Whether or not one accepts the specifics of Brueggemann's

depths of Yahweh's relationship with Israel, however, the psalmist consistently draws on his or her most basic resource for combating the silence, the memories of Israel.

4.2.8 Summary

Psalm 22 opens with an affirmation of relationship, paired with a cry of abandonment. The psalmist uses the recollection of the ancestors' trust in God and his or her own trust in God from childhood to call attention to the contradiction between who God is remembered to be both in Israel's tradition and in the personal experience of the psalmist and the experience of his abandoning the psalmist in a time of great need. The psalmist argues that his or her trust has not wavered, so that Yahweh ought to save the psalmist, just as he has saved the ancestors. But there are those who do not believe the psalmist's report, that he or she has leaned continually on Yahweh, so that the intent of the psalmist's argument is to establish an unbroken and continual trust, which began with the ancestors, but which has also continued throughout the life of the psalmist.

When Yahweh answers the psalmist's cry, he or she is affirmed as one for whom Yahweh acts to save and he or she takes up the task of proclaiming the tradition before the great congregation. The memories which the psalmist depended on are now being added to and are spread throughout the whole world and into the future. As a result of God's answering, the psalmist is confirmed as being a part of the ongoing story of God's relationship with his people.

Psalm 44 explores the covenant relationship between Yahweh and the nation as a whole. Israel is the dependent partner in a covenant relationship with Yahweh. Their bow and sword are not strong enough to bring victory, so that they are reliant on Yahweh. Israel has been loyal in their covenant with Yahweh, but he has failed to keep covenant with them. Thus, the real crisis in Psalm 44 is not the military victory of Israel's enemies, but the threat to their relationship with God which that victory represents. As the lament unfolds, there is a growing tension between "us" and "you" in which Israel's human enemies all but disappear from view. In spite of uncertainty as to the state of Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh, however, their final appeal is to his hesed.

Psalm 40 emphasizes the importance of declaring and proclaiming Yahweh's saving acts. Because the memories which the psalmist recalls and declares are those of the

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argument, he is correct in pointing out that the kind of dangerous reflection which occurs in Psalm 88 or Psalm 77 does not go on in a vacuum, but within the larger context of expressions of obedience and praise. (Walter Brueggemann, "Bounded be Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon", *JSOT* 50 [1991], 63-92.) See also Walter Brueggemann and Patrick Miller, "Psalm 73 as a Canonical Marker," *JSOT* 72 (1996), 45-56. Similarly, J. Clinton McCann's suggests that Psalm 73 acts to summarize the reader's learnings about God's presence in the midst of threats contained in Psalms 1-72. *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 143. See also J. Clinton McCann, "Psalm 73: A Microcosm of Old Testament Theology," in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm.*, ed. Kenneth Hoglund (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press), 1987.

community, private expressions of gratitude for salvation are not sufficient. Testifying before the great assembly is a responsibility and an act of obedience for the one whom Yahweh saves. Indeed, such a proclamation of God's saving acts rivals sacrifice in importance as an expression of gratitude. By testifying before the congregation, the psalmist is adding to the collective memory of the community which has been his or her primary resource in lament and this act of faithful response in turn becomes a basis for future appeals to God in times of trouble.

Psalm 71 offers two different versions of reality, the testimony of the psalmist, who claims to have been consistent in his or her trust in and dependence on Yahweh, and the counter-testimony of the enemies, who claim that the psalmist is God-forsaken. Speech is particularly important in Psalm 71 and the psalmist's claims about his or her relationship with Yahweh are placed over against the claims of the enemies. In the face of such claims, the psalmist maintains his or her unbroken trust in Yahweh, from youth through to old age. The psalmist, who has spent his or her life declaring God's wonders, will respond to God's saving by shouting, singing, and telling all day long.

Psalm 143 explores the special nature of the relationship which exists between Yahweh and the psalmist. Because of this relationship, the psalmist can pray "Do not judge me, but judge my enemies". Because the appeal of the psalmist rests on memories of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel in which the psalmist shares, he or she is able to ask confidently for mercy and deliverance and for the destruction of the enemies.

Psalm 74 seeks to connect the fate of God's people with his own reputation. Because God's temple is destroyed and his people have been attacked, God's name is scorned and mocked among Israel's foes. The destruction of the temple represents a threat to Israel's relation with Yahweh, so that the cry of the psalmist is "Why have you rejected?", "How long?", and "Forever?" The memory upon which the psalmist draws is one which fits the need, namely, one which declares that Yahweh is more powerful than the gods of those who destroyed the temple.

Psalm 77, perhaps more fully than any other psalm, explores the threat created by God's silence and absence to the relationship between Yahweh and his chosen people. The specific circumstances that brought about the lament are of secondary importance (indeed, the enemies of the psalmist are absent from the psalm) and are transcended by the more urgent question "Has our relationship with Yahweh changed?" In response to the terrifying conclusion that it has, Psalm 77 points relentlessly to Israel's memories of who they are and who this God is with whom they are in relationship. The psalmist is committed to Israel's memories of their relationship with Yahweh and insists, against the evidence, that Yahweh is also.

4.3 Conclusion

The psalms of laments which draw on memory as a resource present a contrast between past and present. The experience of God's silence, anger, abandonment, and apparent disinterest causes the psalmist to cry out in lament, in protest, and in supplication. A fundamental response for the psalmist when confronted with a crisis in his or her relationship with the God, is to draw on memories of who this God is and how he has acted to save in the past. The praying community turn to their memories as a source of strength and confidence and as a way of motivating Yahweh to save.

Implicit in the appeal to memory is the assumption that both Yahweh and Israel's relationship with Yahweh are consistent. The psalmist argues for a continuity between past, present, and future, both in Yahweh and in his or her own trust in Yahweh. The evidence of the moment may challenge the consistency of Yahweh and his relationship with the psalm writer, but the psalmist constantly holds up to God the memories of who he has been in the past, in contrast with who he is experienced to be in the present, in order to influence who he will be in the future.

Memory begets memory. The act of remembering in order to motivate God to save places a responsibility on the psalmist. The psalmist must not only remember who God is in the past but he or she must testify of that memory before the community who shares in it. When Yahweh acts to save the psalmist and the nation, that new act, which restores the threatened relationship, becomes a part of Israel's growing wealth of memories.

In the psalms of lament, the psalmist struggles to find his or her place in the story of who God is in relationship with Israel. Present reality is tested against remembered past and the contradictions that arise between the two cause the psalmist to cry out to God in lament. When the psalmist recounts and meditates on memories of creation, the exodus, and his or her own life experiences, he or she is searching for his or her own place in the larger story of the praying community that has found its existence in relationship with Yahweh. The reality of that story for the psalmist is attested to by the fact that he or she expects, and even demands, that Yahweh include him or her in it. When the psalmist cries out in lament and draws forth memories from the past, he or she insists that Yahweh "Do today as you have done in the past."

The psalms of lament do not hesitate to call God's attention to the contradictions between experienced reality and Israel's memories. Nor do they hesitate to reevaluate, inform, and add to those memories, because they are an ongoing part of the life of the community and the psalmist. What the psalms of lament will not do, however, is abandon the version of reality attested to in the nation's memories or allow Yahweh to forget them. Israel's identity is completely tied to their God and, indeed, Yahweh's identity can no longer be separated from this people with whom he is involved.

Chapter Five

The Functioning of Reality, Remembrance, and Response in the Story of Israel's Relatedness to Yahweh

5.1 Introduction

In chapter five, I want to develop the argument that the communities which wrote and prayed the Psalms understood themselves to be taking an active part in the ongoing story of the Yahweh's relationship with his people -- a story which is neither completely static nor endlessly adaptable, but which is open to the dynamic of an ongoing relationship between Yahweh and his people. In the psalms of lament, the expectation that God interacts with the circumstances of the community, acting to save in ways which are consistent with the community's memories of past saving acts, is confronted by experiences of God's failure to act and to save. It has been my argument that the primary resource of the praying community in confronting the experience of Yahweh's absence to save is the recital of the community's story, including creation, exodus, and personal memories, and the seeking of the individual's and the community's own place within the larger story which these memories have constructed. Because of the central place Israel's story has as a community resource in the context of lamentation, the traditioning process in which the community's memories are confirmed and added to through the act of public testimony is an essential function and obligation of the praying community.

In this chapter I will evaluate the observations which were made and the conclusions which were drawn in the exegetical study in chapter four and will attempt to describe and draw some conclusions concerning this process of confronting the reality of absence, offering memory recital, place-finding in the ongoing story, and memory-making in terms of the elements of the present experience of reality, the remembered story of Yahweh's relationship with his people, and the response of testimony before the great assembly.

In evaluating the findings of previous chapters, I will consider four aspects of the praying community's use of memory and testimony. In the first part, I will maintain that experienced reality which results in the prayer of lament has an essential role to play in

revitalizing the community's memories so that each new community of faith may appropriate those memories as their own. I will argue that, for the psalmist, God is never thought of as absent in the sense that he cannot hear and respond to prayer (although he may choose not to), but that there does exist the possibility that he will sever the relationship with his people and it is this possibility which the psalms of lament explore and this risk which the psalmist seeks to avoid. I will also argue that this threat to relationship can be either local, "Does God still save the psalmist?", or universal, "Does God still save?"

In the second part, I will look at the way in which the memories of Israel's relationship with Yahweh define their identity as the people of Yahweh and create their expectations as to how Yahweh will characteristically act in relationship with them. I will seek to show that for Yahweh not to respond as he is remembered to have responded in the past would be to radically alter Israel's sense of identity, their perception of reality, and their expectations for relatedness to Yahweh. Because the act of recollection in the psalms of lament is motivated by a desire for God to save, recollection is selective, choosing those memories best suited to effect the desired change. Because these memories interact with the present need of the psalmist, they are, to a certain extent, adapted to fit the expectations of the psalmist in the present circumstance of lament.

In part three I will examine the traditioning process through which Israel's memories are evaluated, affirmed, and added to. I will give attention to the counter-testimony of the psalmist's enemies which challenges the psalmist's place in the community's story, to the psalmist's seeking to connect the present, past, and future in order to maintain a continuity of community identity and perceived reality, and to the interdependent relationship which exists between psalms of testimony (thanksgiving) and lament in the Psalter.

In the final part of the chapter, I will consider the notion of Israel's story and will examine the interaction between the psalmist, the community of faith, and the larger story in which that community has been, is, and will be in their relationship with Yahweh. I will consider the ways in which Israel understood their story to be a true story and, thereby, how the truth-claim of the story may be discredited so that the story may be lost to Israel. I will examine the possibility of a particular individual or community falling out of that story, so that Yahweh no longer acts to save him, her, or them. Finally, I will comment on the psalmist's remarkable commitment to Israel's story and, at the same time, his or her unwillingness to deny the experience of abandonment.

5.2 Reality

5.2.1 The Importance of Lament

The lament psalms are essential for understanding the nature of Yahweh's relationship with Israel. The honest assertion of experienced reality which seeks neither to exclude lived experience from the context of cultic worship nor to deny its impact on the divine/human relationship which worship seeks to sustain is fundamental to our understanding of the way in which Israel viewed their relationship with Yahweh. Experienced reality is brought into the worship setting and juxtaposed over against the memory of the community of faith because in that context the elements which provide the framework for Israel's relationship with God are all present, namely the gathered community, the cultic apparatus, and the prospect of God's presence. Experiences which contradict Israel's story are not an intrusion on the cultic worship of Israel: on the contrary, it is precisely in that setting that they find their most appropriate expression and make their most valuable contribution to the life of Israel as the people of Yahweh.

The crises of life which threaten the existence of the praying community cast into doubt their relationship with Yahweh and result in prayers of lament, thus articulating the tension which exists in the community of faith between belief about their relationship with God and experiences which diminish and threaten to negate that relationship. Apart from circumstances which allow the received understanding of the nature of Israel's life with Yahweh to be called into question, that received understanding would go unchallenged and would eventually be changed from a memory-based story of relatedness which relies on ongoing testimony for continued vitality, to tradition which is removed from the realm of daily experience and reality testing, to dogmatic assertion which relies primarily on the strength of the assertion itself and which is much less available to be questioned, adapted, or negated by experience. The experiences of God's absence, hiddenness, and silence are essential to the vitality and growth of the story which is formed from Israel's memories and which depends on testimonies of God's presence to hear and to save. It is as the testimonies of God's presence are challenged that they are made available to be reapplied, reaffirmed, and strengthened using the same means by which they were originally formed and later perpetuated in the life of the nation, the testimony of who Israel are and who God is in their relationship one with the other.

This revitalization of the story which declares God to be present to save does not, however, occur without risk. For this revitalization of Israel's testimony to occur, there must be the genuine possibility that the silence and hiddenness of God are real and may continue too long, so that the praying community may go down forever into Sheol, ending their participation in the relationship with Yahweh. But it is not just the continued

existence of the community of faith which is threatened by God's silence. Because Yahweh is known to Israel only in the context of relationship, the continued hiddenness of Yahweh raises for Israel the possibility that the memory is false and that Yahweh is not God. In order for new testimony to be made, so that the story of Israel's relationship with God may be affirmed and may grow, there must exist the genuine possibility of the risk of the loss of the story. The risk involved is that, if the story is allowed to be continually tested against experience, God may remain hidden and the story may eventually need to be radically reinterpreted or abandoned altogether. If, however, this element of risk is removed by taking the story out of the arena of availability to lived experience, the story ceases to be the immediate story of the praying community and becomes, instead, a dogmatic affirmation based on a distant and increasingly irrelevant tradition. Lament, then, introduces to the story of Israel's relationship with Yahweh the element of risk which is essential for the present community to adopt the story as their own and to testify that "you have answered me", "he has done it", and "you are my King and my God".

The constant bringing of experience into contact with the story and the element of risk which results from that contact means that Israel's story of their relationship with Yahweh is by its very nature, and will continue to be, an unfinished story. The story is always in the process of becoming Israel's story and, because it is an open-ended story, the possibility persists that for each new generation that takes up the story, it may cease to be their story. A story which loses all contact with the lived experience of the community which tells it moves from being *their* story to being *the* story and from being what they *believe* to be true to being what they *confess* and *teach* to be true. In the final stages of the death of a community's story, when it has long since lost all contact with the lived experience of the community which tells it, it becomes simply a repeated liturgy of the community, which they continue to recite simply because "that's the way we've always done it here". Thus, the unfinished nature of the story which the circumstance of lament occasions provides space and opportunity for the community to appropriate the story anew and afresh, confirming that it is *their* story.

5.2.2 Is God Ever Absent?

Prayer, by its very nature, precludes the notion that God is in any absolute sense considered to be absent by the one praying, for prayer is speech addressed to God.[1] If

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[1] J. Christiaan Beker, speaking of Job and Ecclesiastes, argues that the tension between expectation of deliverance/response and the experience of suffering can become so severe that hope ceases. *Suffering and Hope: the Biblical Vision and the Human Predicament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 44. It can certainly be argued that true hopelessness might result in the silencing even of complaint, but in the case of the Psalter, in contrast to Job and Ecclesiastes, speech addressed to God continues, underlining the continued hope that he may yet respond. Or, as John Goldingay expresses it, "... the experience of God's absence does not paralyse prayer. Paradoxically, it prompts prayer." *Songs from a Strange Land: Psalms 42-51* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 35. See also Christine

God were thought of as genuinely absent, we might expect the psalmist to fall silent. When the psalm writer experiences God as absent, however, he or she responds not with silence, but with lament, plea, and protest. God, then, is not thought of as absent to hear, but only absent to save. He is silent or hidden or withholding blessing and this lack of response is perceived by the lament psalmist as abandonment and the absence of his saving action. As James Mays expressed it, "God is so much a god of blessing and salvation for the psalmist that he must speak of tribulation and terror as the absence of God. Yet God is so much the God of *hesed* for the psalmist that he can speak to God in the midst of tribulation and terror as the God of his salvation."[2] God is never thought of as completely absent by the psalmist. As long as prayer continues, the psalmist sustains the expectation that God will hear and the hope that he will respond.

As the exegetical work in the last chapter has shown, in the psalm of lament, the crisis which causes the psalmist to pray is most frequently an attack by enemies which can either be accounted for and justified by the sin of the ones praying or for which she or he accepts no responsibility. That which brings about lament is not simply this attack by the enemies, however, but the delay of God's deliverance. The attack of enemies is a relatively minor threat in and of itself as long as Yahweh is a God who delivers and judges, just as he is remembered and reported to have done in the past. The threat inherent in the psalms of lament which pushes the psalmist to plead with, persuade, bargain with, and bribe God to save is a threat to the basic relationship described in Israel's memories, so that that relationship is cast into doubt by the present circumstance of attack coupled with God's hiddenness and silence.

That which is at risk for the psalmist is not that God may absent himself, but that the relationship between Yahweh and the psalmist may end. The immediate crisis which precipitates the prayer of lament is transcended, so that what is at risk is far more fundamental than the problem of the moment. This relativizing of the threat of the moment is most easily seen in those psalms in which either the enemy is absent altogether, as in the case of Psalm 77, or in which they recede into the background and play a secondary role, as in Psalm 44. I have argued in chapter four that, as the role of the enemy diminishes in Psalm 44, what comes to the forefront is the dialectic between "us" and "you". What is finally at risk in the unanswered prayer of the praying community is their relation with God and, thereby, their very existence as the people of God.

Some lament psalms ground this threat to relationship in the sin of the one or ones praying. In that case, prayer takes the form of plea and repentance. But in those psalms which maintain the innocence of the one praying, the psalmist must consider another possibility, namely a betrayal by the God with whom the praying community is

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Pilkington, "The Hidden God in Isaiah 45:15: A Reflection from Holocaust Theology," *SJT* 48/3 (1995): 285-300.

[2] James L. Mays, "Psalm 13," *Int* 34 (1980), 282.

in relationship. In those psalms which locate the source of God's silence not in the praying community but in Yahweh himself, prayer takes the form of plea and protest. The relationship between Yahweh and the praying community is threatened not by the enemy, nor by the sin of the people, but by Yahweh's failure to respond as though he were still in a special relationship with the community.

5.2.3 The Threat to Relationship

The psalms of lament explore two distinct threats to relationship with Yahweh. The psalmist cries out either because his or her place in the community of faith is in doubt, so that the God who acts to save Israel no longer acts to save the psalmist and/or his or her present community (Ps. 22; 44; 71; 74) or, more fundamentally, because the identity of that community as the people of God is under threat (Ps. 77). Either the one praying is no longer in the community for whom Yahweh acts to save or Yahweh no longer acts to save any more as he is remembered to have done. If the new version of reality suggested by the present circumstance of lament is able to displace the version of reality maintained in the remembered story or to displace the psalmist so that he or she is no longer a participant in that story, then there will be a fundamental breakdown in relationship which will result in the extinction of the one praying, presumably through physical death. With the loss of access to Israel's story or, even worse, the demise of that story, comes the loss of the psalmist's primary approach to God in the silence.

This suggests that, for Israel in the time when the Psalter was produced, there were two ways to lose one's place in the community and to be reintegrated into it. According to the priestly understanding, the one who sins bears that sin and, as a result, is cut off from the community. So, for example, the one who eats of a peace offering to the Lord on the third day "... shall bear (נשׂא) his iniquity, because he hath profaned the hallowed thing of the LORD: and that soul shall be cut off from among his people."[3] On the Day of Atonement, the priest places the sins of the people onto the scapegoat, which then "... shall bear (נשׂא) on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness"[4], thus being cut off from the community. In the second understanding suggested by the psalms of lament, the psalmist is in danger of losing his or her place in the story, with the result that he or she will "go down to the Pit". While the priestly solution addresses only instances of separation as the result of sin, the psalmist seeks readmittance to the community for whom Israel acts to save, without a necessary association between the psalmist's separation and his or her sin.[5]

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[3] Lev. 19:8. I have used the AV here in preference to the NRSV, because it preserves the sense of the Hebrew נשׂא, to "bear" or "carry".
[4] Lev. 16:22.
[5] See Fredrik Lindström, *Suffering and Sin: Interpretations of Illness in the Individual Complaint Psalms* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994).

As I have shown in the previous chapter, by far the most common conclusion which the psalmist draws from the experience of God's silence is that, while the nature of Yahweh's relationship with Israel remains intact, he no longer acts toward the person or immediate community praying as he does toward the larger community of Israel. Thus, the threat posed by God's silence in the face of an attack on the ones praying is that he, she, or they are no longer a member of the community for which God acts to save. The result of such exclusion is the threat of imminent death for the one praying.

This conclusion that the psalmist has fallen outside of Israel's story is supported not just by the circumstances of God's failure to respond and save, but by the counter-testimony of the enemies who question the psalmist's relationship with Yahweh. Such counter-testimony takes the form both of accusation ("There is no help for you in God" (Ps. 3:3), "Pursue and seize that person whom God has forsaken, for there is no one to deliver" (Ps. 71:11)) and of mockery ("Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver--let him rescue the one in whom he delights!" (Ps. 22:9), "Where is your God?" (Ps. 42:4, 11)). It is important to note that it is not just the psalmist who is at risk, but Yahweh. Should he continue to be silent, the accusation of the wicked and the fool that "there is no God" might be proven correct. Thus Yahweh is also asked to save the psalmist for the sake of his own name (Ps. 25:11; 31:4; 79:9; 106:8; 109:21; 143:11). In such cases, the act of prayer is an act of seeking for and lobbying for one's place in the community for which Yahweh acts to save, and memory recital is frequently accompanied by arguments intended to demonstrate that the psalmist does, in fact, belong to that community. Principal among the arguments used to answer the counter-testimony of the enemies are the constant hope and trust of the psalmist in Yahweh to save and vindicate (Ps. 22:10-12; 42:6, 12; 71:5-6, 14).

A second possibility which the psalmist considers far less frequently is that the very nature of Yahweh's relationship with Israel has changed, that is, that he no longer acts to save the psalmist because he is no longer willing or able to save Israel. It has been my argument that the only place in the Psalter in which this possibility is explicitly considered is in Psalm 77, with its core assertion "the right hand of the Most High has changed". As I have already pointed out, the enemies are conspicuous by their absence in this psalm. The psalmist is no longer offering testimony before Yahweh to counter the accusations and mockery of his or her enemies, but he or she is now questioning Israel's basic relationship to Yahweh. If Yahweh will no longer grant justice as before, no amount of testimony will avail to counter the accusations of enemies or to bring about deliverance. If God no longer saves Israel, then there is no value to be found in arguing that the psalmist belongs to that larger community of faith. The memories themselves are under threat in Psalm 77 and it is with the repeated recital of those memories that the psalmist seeks to motivate God to respond.

5.3 Remembrance

5.3.1 The Ways in Which Memory Shapes Perception and Expectation in the Psalter

The story of Israel's election and creation as a people by Yahweh and of his saving actions to sustain and direct the life of the nation has created a sense of identity and an understanding of reality for Israel which sees the nation as the people of God and sees God as actively involved in the life of the nation and of individuals within the nation. For Israel to forget who Yahweh is and what he has done in the formation and preservation of the nation would be to drastically alter their understanding of their relationship with Yahweh and to lose their identity as the people of Yahweh. For Yahweh to forget the nation of Israel and his relationship with them, so that he no longer hears, answers, and saves as he is remembered to have done, would result in the demise of Israel as the people of God and, thereby, the loss of Yahweh's identity as the God of this people.

It will be my argument in this part of the chapter that Israel's sense of identity and their perception of reality derive from their story of relatedness to Yahweh. The circumstances which causes the psalm writer to cry out in lament, plea, and protest are experiences of reality which contradict the version of reality presented in Israel's story and thereby threaten their identity as the people of God and the ordering of reality which this identity has set up.

5.3.2 The Formation of Identity

The act of remembering is, for Israel, a formational one, that is, Israel does not remember for memory's sake, but in order to define their identity as the people of God. Because of this, memory is not a detached, objective recording of events, but is a highly selective choosing and ordering of memories in order to provide continuity and cohesion with Israel's self-perception in the present. Thus, for example, when the children ask the meaning of the laws and statutes by which the community lives in Deut. 6:20-25, they are told the story of the exodus in order to give meaning to these acts of obedience. What is remembered and the way it is remembered both informs and is informed by the present understanding of the ones remembering.

Brynolf Lyon has maintained that the act of remembering is greatly influenced by the process of constituting one's identity which goes on in the present.

> ... the activity of remembering says something important not only about the past, but also about the present. More exactly, it says something not only about how our past was constituted, but also about how we are presently constituting ourselves. In remembering, therefore, we are not recalling events that are severed

> from the present. Rather, we are bringing to awareness, in the manner in which we are presently constituting ourselves, the influence of the past on our present identity.[6]

This suggests that remembering is not a disinterested enterprise, but is done in order to clarify identity by establishing a consistent relationship between who a community was in the past with who they are in the present. Therefore, the act of remembering is heavily influenced by the present and may be understood as the "... capacity for the organization and reconstruction of past experiences and impressions in the service of present needs, fears, and interests."[7]

In the context of Christian community, George Stroup has argued that that community finds its identity in the tension which exists between memory of the past and hope for the future. Any attempt to avoid the present, either by hiding in history and simply endlessly repeating the past or escaping into the future through an unceasing search for the novel, results in the confusion and eventual loss of the community's sense of identity. Memory and hope are only constructive, providing a sense of community identity, when they interact with the present.[8] In the psalms of lament, the act of remembering is not an act of escape, because the circumstance of lament is carried by the psalmist into the act of remembering and is placed over against the memory. Neither is the move to future hope a seeking after novelty. The psalmist seeks to perpetuate Israel's memories and story into the future, telling it to "all the generations to come". Both the psalmist's memories of the past and his or her hopes for the future are closely tied to the present, with its challenge to the psalmist's identity as one who is in relationship with Yahweh.

Deuteronomy 5:1-4 provides an example of placing the present community in the remembered story of the nation.

> Moses convened all Israel, and said to them: Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire.

Although many in the generation to whom Moses spoke were not witnesses of the covenant foundation at Sinai, not only was that covenant thought of as theirs, but the story of its founding was thought of as theirs, even to the point of Moses saying that they had been present and had witnessed it. I have argued in chapter three that this does not

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6 K. Brynolf Lyon, "The Unwelcome Presence: The Practical Moral Intention of Remembering", *Enc* 48/1 (1987), 142.
7 Ernest Schachtel, *Metamorphosis* (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 284.
8 George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 260.

refer to a renewed theophany through a re-actualization of the past, but to a new appropriation and replication of the community's memories in a new situation. Thus, the new generation could say "The covenant is *our* covenant and the story is *our* story."[9] In the case of the prayers of Israel, remembering is not an isolated remembering for the purpose of individual self-constitution, but it goes on in community and seeks to include God in the conversation. Thus remembering in the Psalms serves to integrate past and present, to place the individual in the larger community, and to define his or her relationship with God.

Present day understandings of the process of remembering as it is reflected in the Psalter have been drastically affected by the modern enterprise of history, with the result that for many history has replaced memory as a primary concern in approaching the text. The notion that it is possible to construct an objective history of Israel has, however, been challenged in recent years. Philip Davies[10] and Keith Whitelam[11] have argued that that which modern biblical studies present as the history of 'ancient Israel' is, in reality, an invention. Davies speaks of three distinct Israels.

> For I shall be dealing with three Israels: one is literary (the biblical), one is historical (the inhabitants of the northern Palestinian highlands during part of the Iron Age) and the third, 'ancient Israel', is what scholars have constructed out of an amalgamation of the two others.[12]

He develops the argument that the historical information which the Old Testament provides its reader reflects only one fairly small group writing in one fairly brief period in the long development of Israel's history, specifically, the literate class of the Persian and Hellenistic cultures. The history produced by this group is not, Davies maintains, an objective and disinterested one.

> It (sic.) rather an act of ideological imperialism by which a ruling caste appropriates the native peasant customs and, depriving them of all that is meaningful to the peasant, turns them into celebrations of their own dominant ideology: their acquisition of the law, their deliverance from Egypt, their wandering in the wilderness.[13]

Thus the only historical information which can be gleaned from the Old Testament pertains to the ideological agendas of the scribal group which Davies argues has produced it. Whitelam builds on Davies' notion, arguing that modern reconstructions of

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[9] For a further discussion of the use of memory in Deuteronomy, see Edward P. Blair, "An Appeal to Remembrance: The Memory Motif in Deuteronomy," *Int* 15 (1961), 41-47.
[10] Philip R. Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).
[11] Keith W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996).
[12] Davies, *'In Search of Ancient Israel'*, 11.
[13] Ibid., 110.

the history of ancient Israel are not themselves disinterested ventures either, but are motivated by political expediencies.

> The driving force of biblical studies has been the need to search for ancient Israel as the taproot of Western civilization, a need that has been reinforced by the demands of Christian theology in search of the roots of its own uniqueness in the society which produced the Hebrew Bible. This has been reinforced with the foundation of the modern state of Israel, giving rise to a search by Israeli scholarship for its own national identity deep in the past.[14]

Thus, both the literary constructions contained in the Old Testament and the historical reconstructions of modern biblical scholarship are "narratives of power" intended to serve a political ideology.[15] Whitelam goes on to propose the project of recovering Palestinian history, which he says has been suppressed by the dominant ideology of the history of ancient Israel.

With respect to this present work, I would like to make three observations regarding Davies' and Whitelam's arguments. Firstly, they have cast serious doubt on the feasibility of constructing an objective history from the biblical writings. There are simply too many gaps in the available data to provide us with a coherent picture of the history of Israel and, more to the point, the biblical writers do not appear to be interested in producing an objective history. Indeed, it has been my argument that the biblical writers were not writing a history but were remembering in order to give identity to the community.

Secondly, Davies has created a false dichotomy by classifying the material in the Old Testament as either literary or historical in nature. He assumes that defining material as unhistorical in the sense that it falls outside of the range of historical method[16] automatically establishes that such material is a literary construct. Simply to say that material is not verifiable using modern historical methods is not, however, the same thing as demonstrating that that material is an invented literary construct.

Thirdly, what the biblical writers choose to remember in order to give the nation their identity does not seem to fit with Davies' and Whitelam's model of a "narrative of power" which was produced by the ruling class of a single period. They choose to remember that they came from slave stock, that they constantly rebelled against God in the wilderness, that the land does not belong to them to do with as they wish but is God's, that the period of the judges is marked by constant unfaithfulness in the relationship with Yahweh, and that all of their leaders, including the Davidic monarchy and the priesthood, were guilty of gross sins and failings. Were the memories of Israel

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[14] Whitelam, *Invention of Ancient Israel*, 119.
[15] It is interesting to note that neither author examines or questions their own ideological commitments in the critiques that they have produced.
[16] For Davies, the historicity of material is called into question if that material is either a) unbelievable or b) ideologically motivated. *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'*, 39-41.

simply literary constructs which were invented by the literate elite of a late period, far removed from the events being recalled and driven by ideological concerns, one might reasonably expect them to be far less self-critical and far more uniform in their efforts to legitimate the leadership of their day.

Gary Herion has pointed to the tension which exists in biblical historical narrative between the tendency, on the one hand, of monarchies and the priesthood to legitimate political ideologies and theological values and, on the other hand, of the common people at the "grassroots" to record historical narratives which directly challenge these ideologies and theological perspectives.[17] This "grassroots tendency", says Herion, reflects periods of political and social instability in Israel's history. While Herion does not offer an explanation for the presence of both tendencies together in the biblical writings, his observations on the workings of these two diverse tendencies do call into question Davies' and Whitelam's assumption of a relatively late creation of biblical history by a single, ideologically driven group.

It has been my argument, however, that the biblical writers were engaged in the preservation of memory, not history, and that which they choose to remember glorified and legitimated not the hegemony of a particularly political ideology, but the relationship which existed between Yahweh and this particular people. Thus, it is my argument that the psalmists were engaged in a fundamentally different enterprise from the modern writers of history in that they sought to be neither objective nor essentially self-legitimating,[18] but to articulate an identity arising from memories of their relationship with Yahweh.

With the advent of modern historical methods has come the exclusion of the notion of memory as it is practised in the Psalter from modern inquiries into biblical meaning and, I would argue, a substantial loss in the modern reader's ability to draw his or her sense of identity and reality from the story of Israel's relationship with God. Meyerhoff has observed that, whereas we now know a great deal more about the past as a result of modern historical method, as a direct result of that knowledge, we feel far less connected to that past and far less able to draw our identity from that which is remembered.

> Thus a situation has developed which is quite paradoxical in human terms: The barriers of the past have been pushed back as never before; our knowledge of the history of man and the universe has been enlarged on a scale and to a degree not dreamed of by previous generations. At the same time, the sense of identity and continuity with the past, whether our own or history's, has gradually and

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[17] Gary A. Herion, "The Role of Historical Narrative in Biblical Thought: The Tendency Underlying Old Testament Historiography," *JSOT* 21 (1981): 25-57.

[18] It is certainly not my argument that the biblical writers were in no sense self-legitimating, but that there is much in the biblical writings which is critical of established power and which does not seem to fit the notion that a powerful vested interest group controlled the content of what was ultimately produced.

> steadily declined. Previous generations *knew* much less about the past than we do, but perhaps *felt* a much greater sense of identity and continuity with it ....[19]

Indeed, Josef Yerushalmi argues that the practice of historiography works directly against the highly selective and specialized process of the formation of group memory.

> Moreover, in common with historians in all fields of inquiry, he [the Jewish historian] seeks ultimately to recover a total past -- in this case the entire Jewish past -- even if he is directly concerned with only a segment of it. No subject is potentially unworthy of his interest, no document, no artifact, beneath his attention. We understand the rationales for this. The point is that all these features cut against the grain of collective memory which, as we have remarked, is drastically selective. Certain memories live on; the rest are winnowed out, repressed, or simply discarded by a process of natural selection which the historian, uninvited, disturbs and reverses.[20]

Remembering, then, is a very different process than is historiography and it both serves a different function and leads to very different results for the one remembering. The past is both viewed differently and appealed to for different reasons in the practices of historiography and memory. Michael Morgan maintains that:

> ... the historian studies and, indeed, shapes a past that is remote, distant, and isolated, while the faithful devotee recalls a past that is powerfully immediate, assimilated to the world of memory, imaginatively current. The historian produces a past that is very past, while memory finds a past that is very present. The historian returns, so far as he or she is able, to another time; the rememberer welcomes another time into his or her own. To one the past is treated *as past*, to the other *as present*.[21]

The process of remembering in the Psalter is not the practice of historiography, which seeks to recover as much of what happened as possible, but is the much more selective recollection of that which will inform, give shape to, and provide a consistent identity for the present community within their current experience of faith.

In the biblical context, the objects of Israel's remembrance are those events and experiences which articulate the relationship between the people and Yahweh, defining for both an identity which is expressed in the context of that relationship. Thus, Yahweh is identified in the exodus account not in terms of his attributes, but in terms of relatedness. Yerushalmi calls the reader's attention to this feature of the narrative.

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[19] Cited without footnote from Meyerhoff's *Time in Literature* in Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 79.

[20] Ibid., 94-95. Certainly all history is selective, but Yerushalmi's point here seems to be that community memory is much more intentionally selective and that such selectivity is seen as a positive thing.

[21] Michael Morgan, "Overcoming the Remoteness of the Past: Memory and Historiography in Modern Jewish Thought." *Jud* 38/2 (1989): 161.

> Sent to bring the tidings of deliverance to the Hebrew slaves, Moses does not come in the name of the Creator of Heaven and Earth, but of the "God of the fathers," that is to say, of the God of history: "Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them: The Lord the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has appeared to me and said: I have surely remembered you ... " (Exod. 3:16). When God introduces himself directly to the entire people at Sinai, nothing is heard of his essence or attributes, but only: "I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, the house of bondage" (Exod. 20:2).[22]

That which Israel recalls of the past, then, derives from the specifics of the interaction between Yahweh and his people. "Not only is Israel under no obligation whatever to remember the entire past, but its principle of selection is unique unto itself. It is above all God's acts of intervention in history, and man's responses to them, be they positive or negative, that must be recalled."[23] Memory in the biblical writings selects for instances of interaction and relatedness between God and Israel and it is from these memories that Israel draws their identity of self and of God. It is the loss of memory, and not the loss of experience, which leads to the loss of identity.

5.3.3 Defining Reality and Setting up Expectations

Israel's sense of identity and their understanding of Yahweh's identity arise, at least in part, from the collected memories of what Yahweh is remembered to have said and done in the nation's past and the people's response to his interaction with them. Also, the way in which Israel understands reality is affected and shaped by their identity as the people of Yahweh. As Israel derives its identity from their memories, so too they construct an understanding of reality which conforms to that sense of identity. As a result of their perception of reality, they have certain expectations as to the way in which Yahweh will relate to them in the present. So, in Psalm 44, for example, the psalmist can say of the ancestors: "... for not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm give them victory; but your right hand, and your arm, and the light of your countenance, for you delighted in them", and of his or her own past experience: "For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me. But you have saved us from our foes, and have put to confusion those who hate us" -- so that the expectation of the psalmist is that God will intervene to save those who trust in him. The crisis presented in Psalm 44, though, is that this expectation has not been realized: "Yet you have rejected us and abased us, and have not gone out with our armies."

As I have argued in chapter four, there is the expectation that Yahweh behaves consistently, that is that he will act in the present as he has acted in the past. This assumption underlies every appeal to memory in the psalms of lament. Thus, when Israel is faced with the threat of foreign peoples who wish to destroy them, they pray ,"Do to

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[22] Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 9.
[23] Ibid., 11.

them as you did to Midian, as to Sisera and Jabin at the Wadi Kishon, who were destroyed at En-dor, who became dung for the ground",[24] and "Summon your might, O God; show your strength, O God, as you have done for us before."[25] The recollection that "... they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame" of Psalm 22 implies the clear expectation that, as long as the psalmist trusts in Yahweh as the ancestors did, he or she will also be delivered.

The way in which Yahweh was expected to act can be seen in what he was asked to do. As I have mentioned in chapter two, what is expected of Yahweh in the psalms under consideration is determined by the context of a circumstance of lament. Thus, the expectation most often expressed in the lament psalms is judgment against the wicked and justice for the poor and oppressed (Ps. 5; 7; 82; 125), protection from the enemies and judgment for their attacks (Ps. 27; 91; 121; 140), and provision or blessing which sustains life (Ps. 67:7-8; 104:10-18; 144:12-15). All three elements may be seen together in Psalm 68:6-15.

> Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.
> God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity,
> but the rebellious live in a parched land.
> O God, when you went out before your people, when you marched through the wilderness, Selah
> the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain at the presence of God,
> the God of Sinai, at the presence of God, the God of Israel.
> Rain in abundance, O God, you showered abroad;
> you restored your heritage when it languished;
> your flock found a dwelling in it; in your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy.
> The Lord gives the command; great is the company of those who bore the tidings:
> "The kings of the armies, they flee, they flee!"
> The women at home divide the spoil,
> though they stay among the sheepfolds--
> the wings of a dove covered with silver, its pinions with green gold.
> When the Almighty scattered kings there, snow fell on Zalmon.

Interestingly, all three elements also appear in Psalm 72 which describes the qualities of the king, indicating that the king, as God's representative to the people, was expected to act like God. The psalms of lament, however, mark occasions when the experienced reality of the psalmist contradicts his or her expectation.

Finally, because recollection in the psalms of lament served a motivation function and needed to be adapted to address different circumstances of lament, it should be observed that remembering was a highly selective and somewhat flexible process.[26] For example, Psalm 106, which contains one of the more extensive historical recitals in the

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[24] Ps. 83:10.
[25] Ps. 68:29.
[26] This is, or course, not a feature which is peculiar to memory in the Psalter. Human memory in general is highly selective and that which is selected and the way in which it is presented provides clues to the motive for remembering.

Psalter, is a highly selective recollection, serving the particular need of the psalmist on the occasion of his or her prayer. In his or her historical review, the psalmist does not give a "balanced" historical review, but emphasizes the ongoing cycles of rebellion and repentance by the Israelites in their journey through the wilderness, highlighting the fact that no matter how many times Yahweh delivered the people, they continued in their iniquity and rebelliousness. In spite of their constant rebellion, "Nevertheless he regarded their distress when he heard their cry. For their sake he remembered his covenant, and showed compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love. He caused them to be pitied by all who held them captive."[27] The reason for this emphasis on Yahweh's patience and mercy becomes apparent in the last two verses of the psalm where the hearer learns for the first time that Psalm 106 is occasioned by a circumstance of lament as the result of the sin of the people. The plea to "save us" and "gather us" and the promise to "give thanks" and "glory in" are founded on the preceding argument that "no matter how rebellious the people were at the time of the exodus, you had compassion on them and forgave them, so forgive us now in the same way."

In Psalm 78, however, a very similar historical recital which selects many of the same events for emphasis serves a very different purpose. In this psalm, the long history of rebelliousness is utilized not in order to motivate God to forgive and save again, but to explain Yahweh's judgment against the Northern Kingdom and to legitimate the Davidic monarchy in the south. Yahweh's patience has come to an end and he will judge the people, *but only the people of the Northern Kingdom*. While rejecting Joseph and Ephraim, Yahweh has chosen Judah, Mount Zion, and his servant David. Memory, thus, is not an attempt at an objective record of the past, but serves to interpret and, to some extent, be interpreted by present experience.[28] The cry of lament, however, helps the reader to identity the limits beyond which the memories cannot be easily stretched as it contradicts present experience with past memories which the psalmist refuses to adapt in order to fit experience. Lament brings to light a key distinction between a fiction and Israel's memories. For the psalmist, the basic content of what is remembered is non-negotiable.

5.4 Response

5.4.1 The Offering of Testimony

When God answers the psalm writer, transforming his or her prayer from lament to praise, it is incumbent upon the psalmist to respond to this change with praise and

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27 Ps. 106:44-46.

28 Lee, for example, offers the credible suggestion that the plagues narrative in Psalm 78, which appears only three times in the Old Testament (Ex. 7-12; Ps. 78; 105), can best be understood as being reapplied to the situation of the Assyrian invasion under Hezekiah. Archie C. C. Lee, "The Context and Function of the Plagues Tradition in Psalm 78," *JSOT* 48 (1990): 83-89.

testimony which is offered not in private prayer, but in the midst of the congregation. Thus, when God answers the lament and reaffirms the story of his relatedness to Israel in a new act of relatedness, it is not a private act which affects only the one praying, but is a confirmation of the community story which is the property of the community as a whole. Just as lament is a public act in the Psalter, so too testimony to God's answer is offered in public, serving to reaffirm the truth of Israel's story and, thereby, their identity and their relationship with Yahweh. In this way, testimony which affirms the story becomes a part of that growing story.

Walter Brueggemann has argued that that which the Old Testament tells us about Israel's relationship with Yahweh cannot finally be reduced to a single, consistent depiction, but is presented in the form of competing testimonies about God and his dealings with his people. Furthermore, he states that testimony is not an objective account of what happened, but is "... a mixed matter of memory, reconstruction, imagination, and wish."[29] Brueggemann utilizes a courtroom analogy in which Israel as the witness offers testimony as to the true nature of God's relationship with his people. The court must finally form a decision about the truth claims of this testimony based on the testimony alone, because that about which the witnesses testify is not directly accessible to the court. The court cannot return to the original event, but must make a decision about the truth of the testimony from the testimony alone, without speculating as to what lies behind that testimony.[30]

> What happened, so our "verdict" is, is what these witnesses said happened. In complementary fashion, this means that theological interpretation does not go behind this witness with questions of ontology, wondering "what is real." What is real, so our "verdict" is, is what these witnesses say is real. Nothing more historical or ontological is available.[31]

Thus, for Brueggemann, Old Testament theology should not concern itself with questions of history (what *really* happened) or ontology (what God is *really* like), but with the reality created and maintained by the testimony contained in the biblical text. In order to function theologically within the world of the Old Testament, it is necessary to accept reality as it is defined by the testimony of the text itself.

> Note well that in focusing on speech, we tend to bracket out all questions of historicity. We are not asking, "What happened?" but "What was said?" To inquire into the historicity of the text is a legitimate enterprise, but it does not, I suggest, belong to the work of Old Testament theology. In like manner, we bracket out all questions of ontology, which ask about the "really real."[32]

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29 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 120.
30 Ibid., 121.
31 Ibid., 206.
32 Ibid., 118.

By allowing the text to set the parameters on reality, Brueggemann's approach enables the reader to consider questions about the nature of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, the identity of Israel as a nation, and the biblical writer's understanding of reality from a perspective which more closely approximates that of the psalmist.

One question raised by Brueggemann's work is "Is it ever possible, even within the biblical text itself, to confine the definition of 'what is real' exclusively to the parameters set up by testimony?" Put another way, "Can questions of history (what really happened) and ontology (what God is really like) truly be bracketed out, either by the reader or by the psalmist?"[33] Here Brueggemann's application of his analogy finds its limits, both for the modern reader and for the psalmist within the text.

To begin with, it is not accurate to say that a court of law must work exclusively from testimony. The court is free to examine other sorts of evidence as well, including physical and forensic evidence, demonstrations and reconstructions, video and audio recordings, and results of scientific testing, to name a few, and will evaluate testimony in light of those other sources of evidence. The biblical text itself evaluates the testimony not only with counter-testimony, but with other evidence which is open to more "objective" evaluation. In the context of the psalms of lament, this "other evidence" consists of the reality of lived experience which contradicts the received testimony, creating a new counter-testimony, but a counter-testimony which can be confirmed or negated by direct observation. Psalm 73 offers a prime example of this process of bringing observation directly to bear on the received tradition. As long as the psalmist continues to suffer injustice and the wicked continue to prosper, the counter-testimony which questions Israel's story has external confirmation. Likewise, when God responds to save the psalmist and judge the wicked, the testimony of relatedness receives external confirmation. Even if God's response is experienced subjectively ("until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end"), that response must eventually affect those circumstances which brought about the lament in order for the affirmations "he has answered me" or "then I perceived their end" to be sustained. The experience of God responding to save in a particular situation provides evidence (albeit inconclusive and

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[33] Norman Gottwald suggests that Brueggemann, in fact, appeals to categories of history and ontology in his theology. Gottwald observes that, while a philosophical consideration of ontology is absent from the Old Testament, an ontological category is implicitly present in that, for Israel, Yahweh "... is regarded by Israel as the ultimate reality framing and sustaining the fundamental conditions of human existence and the more specific terms of Israel's life,..." and in the counter testimony which challenges that ontological understanding. "Rhetorical, Historical, and Ontological Counterpoints in Doing Old Testament Theology," in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 19. Brueggemann himself recognizes the extent to which his attempt to exclude categories of history and ontology from Old Testament theology are problematic and he acknowledges a not always conscious indebtedness to and dependence on categories of historical criticism. Walter Brueggemann, "Theology of the Old Testament: A Prompt Retrospect," in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, eds. Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 314-315.

open-ended evidence) that the salvation events to which Israel's memories testify were themselves experienced in similar ways by the community who lived through them. Thus the present experience of God intervening to bring victory in battle provides evidence that God's past interventions, as testified to in the memories of Israel, were experienced in similar ways. This is evidence which addresses not just the testimony, but the events which lie behind the testimony. Thus, while it is true to say that we cannot go behind the testimony in order to recover the events which occasioned it, it is not true to say that all we have is the testimony.

Brueggemann himself acknowledges that testimony may be evaluated on additional grounds and not solely on the basis of other testimony and he refers to this evaluation under the rubric of the cross-examining of Israel's core testimony by the court. What I will refer to in the fourth part of this chapter as "reality testing", he calls the "reality of justice",[34] stating that

> In its deepest vexation, then, Israel makes a distinction between Yahweh and the reality of justice. While we might expect that Yahweh is ultimate and justice penultimate, in some of Israel's most desperate utterances, matters are inverted. Justice is held up as ultimate, and Yahweh as an agent of justice is critiqued for failure of justice.[35]

Present experiences of justice and injustice inform the parameters available in evaluating testimony that Yahweh is a just God and that he has acted justly in the past. Thus my own argument is that the psalmist, in the process of recalling and creating testimony, is not working exclusively within the parameters of that testimony, but is constantly testing that testimony against lived experience.

Brueggemann's argument seeks to articulate the futility of introducing questions of historicity and ontology in the modern task of formulating an Old Testament theology, maintaining that the task of such a theology is to observe the competing testimonies contained in the biblical text and the lack of final resolution in the ongoing relationship between God and Israel. In so doing, he seeks to recover the openness and ambiguity of the text which is all too often obscured or eradicated in modern attempts to systematize its content. Such an approach to the text is reflected in the Psalter where the version of reality offered in Israel's memories is constantly open to challenge by the lived experiences of the community which recites them.

I will argue in the last part of this chapter that the psalmist's understanding of truth is certainly derived from testimony.[36] Furthermore, I will continue to argue that

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[34] Gottwald also has observed that "This strikes me as a strong admission of a deep split between appearance and reality at the heart of the rhetoric." Ibid., 20. The conflict described here by Brueggemann is an ontological one, namely, "What is real, the tradition that Yahweh is just or the experience of injustice?"

[35] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 740.

[36] Coady provides an extensive argument which demonstrates that all knowledge derived from scientific inquiry rests, at least in part, on accepting the testimony of others

testimony is also constantly open to reality testing which seeks to evaluate the testimony against lived experience and, in the case of the psalms of lament, seeks a new expression of Yahweh's salvation which will confirm the testimony of previous witnesses and deny the counter-testimony of the enemies and the present circumstance. Thus, while Brueggemann's assertion that we can not go behind the testimony of the biblical witnesses to discover what "really happened" is correct, nevertheless present experiences of Yahweh can be utilized to evaluate the truth claims of testimony. There has never been a "court", either in the biblical writings themselves, or in the interpretative community which has utilized the text throughout history, or in current approaches to the study of the text, which, in the course of its cross-examination, fails to make evaluative decisions concerning the reality which the testimony puts forward, based on evidence external to the testimony itself. Fundamental to the making of such decisions is the extent to which the truth claims of the testimony may be confirmed or contradicted by the experience of the ones making the judgment. So, for example, the testimony of God's provision of food and water during the wilderness wanderings in Ps. 105:40-42 might seem a less credible indicator of how God may be expected to act today if the community which sits in judgment on the testimony is not the prosperous northern church, but the church in famine-struck Africa. I would argue that, on the basis of such evaluations, the testimony can be and is tested in terms of the accuracy with which it reflects the events that it reports. Testimony never stands alone as the definer of reality, but is always open to assessment by lived experience. Precisely because the relationship between Yahweh and Israel is not seen as confined to the arena of past memory, but is understood by the psalmist to continue into the present, Israel's memories are forever open to re-evaluation and their testimony must be periodically renewed.

5.4.2 The Counter-testimony of the Enemies.

The testimony of the psalmist that the memories of Israel are true does not stand alone in the Psalter, but is often challenged and must compete against counter-testimonies which seek to offer a version of reality which negates that affirmed by Israel's memories. Just as the psalmist asks two basic questions in his or her wrestling with the contradiction between reality and memory, so too the counter-testimony of the enemies asks the same two questions and reaches a negative conclusion. The counter-testimony of the enemies asserts that either God no longer saves and perhaps no longer even exists or , while he still acts to save Israel, he no longer acts on behalf of the psalmist.

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uncritically. It is simply not possible to "begin at the beginning" in each new scientific inquiry. Certain assumptions and information must be accepted "second hand" as a foundation for new work without being demonstrated to be true by the scientist. Limits in time and resources make this expedient. (C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992].)

The wicked have come to the place where they accept the reality of present experience over the memories of the nation, so that they proclaim that "There is no God ... We shall not be moved ... God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it ... You will not call us to account."[37] Likewise, the fool says that "there is no God"[38] and those who oppress the poor believe that "The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive."[39] The counter-testimony of the psalmist's enemies also attacks his or her relationship with Yahweh directly. Thus, they bring the accusation that "There is no help for you in God",[40] that God no longer delights in the psalmist,[41] that God is not present for the psalmist,[42] and that God has forsaken him or her.[43]

Both of these forms of counter-testimony, like the testimony of the psalmist, are open to being tested by the experienced reality of the circumstance. God's silence and hiddenness confirm the counter-testimony of the witnesses which maintain either that God does not exist or that he has no interest in the psalmist. Likewise, for God to answer the prayer of the psalmist is for him to negate the counter-testimony of the wicked and the enemies. The point which is of interest in the present discussion is that the two versions of reality are both truth claims which are open to evaluation and testing against experienced reality. The one only requires that God remain silent, aloof, and hidden in order to be sustained. The other requires a change in the outlook and in the circumstance of the psalmist which would allow him or her to assert that "God has answered me!" Thus, the counter-testimony of the wicked and the enemy serves to heighten the contradiction between experienced reality and memory, underlining the threat to the praying community's relationship with Yahweh.

5.4.3 Memory Building -- Testimony as Both a Future Resource and a Present Responsibility

In this section, I will develop the argument that the move from lament to thanksgiving and testimony in the Psalter is not a linear one but is, instead, spiral. The memories of God's saving acts in the past which provide Israel with their identity as a nation in relationship with Yahweh and with their perception of reality as a place in which Yahweh is free to act and to save are the primary resources of the psalmist in the context of lament and the response of the psalm writer to renewed deliverance becomes the material from which new memories are constructed both as a basis for praise and

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37 Ps. 10:4, 6, 11, 12.
38 Ps. 14:1.
39 Ps. 94:7.
40 Ps. 3:3.
41 Ps. 22:9.
42 Ps. 42:4, 11.
43 Ps. 71:11.

celebration and as a resource for the future, when new experiences again place Israel's relationship with Yahweh at risk.

Because testimony to Yahweh's deliverance serves this vital double function in the life of the nation, both as a basis for praise and gratitude and as a resource for future challenges to relationship, we find in the Psalter the strong expectation that the appropriate response of the psalmist to the experience of being answered by God is public speech. The psalmist is a "sign" to the nation of Israel and, indeed, to the whole world, but, as in the case of Psalm 71, the nature of that sign is ambiguous as long as Yahweh remains silent and the counter-testimony of the enemies goes unchallenged. When God answers, so that the psalmist becomes a sign of relatedness, he or she "praises", "sings praises", "shouts for joy", and talks "all day long". Yahweh's deliverance must be voiced.

The nature of testimony as both an obligation and a resource has been perhaps most clearly demonstrated in Psalm 40, in which the psalmist relativizes the importance of sacrifice in favour of testimony and offers his or her past record of faithfulness to testify when he or she was delivered by God as a motivation for God to deliver again in the present. Because the psalmist has discharged his or her responsibility to the community faithfully and has "told the glad news", "not restrained my lips", "not hidden your saving help", "spoken", and "not concealed" God's steadfast love (חסד) and his faithfulness (אמת) before the great congregation, he or she is able to say to Yahweh "Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love (חסד) and your faithfulness (אמת) keep me safe forever." The act of public testimony before the great congregation is a vital function of prayer, because even as the psalmist celebrates a new experience of God's deliverance which reaffirms the truth of Israel's memories, he or she builds new memories as a resource for the future. Even renewed deliverance does not place Israel's relationship with Yahweh above risk, so that the psalmist is obliged to be concerned for the next time that lived experience raises up a challenge to Israel's memories.

It has been traditional to classify those psalms which praise God for a specific act of deliverance in the life of the psalm writer as psalms of thanksgiving. Westermann has argued, however, that the modern notion of thanks does not appear in the Old Testament and that, in the Psalter, thanks is subsumed under the category of praise.[44] Specifically, those psalms which are categorized as psalms of thanksgiving, that is, those which praise

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[44] Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 27. The Hebrew verb ידה comes closest to the notion of "to thank" and carries both the notion of praise and of confession. (G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 5, tran. David E. Green [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986], 428.) In the Psalter, ידה appears in parallel most frequently with the verbs "to remember" or "to mention" (זכר), "to sing praise" (זמר), "to show forth" or "declare" (ספר), and "to praise" (הלל).

God for a particular and recent act of deliverance, are described by Westermann as psalms of "declarative praise".[45]

In view of the way that praise in response to God's saving actions functions in the psalms which were examined in chapter four, it seems that Westermann's classification, while correct, is incomplete. Those psalms which praise God for deliverance serve a particular function, that is, they not only praise God as an expression of gratitude, but they also offer testimony which serves to build up Israel's memory resources. The acts of remembering, mentioning, and declaring before the great congregation serve to build up Israel's primary memory resource. Thus, while the term "thanksgiving" seems incorrect, Westermann's suggestion of declarative praise does not sufficiently stress the important function which these psalms serve as a community resource. I suggest instead, therefore, that they be called psalms of testimony. The idea of testimony certainly includes the content of that testimony, namely the goodness and faithfulness of Yahweh to save, but it is not simply an expression of gratitude or praise for praise's sake. Testimony is offered in order to establish and affirm who Yahweh is in relation to Israel, specifically with an eye to how he may be expected to act in the life of the praying community.

The general move in the Psalter from lament to praise, both within individual psalms of lament and in the structure of the book as a whole, is an extremely common and easily observed feature of the psalms of lament. So pronounced is this tendency that it has led Westermann to make his oft-quoted statement, "There is no petition, no pleading from the depths, that did not move at least one step ... on the road to praise."[46] What is perhaps less obvious is the move again from testimonies of God's deliverance back into lament. If, as I have argued, testimony is a primary resource for lament, as well as a required response to it, we should expect to find psalms which move from testimony to lament, thus recycling the testimony of the psalmist when the need is renewed in a fresh crisis of relationship. We find such a move in a number of psalms, specifically Psalms 9-10, 27, 40, 44, 85, 89, and 126. A number of authors (Kirkpatrick, Kraus, Dahood) have utilized the assumption that lament invariably precedes thanksgiving as part of their argument for dividing Psalm 40 into two distinct psalms, one of which can be found in the supposedly older Psalm 70.[47] Craigie demonstrates, however, that there is no firm basis for making the assumption that the shorter psalm is necessarily older and without it the exact nature of the relationship between Psalm 40 and Psalm 70 is far less clear.[48]

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[45] Ibid., 31.

[46] Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 154.

[47] Kirkpatrick even speculates that similarity in language in the two parts may indicate that the author of 1-12 returned later to amend his or her work by adding 13-18 when the circumstances had changed. He does not consider the possibility that the work in question has introduced a lament with a testimony of past salvation in its original composition as an intentional contrast device.

[48] Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 313-314.

My own argument, that testimony is incumbent upon the psalmist when he or she is delivered so that the community's primary resource for responding to experiences of God's hiddenness may be sustained and may grow, gains support from the use by the psalmist of testimonies of past deliverance as an introduction to lament. Indeed, the assumption of the form critical method that abrupt shifts in form and mood indicate separate *Sitz im Leben*, serves to dissolve the contrast set up by the author in order to motivate a response from Yahweh.[49] Instead of breaking the text into component parts or insisting that the text always move from crisis to resolution, it seems preferable to assume that the move from testimony to lament found in some psalms is an intentional device of the psalm writer. Thus, it is more helpful to think of these psalms as a single unit, with testimony and lament in combination functioning as a motivation-for-deliverance form. If this is the case, the models of Walter Brueggemann[50] and John Goldingay[51] which picture the movement of the psalms not as a linear move from crisis to resolution, but as a cyclical move from crisis to resolution to renewed crisis seem to better reflect the movement found within the Psalter. While Brueggemann has observed the cyclical nature of the move from praise to lament to renewed praise, it has been Goldingay's contribution to observe that such a movement is better represented as a spiral rather than a circle. The experience of God's answering in lament results in growth, so that the psalmist does not simply return to the place where he or she started with the renewal of lament, but he or she has a greater stock of personal memories upon which to draw and is better equipped to confront the new experience of abandonment.

Whereas Brueggemann and Goldingay describe the general flow of the Psalms from praise to crisis to renewed praise, my own work explores one of the primary mechanisms of that move, the drawing from and adding to of the community's story by means of recital and testimony.[52] My own argument is that, in the context of lament, the story of Israel's relationship with Yahweh is constantly being called upon and the testimony of salvation which results from a new act of deliverance by God will become part of Israel's memories to which they make appeal when fresh circumstances of lament arise to threaten their relationship with Yahweh.

If this proposed relationship between lament and testimony is correct, then memory and testimony are interdependent and it is through their interaction that the

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[49] This assumption can perhaps be most clearly seen in Kraus' Psalms commentary.
[50] Walter Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function." *JSOT*, 17(1980), 3-32. See also *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1984). "Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon," *JSOT*, 50 (1991), 63-92.
[51] John Goldingay, "The Dynamic Cycle of Praise and Prayer in the Psalms", *JSOT* 20 (1981), 85-90.
[52] Even in his most extensive theological study, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, which is a rhetorical study of Israel's use of testimony, Brueggemann does not explore this cyclical interrelationship and interdependence between memory and testimony.

description of who Yahweh is in relationship to Israel is evaluated and refined. The circumstance of lament, when it is resolved, gives rise to testimonies, which in turn become the basis for confronting future circumstances of lament. It also seems likely that the cumulative testimonies to God's deliverance form the fundamental memories of who Yahweh is and how he may be expected to act and that it is from these larger stories that the more general descriptions of who Yahweh is are formed. Psalms which express praise for and testify to what God has just done express a closeness to the event which is less obvious in those praise psalms which Westermann calls psalms of descriptive praise. Westermann identifies psalms of descriptive praise with cultic use, while psalms which testify to what God has done (declarative praise) have their location "... 'out there,' in the midst of history, yes, while still on the battlefield -- in the hour and the place where God has acted."[53] It seems reasonable to conclude that it is out of the collected memories of how Yahweh has related to Israel in the past that statements about the way in which he characteristically relates are formulated.[54] These hymns or psalms of descriptive praise would seem to be less directly involved in the interaction between lament and testimony: nevertheless, general descriptions of who Yahweh is can never be completely disassociated from experiences of relationship with him out of which they arise.[55]

That descriptions of the nature and character of God are more resistant to the challenge posed by particular circumstances of lament is borne out by the fact that it is normally the psalmist's standing with Yahweh and place in the story of Yahweh's relationship with Israel which is at risk in the psalm of lament, rather than the fundamental nature of Yahweh's relatedness to Israel throughout history. The psalmist will much more readily entertain the question "Has Yahweh's relationship with me changed?" than the question "Has Yahweh's relationship with his people changed?"

5.4.4 The Continuum in Time Between Present, Past, and Future

The lament psalms seek for God to change the circumstances of lament. Even in those psalms which begin with a testimony of past salvation as preparation for lament, the psalmist is motivated to pray by an experience which casts into doubt the past acts of God because of his present inactivity. The general move in lament is from present to past, that is, the psalmist begins with the problem and then moves to memory recital as a resource for motivating God to address the problem. The move to past is not an attempt

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[53] Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 23.

[54] There are a number of psalms which contain both types of praise and which seem to move from declarative to descriptive praise, for example, Ps. 9; 18; 31; 32; 34; 66; and 116.

[55] A more speculative suggestion is that wisdom psalms arise from psalms of descriptive praise, expressing the character and nature of God in more abstract truisms and being far less available to be questioned by lived experience. So, for example, the notion of God as provider might give rise to the wisdom statement in Ps. 37:25, "I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread."

to escape into a nostalgic recollection of a simpler, safer time, but is an act of bringing the past into the present for the purpose of transforming the present. Having said that, memory recital is not just for the sake of the present moment or the present generation. The psalmist also acknowledges his or her connection with the local community, with other communities outside of the local community, and with future generations who will be receiving and reciting the community's memories (Ps. 73:15; 22:31-32; cf. 71:18; 102:19-23).[56] Thus, the vow of praise serves to motivate God to save by calling attention to the fact that the present contradiction between circumstance and who God is believed to be is not simply in discord with who he is remembered to have been yesterday, but with who he will be reported to be tomorrow. The psalmist assumes a consistency in God's character and action which is uniform through time and memory and which is threatened by the present discord. He or she seeks to remind God that to allow the breakup of this consistency will impact not just on the psalmist, but on the larger community and on future generations.

5.5 Finding a Place in the Eternal Story

5.5.1 The Shape of the Eternal Story

To the extent that Israel may be said to have a story which provides an identity for the nation and which is perpetuated from generation to generation, that story is principally rooted in the events of the exodus. The story of Yahweh's dealings with Israel were to be preserved and passed down, in order to maintain the special relationship that the nation enjoyed with their God. Psalm 78 illustrates this process. The nation is faced with the destruction of the Northern Kingdom and the need to reinterpret their relationship with Yahweh in light of this event. In order to do so, they draw on the exodus narrative and the psalmist reminds the hearer that,

> He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel,
> which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children;
> that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn,
> and rise up and tell them to their children,
> so that they should set their hope in God,
> and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments;...[57]

The praying community addresses the new situation in light of the ongoing story of the community's origin, reinterpreting the events in the light of the story and, to a lesser

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[56] Eugene Peterson has described memory as "... the capacity of the human spirit to connect the experience of last year with the one of yesterday, and at the same time to anticipate next week, and next year." *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1989), 116.
[57] Ps. 78:5-7.

extent, the story in the light of events. The constant rebelliousness of the people becomes the explanation and the justification for Yahweh's rejection of the Northern Kingdom and his eternal election of the Davidic monarchy. Israel's story is adapted in order to bring continuity to a changing world. The rebelliousness of the people has been concentrated in the Northern Kingdom, so that God's judgment leaves the Southern Kingdom intact.

Israel's story is not, however, endlessly malleable and one of the notable features of the psalmist's use of the story is his or her unwillingness to radically reinterpret that story, even when the circumstances of the moment seem to demand it. It has been my argument throughout this present work that this unwillingness to radically adapt or even abandon Israel's story can be most clearly seen in the lament psalms in the tension which the psalmist sets up between the remembered story and the present experience of abandonment which threatens to negate that story.

The story of Israel's relationship with Yahweh is seen by the psalmist as neither static nor essentially in the past. One very notable feature of the process of testimony is that it is not confined to the local community of faith or even to the nation of Israel, but is proclaimed throughout the nations and, indeed, throughout time, so that the whole world, both present and future, will hear about Yahweh. It is the intent of the psalmist that "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him." and that "Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it."[58] The psalmist has been given a new song to sing so that "Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD."[59] In Psalm 71, the psalmist has made a life-long study of spreading the story, so that he or she can appeal to God to let him or her live in order to proclaim it just a little while longer: "So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come. Your power and your righteousness, O God, reach the high heavens. You who have done great things, O God, who is like you?"[60]

The story which the psalmist proclaims is not one in which she or he is disinterested and personally uninvolved. It is a feature of remembering in the lament psalms that the psalmist will, at times, tie his or her own experiences of God's salvation with the larger story of God's saving acts for Israel (Ps. 22:5, 10-11; 44:2-4)[61] and the psalmist seeks to maintain that what God has done for Israel in the past is still a real possibility in his relationship with the psalmist in the present (Ps. 85:2-5; 126:1-4).

Israel's story of their relationship with Yahweh from which they take their sense of identity and to which they appeal in order to interpret and give continuity to present

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58 Ps. 22:28, 31-32.
59 Ps. 40:4.
60 Ps. 71:18-19.
61 Ps. 66 is an example of that same connection in a psalm of testimony after deliverance.

reality is not a static, closed story. As the memories of the past are reapplied in the present in order to serve the need of the moment, the story undergoes a certain degree of reinterpretation and of shifted emphasis.[62] Furthermore, it spreads continually throughout the world and will be the principal means by which the nations will hear about and give glory to Yahweh.

5.5.2 Is the Story True?

I have asserted that the collective memories of Israel form a coherent story which serves to identify the nation as a people in relationship with Yahweh and which serves to define the nature of that relationship and to identity the two parties involved in it. It has not been my purpose to argue that the story which Israel tells is history in any modern sense of the word.[63] While the story may not be history, though, I would argue that it is, nevertheless, understood to be "historical" by Israel in the sense that it uses the past to define the present and project the future. The dialectic found in the psalms of lament between remembered past and contradictory present experience would be impossible if the remembered past were not thought of as historical by the psalmist. A defeat in battle today may elicit prayer if the memories of Israel are not historical, but it will not elicit protest and arguments of Israel's faithfulness in relationship unless the one praying understands firstly that the past deliverance to which he or she refers happened as the result of Yahweh's intervention and secondly that Yahweh may be expected to, indeed is obligated by his relationship with Israel to, intervene again in *this* battle *today* in the same way that he intervened before. It is this protest and lobbying by the psalmist which makes clear the historical understanding which he or she had of Israel's memories. As Stroup argues regarding biblical narrative, "Christian narrative ... is 'history' in that it attempts to interpret the past and to explain what is done in the present and expected in the future in light of the claims made about the past."[64] It has been my contention throughout this study that the psalm writers utilize the memories of Israel in this historical sense, to explain the past, interpret the present, and set expectations for the future.

The story which Israel tells is not a fictional one for, as I have argued in part two of this chapter, they tell the story in order to define themselves and their relationship with Yahweh and thereby their place in the world; that is, they use the story to provide

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[62] Samuel Balentine has suggested that the act of prayer itself is a constructive one which "recharacterizes" and creates a potential for newness in both God and humanity. *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 268-269.

[63] For a discussion of the limits of modern historical approaches in addressing Old Testament issues see Leo G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

[64] Stroup, *Promise of Narrative Theology*, 92.

an identity for the nation. Drawing on this identity, Israel makes a faith claim about the nature of reality. Thus, for Israel, their story is "true" because it is believed to define reality and their place in it.[65]

This rendering of reality, though, is not a purely subjective one but it can be and is weighed and evaluated against other renderings of reality. In the context of the lament psalm, the story is constantly open to being tested against reality as it is defined by experience. According to Clifford, one distinction between ancient biblical and modern understandings of creation "... is the criterion for truth in ancient and modern accounts. We expect a creation theory with its empirical reference to be able to explain all the data, to be compatible with other verified theories and data .... The criterion for truth for cosmogonies, on the other hand, is dramatic, the plausibility of the story."[66] Clifford does not explore for his reader, however, the criterion necessary to make an account "dramatically plausible" for the ancient writer and he implies by setting up the ancient/modern distinction that the ancients were not interested in "explaining the data". My contention, however, is that, while the psalms writer obviously did not evaluate and test the biblical tradition using modern historiographic methodology, nevertheless he or she was very much interested in explaining the "data" of lived experience in terms of the story of their relationship with Yahweh and in testing that story against the data. Israel's story is not above the fray of lived experience, but can be contradicted and even rendered "untrue" by the experience of the community which tells the story. As a result, Israel both testify to the truth of their story and tell their story in the arena of lived experience, so that the story is available for confirmation, adaptation, and even negation. This "reality testing" is essential for understanding the way in which Israel view their story, because it is only by testing the story against lived experience that the story may be affirmed to be true in an "historical" sense for each new generation that tells it.[67] Conversely, precisely

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[65] Stroup draws a distinction between "history" and "historical" when speaking of the ways in which Christian narrative (and I would add, Hebrew narrative) serves to give the community their identity.

> Christian narrative is "historical" in that it claims to re-present a person's identity (and therein his or her history, present behaviour, and hopes for the future) as it has been constructed from the perspective of Christian faith. But the one identity narrative we encounter in Christian confession is itself the result of the collision between different kinds of narrative, not all of which are history or pretend to be. Symbols and myths which have nothing to do with historical events are commonly used to interpret the meaning of historical experience.

(Stroup, *Promise of Narrative Theology*, 93-94.)

[66] Richard J. Clifford, "The Hebrew Scriptures and the Theology of Creation", *Theological Studies* 46 (1985): 511-512.

[67] John McKay has suggested that the one testifying cannot engage in the academic task of evaluating their own testimony for "... if this happens there is the implicit admission that witness may not be true. And there also lies a dilemma." "When the Veil is Taken Away: The Impact of Prophetic Experience on Biblical Interpretation," *JPT* 5 (1994) : 38. While the task of testing belief against experience is not an objectively detached venture, and is therefore not a scholarly study in the traditional sense, nevertheless, it would be

because the story's truth can be tested using present experiences of God, it is also open to negation and the claim of untruth in ways which a purely fictional or non-historical story would not be.

The truth of the story and the way in which it is true is of fundamental importance. For much of Israel's story, the question "Did it happen?" is one which falls beyond the grasp of modern historical method and yet the asking of that question alerts the hearer to the kind of truth claim with which he or she is being confronted and, thereby, how that truth claim is to be interpreted and used. "What happened" informs and sets limits on "what may happen", which in turn establishes the parameters for the impact of the truth claims on the life of the hearer.[68] A story that claims to have "really happened" is able, in general, to make much more specific and more binding claims on the life of the hearer and, as a result, is far more problematic for that hearer. For example, a story which reports God responding to prayer with direct action may elicit in the hearer an expectation of similar action, but only if the hearer believes that the story is historical, that it "really happened". On the other hand, if the story is understood by the hearer to be a true fiction, then he or she is more likely to look for the truth of the story in ways which do not anticipate God's action.[69] Throughout this study it has not been my purpose to try and demonstrate that the story which Israel remembers and recites in the psalms of lament is history in the modern sense, but rather to demonstrate that, for the psalmist, the story was thought to be historical in that it was thought to describe what happened, with the result that it set up expectations about the way that things happen generally. The expectations that the psalmist brings to the story, namely that God will hear, save, and judge, attest to the psalmist's understanding the story in this way. The result is to put the story much more at risk for the psalmist by limiting the field of interpretation to the parameters of "what happened" (a move which a great deal of modern Psalms scholarship does not make), thus opening the story up to contradiction and to the possibility that finally the story is not simply a true fiction, but that it is an "untrue" story.

It is important to note that the modern biblical scholar and the psalmist are using two very different models of truth. For the modern archaeologist, for example, the assertion that the walls of Jericho were knocked down would become true when he or she can excavate Jericho and discover the stones of the walls are still laid out flat where they

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incorrect to say that the witness neither doubts nor seeks any external "proof" outside of his or her own subjective belief in the story being told.

[68] Wilder points out that our interest in what happened is driven by the larger interest in the "ways things happen". (Amos Wilder, "Story and Story-World" *Int* 37 [1983]: 353-364.) In the case of the lament psalmist, "what happened" in the memory-story sets limits on and produces expectations as to what may happen when he or she presents the contradiction between experience and memory in prayer before Yahweh.

[69] Both readings can be true readings, but, in the context of lament, the psalmist seeks to motivate God to intervene in his or her situation and so chooses an historically determined truth claim.

had fallen. But what an archaeologist cannot discover through this method of searching for truth is, firstly, whether God knocked down the walls and, secondly, whether he is still in the business of knocking down walls today. The archaeologist is limited to asking only certain types of truth questions which fall on a continuum between doubt (incomplete information) and absolute certainty (complete information). The psalmist is asking a different truth question, namely, when my enemies were last defeated and judged, did God do it and will he do it again for me today? The psalmist's truth question falls on a continuum between absolute certainty (which requires no faith because it entertains no uncertainty) and faith (which maintains an expected outcome, but which acknowledges a degree of uncertainty). Because the psalmist makes his or her truth claims about Yahweh acting in events in the life of the nation, both past and present, those claims are seen as historical in nature.

My argument throughout has been that, while the psalmist has the option of reclassifying the story from a true historical story of what is believed to have happened to a true fictional story of what things are like, to do so would be radically to transform the prayer of lament, removing or at least making non-motivational the element of protest by removing any expectation that God can and does "act that way". Indeed, the story can be rendered untrue precisely because the psalmist continues to protest, thus demonstrating his or her refusal to reclassify the story.

While this places the story of Israel perpetually at risk from contradiction by lived experience, it also allows the story to be declared an historically "true" story. In the Psalter the truth of Israel's story is never declared to be ultimate, that is, it is never removed from the fray and placed above the possibility of contradiction and negation. It never becomes an absolute truth or a dogmatic statement. When, however, God responds to the prayer of lament in a specific situation and moment in time so that the psalmist declares "You have answered me", he or she is able to say to the great assembly "the story is true". Israel cannot and does not attempt to make a final pronouncement about the truth of their story, for in order to do that it would be necessary to remove it from the arena of life experience and to cloister it within a form of the cult which denies any concrete connection with the world outside of the temple. It is precisely because Israel insist that their story is historical and test that story against lived experience that the truth claim of that story is forever at risk and, at the same time, capable of being declared true in the present encounter with God.

Walter Brueggemann locates the risk to the story in the character of God himself. He argues that there is a fundamental tension between God's sovereign self-regard and his covenantal regard for Israel.

> *These resolutions appear to me to be characteristically provisional and tenuous, likely to be unsettled in the next crisis, undone by the next text*. The reason for this unsettlement is not finally -- speaking theologically -- that Israel speaks with

> many voices (which it does), or that Israel cannot make up its mind (which it cannot); the unsettling quality belongs definitionally to the character of Yahweh. In my judgment, the texts permit no overall solution, because self-regard [by Yahweh] and regard for Israel are not, in the end, the same.[70]

I would simply observe that, because both these elements of God's nature are present in the text of the Psalter, the risk remains that God, for reasons of his sovereign purpose, may remain silent, hidden, and unresponsive, thus allowing the story of his relationship with Israel to be negated. Without such a risk, the language of lament becomes purely rhetorical, acting as an introduction to praise. The testimony of the psalmist is that God will not remain silent and that his relatedness with Israel and with the one praying will have the last word, but testimony is not certainty.

By removing the option of fictional truth or some other non-historical truth which can be detached from questions of historicity, the psalmist has opened the story up to the possibility of final and complete negation. The argument that Israel's story is in any way history in a modern sense is finally an unwinnable one because it is highly improbable by modern understanding and ultimately unprovable by modern methods. As a result, the argument that Israel's story is historically true cannot be adequately demonstrated in a modern setting. For the psalmist , though, the only "resolution" which can salvage the apparently untrue story is the response of God. Indeed, if it were possible for the psalm writer to prove that Israel's story is history in the modern sense of that word, such a move would in no way help him or her in the circumstance of lament. By placing Israel's memories in a context of lament which pleads and protests that God should respond as he is remembered to have done, the psalmist takes up Israel's story as an historical story, with the present situation providing a specific historical context from which to view the story. By refusing either to abandon memory or to deny the experience of abandonment by God, the psalmist creates and sustains a highly costly tension, waiting for God to answer.

Because the story is cast as an historical one, the lament places the veracity of the story, the identity which Israel draws from it, and the understanding of reality which they construct out of it profoundly at risk. If memory were redefined in non-historical ways or the present reality were in some way denied or reinterpreted, Israel's memories, their identity, their understanding of reality, and their existence would no longer be at risk, but neither would those memories be a resource in the circumstances of lament. For the psalmist, the story can only be true if God responds, doing as he has done before and transforming the lament into praise and testimony.

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70 Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 303.

5.5.3 Falling Outside of the Eternal Story

As I have argued above, the principal threat to the psalmist in the psalms of lament is not that God's relationship with Israel has changed, but that, for reasons which may or may not be clear to the psalmist, he or she is no longer eligible to receive Yahweh's protection, provision, and deliverance. He or she has "fallen out of" the story of those for whom God acts to save. Psalm 102 offers a unique insight into this notion of the psalmist falling out of the story. In one sense, Psalm 102 is perhaps the farthest removed from Psalm 77[71] in the Psalter in that it assumes that, even if God continues to afflict the psalmist so that he or she dies, God's failure to answer the psalmist's prayer will in no way threaten Israel's relationship with Yahweh. The psalm begins as a typical lament of the individual with a plea for Yahweh to "Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you. Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress. Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call",[72] followed by an extended complaint in verses 4-12 in which the psalmist describes his or her utter dejection. In verse 14, however, the psalmist unexpectedly voices a confident expectation for the future salvation not of him- or herself, but of Zion: "You will rise up and have compassion on Zion." Although personal complaint and plea reappear briefly in verses 24-25, the psalm concludes with the confident affirmation that what is eternal and guaranteed is not the salvation of the individual psalmist, but God himself and Zion with whom he is in relationship. Because Yahweh is eternal, outlasting even the created world, "The children of your servants shall live secure; their offspring shall be established in your presence."[73] It is reasonable to suppose that the psalmist hopes to be included among these children and offspring: nevertheless, the personal lament has completely disappeared by the end of the psalm and has been relativized by the eternal relationship between Yahweh and Zion. Psalm 102 suggests that it is possible for the individual psalmist, and presumably the local praying community, to fall out of the story without bringing to an end that story of God's relationship with Zion. Even if Yahweh does not answer and the psalmist dies, the relationship between Yahweh and Israel is unending. Thus, the falling out of the story by the psalmist is a genuine possibility, a real threat, so that the psalmist must argue, plead, and bargain with God in order to convince him that he or she belongs in the story.

We have already seen how the counter-testimony of the psalm writer's enemies serves to call into question the psalmist's place with God. The enemy's accusation in Psalm 22 that the Lord no longer delights in the psalmist is answered with the argument of unwavering trust on the part of the one praying, a trust which is like that of the

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71 As I have already argued, Psalm 77 is also unique in the Psalter in that it entertains the possibility that Yahweh has changed. If that were proven to be the case, Yahweh himself would have "fallen out of the story".
72 Ps. 102:2-3.
73 Ps. 102:29.

ancestors whom Yahweh answered and delivered in the past. Likewise in Psalm 71, the enemies maintain that the psalmist is God-forsaken, but he or she argues that his or her trust and dependence in Yahweh has been constant throughout his or her life. Thus, a key response to the accusation that the psalmist is no longer a part of Israel's story is the argument of continuity between the present moment and the psalmist's past experiences of Yahweh, as well as between the psalmist and the community of the larger story. The psalmist rigorously denies any break in the continuity of the story, either as it is told of Israel or as he or she has experienced it personally in the past and in so doing, he or she refuses to allow him- or herself to be dropped from the story without a protest.

There are also those psalms of lament in which the psalmist appears to speak from within the story, that is, in which there seems to be no threat to the psalmist's place in the story, in spite of the circumstance of lament. The circumstance of lament is still present, but the psalmist's petitions appear more confident. Thus, in Psalm 143, the psalmist can maintain that "you are my God" and "I am your servant" and on the basis of that relationship, he or she can plead for special treatment. The psalmist can ask that God not enter into judgment with him or her, even though he or she is sinful and deserving of such judgment, but that instead he judge and destroy the enemies for his name's sake, his righteousness, and his steadfast love. Being inside the story appears to carry with it a number of rights and privileges.

5.5.4 The Psalmist's Commitment to the Story

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the psalmist's relationship to the larger story of Yahweh's relationship with Israel is his or her tenacious commitment to that story, often in the face of overwhelmingly contradictory evidence. I have argued above that part of the reason for this commitment is that, for the psalmist, the story is an historically true one from which the nation draws its sense of identity and its perception of reality. Thus, to radically alter or abandon the story would have a profound effect on Israel's self-understanding, something which the psalmist seems eager to avoid.

While to some degree the psalmist is willing to remember selectively and reinterpret the story, nevertheless, he or she is often incredibly and unaccountably stubborn in his or her unwillingness to radically change or to abandon that story. It is interesting to note that the poor, for example, who have the greatest evidence to hand of the breakdown of relationship with God and the failure of memory, also have the greatest claim on relationship with God and salvation by him. Those who are poor and suffer affliction and abuse have experienced most fully a reality which tells against Israel's memories of God's salvation. As the writer of Psalm 22 maintains, however, they also have the greatest claim on God for deliverance and justice. Those who have the greatest amount of experience which says that the memories are not true also have the

greatest claim on Yahweh to act again to alter the present experience and vindicate the memory.

Robert Carroll has argued in his discussion of prophecy in ancient Israel that, when the prophecies did not "come true", they were radically reinterpreted and made to "fit" the new circumstance in order to avoid the build-up of cognitive dissonance as the prophecy is contradicted by subsequent experience. Carroll identifies faith as the primary tool for dissipating cognitive dissonance because, he argues, faith is not open to falsification.

> What makes faith such an effective avoidance of dissonance is its irrefutability. It cannot be gainsaid, rebutted, shown to be wrong or effectively argued with, though it can, or course, be given up or lost. To the person with faith nothing counts against a position nor could anything count against it .... Where faith can be tested modifications have to be introduced or the group will suffer serious dissonance on occasions.[74]

Faith is, for Carroll, a tool for avoiding unpleasant realities.

> Now faith is a very slippery concept indeed and will provide endless ways around problems, resolve dilemmas and sustain conviction against overwhelming dissonance .... Within a religious or political context faith is a way of avoiding dissonance by refusing to treat with reality and compromising expectations.[75]

While the present discussion concerns memory of story and not prophecy, nevertheless Carroll's caricature of faith is illustrative of a wrong understanding of the operation of faith in the biblical writings as a basis for believing something to be true. I have argued above that, while the psalmist's acceptance of Israel's memories as true is a faith claim, it is nevertheless open to testing against lived experience and, therefore, to the possibility of negation. It is precisely because the psalmist refuses to engage in radically reinterpreting the story that it is falsifiable. To say that the psalmist's commitment to the story is based on a faith claim about its truth is not to demonstrate that that story may be reinterpreted freely or that faith assists in avoiding the cognitive dissonance that is created by the contradiction between reality and remembrance.

The psalmist's commitment to the memories of Israel is perhaps most apparent in Psalm 77. The psalmist has come to the conclusion that the story may finally be compromised, so that the memories of the past have become untrue for the present. Nevertheless he or she retreats into the only resource available in the face of such a conclusion, the memories themselves. Against all the evidence and the psalmist's own conclusion drawn from that evidence, he or she continues to recite the memories and to

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[74] Robert P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Reactions and Responses to Failure in the Old Testament Prophetic Traditions* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 217.
[75] Ibid.

hope that Yahweh will yet respond, thus overturning the verdict that "his hand has changed". Psalm 77 is unique in the Psalter and its presence is essential to the expression of the nature of the lament. Lament arises out of the risk to relationship when God is silent and remains hidden. If God remains silent and hidden long enough, the psalmist will descend to the grave. The writer of Psalm 77 carries that process to its logical conclusion. If God continues to remain aloof from the suffering of his people, his relationship with Israel will not simply be threatened, but will dissolve. All that is to say that the threat to relationship is genuine, so that lament is not simply a rhetorical preamble to praise or a preoccupation with a momentary threat, but is an act of exploring a relationship which appears to have changed.

What is remarkable in the psalms of lament is not only the commitment of the psalmist to Israel's story, nor is it simply his or her honest, unflinching assessment of the reality of the present situation. What is most remarkable is that the writers of these psalms will neither deny the reality of their experience nor abandon the story. The resulting tension, as I have argued in chapter two, is a costly one for the psalmist to sustain and is one which appears only rarely in current biblical studies.

5.6 Summary

In the second part of this chapter, I argued that lament serves the important function of revitalizing the memory-based story of Israel through fresh experiences of crisis and deliverance, so that each new generation can appropriate Israel's story anew, making it their own story as well. The fresh appropriation and revitalization of the story resists the effects of the passage of time which tend to turn story into tradition and tradition into dogma. The story remains the story of the present day community. It does not become past and it does not become irrelevant. The revitalizing and reappropriation of Israel's story by the praying community, however, involves an element of risk. That risk may be identified in the psalms of lament not as the risk that God is absent, but as the risk that he is no longer related to the one praying as he was to the ancestors. In the Psalter, the threat to relationship takes two forms, the threat that Israel's story no longer applies to the one praying, and the threat that the story itself has changed and that God no longer relates to Israel as he is remembered to have done.

In part three I have maintained that Israel utilized their memories of Yahweh to create their sense of identity as a people, their understanding of reality, and their expectations as to how Yahweh would relate to them. Israel expected Yahweh to act consistently, judging, protecting, and providing for them as he had done in the past. The way in which the praying community applied their memories in the context of lament was somewhat selective and flexible, as the psalmist sought to restore continuity and coherence between present experience and remembered past.

In part four, I have argued that the psalmist constituted reality and set up expectations for the present based on the testimony contained in Israel's memories. When these expectations were contradicted by the circumstances of lament and by the counter-testimony of the enemies, the memories which the psalmist used in order to constitute reality were cast into doubt. In the lament psalms, the psalmist presents the contradiction between testimony and counter-testimony to God and allows the experience of God's answering or remaining aloof and silent to finally determine which testimony was "true". Memory and testimony are intimately related, for today's testimony to deliverance becomes tomorrow's memory in the time of lament. Thus, there is an obligation placed on the psalmist to testify before the great congregation. The place of the psalmist and his or her predicament is relativized by the consideration of the larger community and future generations which must hear the testimony that Israel's story is true.

In part five, I have sought to demonstrate that the memories of Israel together form a story of relatedness in which the psalmist has taken part and to which he or she seeks to remain connected. To the extent that the psalmist is able to locate him- or herself in the story in his or her present circumstance, the story is show to be an open and growing story, resistant to closure and finishing. I have also argued that the psalmist understands the story to be historically true and applies that story directly to his or her own circumstance. Because the psalmist seeks to make the connection with his or her situation, the story is laid open to the possibility both of negation and of confirmation. Furthermore, the psalmist's own place in the story is by no means assured. When the circumstances of the lament seem to suggest that the psalmist has fallen out of the story, he or she lobbies God to be included back into the story. On the other hand, when the psalmist's place in the story seems secure, he or she pleads with God from a position much more akin to confident assurance. The most remarkable feature of those psalms of lament which draw on Israel's memories as a resource in the times when God is silent is their unwillingness either to deny the reality of the moment or to abandon the story of relatedness.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

When I began this study I had thought that I would have the opportunity to study my chosen topic in such depth and with such thoroughness that I would be able to essentially exhaust it and to find answers to those questions which first attracted me to the consideration of Israel's perception of the presence and absence of their God. Having completed the present consideration of this issue, I feel as though I have done little more than introduce the subject. In providing a few answers, I have also raised many new questions which invite further study.

6.1 Summary of the Present Work

It is now possible, on the basis of the examination of a number psalms of lament which appeal to memory as an approach to God in the silence, to make a number of conclusions with regard to Israel's understanding of the presence and absence of their God and the relation of the individual with the community and the larger story in the ongoing relationship between Yahweh and his chosen people.

1) Israel are very much a people of their story and are overwhelmingly bound to that story. They have a single story in the sense that they are not free to choose whatever story, whatever god, and whatever reading of reality that suits their circumstance, but are committed to the story of their relationship with Yahweh. The story is an historically true one in that it provides Israel's identity and largely determines their interpretation of the past, their expectations for the present, and their hopes for the future.

2) In taking up Israel's story in the context of lament, the psalmist believes Yahweh to be consistent in his dealings with Israel, so that an experienced reality which is at odds with the community's memories of who Yahweh is and how he acts in relation to the community creates a tension for the psalmist between the current experience of absence and the memory of presence. The crisis which this contradiction precipitates is relational in nature, so that the initial problem which led to the contradiction is transcended by the threat to Israel's relationship with Yahweh which the continued contradiction implies.

3) Memory recital in the context of lament and more specifically the experience/memory dialectic are essential resources for exploring Israel's relationship with their God. Their story is very much an "open" story in that it is constantly being assessed by lived experience, reasserted and reappropriated by the present community of faith, and renewed and added to through their testimony. Precisely because it is a story of relationship, Israel's story is both dynamic and growing and it is perpetually at risk from experiences which contradict it. To remove the contact between the story and lived experience, thus removing these elements of openness and risk, would be to rob the story of its ability to act as a resource for approaching a hidden God.

4) Because the circumstance of lament threatens the relationship which is believed to exist between Yahweh and his people, the protest and plea of lament often consists of the psalmist seeking his or her place in the larger story which he or she remembers and testifies to. There is in the psalms of lament a general move from isolation to community and from the immediate moment to participation in the larger story of Israel's relationship with their God. The story in which the psalmist seeks to find a place stretches from the beginning of Israel's relationship with Yahweh through time to the present and will extend into the future until all the nations of the earth have heard it.

5) The continued risk both to Israel's relationship with Yahweh and to the story which results from that relationship makes the testimony which affirms the validity of the story and helps the current generation to appropriate it as their own crucial for the continuation of that story. Thus, acts of testimony are not only expressions of grateful response on the part of the one who has been delivered by Yahweh, but they are also a responsibility incumbent upon the psalmist. Testimony is crucial for the continued vitality of Israel's memories as a resource in the midst of experiences of God's silence, hiddenness, and abandonment and, therefore, for the psalmist to refuse to testify before the great assembly would be for him or her to rob the congregation of their chief means of reaffirming and reappropriating the story for themselves and addressing God in the silence.

6) Current approaches to biblical studies are at odds with the assumptions of the writers of the Psalms and, therefore, are asking different questions and coming to different conclusions about the presence and the absence of God. This becomes problematic when such approaches of presence and absence are formulated by drawing uncritically on the Psalms in order to argue for positions which are fundamentally alien to the worldview found in the Psalter. The loss of the expectation by many modernists that God can and does acts directly in human history has resulted in the dissolving of the experience/memory dialectic which is such a key element in the psalms of lament. The

dismissal of the supernatural and divine intervention has led to the replacement of memory with history. The historical approach to the biblical text, however, has largely failed because of the inability of modern historical method to recover Israel's history. As a result, while the psalmist is able to sustain the tension between present experience and the larger story, there is a strong tendency in the current literature on God's presence and absence to dissolve this tension and explore either God's presence or his absence as the primary definer of his relationship with the community of faith today.

An approach which takes seriously the psalmist's understanding of his or her and the community's relationship with Yahweh will need to consider the importance of Israel's story for identifying the community and creating their perception of reality, the life-experiences of the one remembering the story, and the open-ended place created by lament in which the psalmist waits in the profound tension between experience and memory for the response of God.

6.2 Contributions of the Present Study to the Field of Psalms Research

This present study has sought to explore the experiences of the presence and absence of God from within the worldview of the praying community which produced and prayed the Psalter. While it is never possible fully to comprehend a culture and worldview alien to one's own, nevertheless, by attending to the way in which the psalm writers approached God in the midst of experiences of abandonment, it has been possible to gain some insights into the psalmist's understanding of God's presence and absence and to apply those insights to the current enterprise of Psalms research. As a result, a number of observations about that enterprise can be made which have implications for future research.

6.2.1 Questions Set by Brevard Childs

This present study has sought to build on the contributions of Brevard Child's seminal work *Memory and Tradition in Israel* in three ways. Firstly, Childs restricted his consideration of the experiencing of Yahweh by the psalmist to an internalization of the tradition by the one praying. The exegesis of the psalms considered in this study has demonstrated, however, that the appropriation of Israel's memories, while certainly including an internal element, was concerned more often with external features of the praying community's relationship to Yahweh. The appropriation of the tradition by the one praying depended on the resolution of the presence/absence dialectic created by the circumstance which caused the psalmist to seek to reappropriate the tradition in the first place, such as a military defeat or the attack of enemies. By making both the articulating

of this dialectic and the testimony of God's response a public matter before the congregation, a purely internal appropriation of God's answer by the psalmist became impossible.

Secondly, Childs has explored the response to a fresh actualization of Israel's memories in terms of renewed obedience to the deuteronomic law. This study's exegesis of Psalm 40 in particular has demonstrated that actualization, when it takes place in the context of lament, calls for a different response. Sacrifice alone is insufficient and the recalling of Israel's memories which led to the renewed actualization must be reaffirmed and added to in public testimony.

Thirdly, Childs identifies but does not expound on the notion that Israel's memory does not consist only of the original event being recalled, but of each successive layering as that memory is recycled and reapplied, with the result that God is re-experienced. This present study has sought to expound on Child's initial observation by exploring the mechanism by which that process functions in the psalms of lament. The memory of past experiences of God's saving actions shapes the expectations of the psalmist in the present distress, but the present experience of the psalmist also challenges and shapes the memory. Memory which serves to motivate new experiences of God has been shown to be highly selective. Each new layering in the lament psalm also requires placing the memory at risk and only as the story of Israel is threatened with genuine contradiction is reappropriation made possible. With each fresh appropriation through the process of risk and resolution, a new layer is added to Israel's memories and the story is expanded.

6.2.2 Walter Brueggemann's Theology of Testimony

This study has built most directly on the rhetorical approach to the Psalms developed by Walter Brueggemann. In taking Brueggemann's approach as a point of departure, I have sought both to add to and to critique his contributions to the field of Psalms study.

Brueggemann's assertion that the primary if not exclusive means of God acting, both for the psalmist and for the modern reader of scripture, is through the transformation of the human imagination and a subsequent move to transforming human action, has not been borne out by this study, at least with regard to those who produced the Psalms. This study has called attention to the fact that plea, complaint, and lament in the Psalter all rest on the assumption that human agents of transformation are vain. God is called upon to act directly to save one who can no longer act for him or her self.

I have also sought to build on Brueggemann's model (including Goldingay's contribution to that model) of the cyclical move in the Psalter from praise to lament to renewed praise. It has been the contribution of this study to demonstrate that an

important mechanism for bringing about the movement of that cycle is the drawing on and adding to community memory by means of public memory recital and testimony. In particular, this study has demonstrated that public testimony is not only an act of gratitude and thanksgiving, but is also a responsibility incumbent on the one delivered, the importance of which transcends the present moment of experienced salvation. The offering of testimony is an individual and a community responsibility which eclipses sacrifice in importance in the context of lament. Testimony of a new act of salvation by God adds to and re-inforces those memories which are a primary resource in circumstances of lament, so that they may be drawn upon anew when a fresh crisis arises.

Brueggemann's recognition of the intrusion of experience on the rhetoric of testimony about Yahweh in the form of what he has called the "reality of justice" has not been developed in his Old Testament theology and, as Norman Gottwald has observed, it is here that categories of history (what happened) and ontology (what is real) place limits on and shape testimony.[1] Brueggemann has not yet addressed this intrusion in his work and this present study has demonstrated that the range of possible meanings for statements like "God acts" and "God answers" are determined not only or even primarily by rhetorical and literary categories. Life experiences which contradict community memory and place the community's story at risk of being negated define the parameters for articulating God's abandonment and salvation. Because of that, a subjective experience of crisis resolution must be accompanied by a change in the life experience which initiated the lament. It is, therefore, not correct to say, as Brueggemann does, that all we have is the testimony, without any other access to "what happened" and "what is real" when we consider the rhetorical functioning of Israel's testimony. This study has demonstrated that questions of "what happened" and "what is real" contained in the psalmist's testimonies are tested and reaffirmed (but never established ultimately or taken out of the fray) in the process of reality testing which goes on in the psalms of lament. Brueggemann has not yet addressed in depth the interaction between the rhetoric of testimony and the reality created by experience.

6.2.3 The Loss of Place in the Community

The exegeses in this study have demonstrated that, along side of the deuteronomic and prophetic traditions which understand a member's place in the community to be threatened by their disobedience to covenant, a second understanding of the loss of place in the community is found in the Psalter. Whereas loss of place as the result of sin requires an act of atonement, including animal sacrifice, the loss of place in

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[1] Norman Gottwald. "Rhetorical, Historical, and Ontological Counterpoints in Doing Old Testament Theology," in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 19-20.

Israel's story is not necessarily associated with human sin and, therefore, repentance and sacrifice alone are insufficient responses on the part of the one who seeks to be readmitted to the community. The psalmist's response includes a vow of praise, which certainly may include an animal sacrifice, and/or a promise to offer testimony of God's deliverance which has reinstated the one who had fallen from Israel's story. This present study has demonstrated that the offering of testimony is not only an expression of gratitude, but is also an act of story-building and, therefore, that it is a responsibility incumbent on those who draw upon Israel's memories when face with experiences of God's silence and abandonment.

6.2.4 The Loss of Memory

Another basic contribution of this study to the wider field of biblical theology is to call attention to the loss of the expectation of God's presence to save in modern scholarship, with the resulting loss of the scholar's ability to approach the psalms of lament from within the presence/absence dialectic. This study has demonstrated that this dialectic is an essential element of the psalm of lament. This inability, in turn, has resulted in the loss of memory-based story, which has been replaced in much modern biblical scholarship by the pursuit of history.

As the result of the loss of memory and of the expectation for God's action which it creates, the experience/memory dialectic becomes far more difficult to sustain and most writers have dissolved that tension either in favour of assured presence or perpetual hiddenness or absence. Such scholars a) deny all absence either by transforming signs of absence into evidence for presence (Fiddes) or by claiming a constant but elusive and therefore undetectable presence (Terrien), b) deny the possibility of presence, so that God must be manifested primarily if not exclusively through his absence (Berkovits), or c) concentrate on those odd texts which make God present as enemy, denying any other expression of presence and giving pride of place to the minority reports of the biblical texts (Milazzo, Crenshaw). None of these three approaches reflect accurately the presence/absence dialectic which this present study has demonstrated to be a primary means of responding to God in many psalms of lament. Unless this fundamental difference in approach and worldview between the writers of the Psalms and modern scholars studying questions of divine of presence and absence is recognized and taken seriously, any Psalms exegeses which are used as a foundation to construct models of God's presence and absence are in danger of being greatly distorted.

It is fair to say of modernism, I believe, that experience has finally won out over memory. The prolonged experience of God not acting has caused the story to be abandoned, so that the supernatural is not disproven but is discounted out of hand and relationship with God is restricted to that which is internally experienced and externally

mediated primarily if not exclusively through human action. As my exegetical work has demonstrated repeatedly, the expectation of the psalmist was presented publicly before the great congregation and the expectation was for God to respond in the face of human inability to do so. To the extent that memory can be recovered as a resource for approaching the text, that text can be used again to define identity and create the expectation of relatedness. As my critique of the work of Patrick has illustrated, however, the presuppositions with which the text is approached shape and limit what is remembered and how that memory may shape the reader's understanding of God. The recoverability of memory is, thus, limited by the worldview of the reader. It is essential that the effects of a radically different worldview on the reader's understanding of the experience/memory dialect in the Psalter be articulated, so that he or she does not simply project his or her own understanding uncritically onto the writers of the Psalter.

With the loss of memory, modern biblical scholarship has pursued instead questions of history. As was noted in chapter five, Philip Davies and Keith Whitelam have argued that the histories which were produced by the biblical writers are ideologically driven and, therefore, should be classified as literary inventions. While demonstrating that questions of believability and the presence of ideological motivation place limits of the ability of modern methodology to confirm the historicity of a given text, however, these authors fail to justify their subsequent classification of such materials as a literary invention.

In this present study I have argued that the memory recitals of the lament psalms are not history but memory-based "true story" which seeks to bring before God and the praying community not as accurate an account as possible of "what happened", but an understanding of relationship which is being threatened and which the psalmist believes that Yahweh can act to sustain. Thus, the reciting of memory-based story and the telling of history, although related, are two different pursuits. The placing of memory recital over against lived experience in the psalms of lament serves to test the "inventedness" of the story, thus relating the story to the historical concern of what happened in the past, in terms of what is expected and wished for in the present. To say that Israel recites story rather than history is not the same thing as saying that they recite invented literature which cannot be tested, rather than modern history which can.

In addition, this study has demonstrated that Israel's memorys are and should be ideological, that is, biased by the motivating agenda of the one remembering. The story of Israel's relationship with Yahweh should "prejudice" the psalmist in his or her understanding of reality and, as a result, the psalmist should seek to shape recollection in order to motivate God to act as he is expected to act. As the study of Psalm 143 in particular demonstrates, the psalmist has no interest either in objectivity or in detachment. The psalmist is not seeking to reconstruct the past, but to have a fresh experience of God in the present. Such ideological motivation, however, does not mean

that the story recited must be an invention. The truth claim of the story and "what really happened" in the past are held together by that seeking for a new experience of presence. The truth-claim of the story does not, however, lie behind the story in the historical accuracy of the memories being recounted, but is found instead in the tension between experience and memory and can only be demonstrated to be true by a new experience of God.

It needs to be recognized, therefore, that establishing the historical truth of the story is not the same thing as establishing the truth of the memory of who Yahweh is in relation to his people. The one seeks to confirm a factual account, while the other seeks to confirm an expectation for the present. It is possible to disprove elements of the history and still re-experience the truth of the memory through a fresh act of God's deliverance. In the same way, even if it were possible to prove that the Old Testament is an accurate and reliable history, that would still leave unanswered the question which preoccupies the psalmist, namely, "Does God still act that way today?"

6.3 Directions for Future Study

In this last section I would like to suggest three possible directions for further study; the use of lament and testimony in the Pentecostal movement, the use that postmodern biblical study methods make of story, reading community, and testimony, and the application of the experience/memory dialectic to the Old Testament theology project of Walter Brueggemann.

6.3.1 Pentecostalism

If, as I have suggested above, the principle obstacle to the recovery of a use of memory similar to that which is demonstrated in the psalms of lament is the radically different worldview of the modern reader, it would be worthwhile to examine the Christian community which most nearly approximates the expectation of the psalmist that God will act again in the present as he is remembered to have acted in Israel's story. The Pentecostal movement is founded on a set of experiences which have led its members to reappropriate a belief in the supernatural and in God's direct intervention in the life of the community of faith. Leaving aside for the present the question of whether or not the Pentecostal testimony to experience is a reliable one, it would be interesting to evaluate the Pentecostal use of testimony, story, and lament in order to see the ways in which it is similar to and different from the pattern that is found in the Psalter.

It has been widely argued in emerging Pentecostal theology that Pentecostalism is an orally-based, narratively-expressed tradition and that testimony to what God has

done in the life of the believer is an instrumental part of the life of the local congregation.[2] It would be worthwhile to compare the structure and content of Pentecostal testimony with that contained in the Psalms. It would also be instructive to examine the use of testimony specifically in the context of the experience of lament. Larry McQueen has argued that the practice of lament, which was common in the early days of the Pentecostal movement and which was often referred to as "praying through" and "tarrying", has largely disappeared from the prayer language of modern Pentecostalism.[3] In the examples which McQueen cites from early Pentecostal publications, though, "praying through" and "tarrying" appears to refer almost exclusively to seeking for salvation and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The kinds of justice questions which predominate in the Psalter are all but absent from early Pentecostal lamentation. McQueen himself observes this lack, commenting that "... Pentecostal lament must take into account the political and social implications of 'praying through'."[4]

Jean-Daniel Plüss has noted the tendency in Pentecostal testimonies to move toward a "happy ending". "There is no sense of the tragic," says Plüss, "except in the case of prolonged suffering, which then is interpreted as a period of *catharsis*, of purification and self-examination."[5] Plüss argues for the inclusion of "testimonies of defeat" which will serve to make testimonies of God's salvation from distress more credible. Thus, it would be useful to see the extent to which the experience/memory dialectic exists and is utilized in Pentecostal faith communities and to consider how the loss of lament in such communities affects the use and form of Pentecostal testimonies of God's saving action.

6.3.2 Moving into a Postmodern Hermeneutic

In this present study I have contrasted the worldview of the psalmist with that of modern biblical scholarship, but I have not attempted a similar contrast with the newly emerging postmodern worldview. The term "postmodern" has become very much a common currency in society and a dizzying number of ideas and approaches have been subsumed under that heading. I cannot attempt anything like a definition of the term postmodern under the present constraints of space, but as it relates to this present study, I

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[2] William McDonald, "Pentecostal Theology: A Classical Viewpoint." in *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 58-74. William McDonald, "Temple Theology," *Pneuma*, 1 (1979), 39-48. Cheryl Bridges Johns, *Pentecostal Formation: A Pedagogy Among the Oppressed* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 87-91. Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 112. Michael B. Dowd, "Contours of a Narrative Pentecostal Theology," a paper presented to the 15th annual meeting of the *Society for Pentecostal Studies* (1985): E1-E48.

[3] Larry R. McQueen, *Joel and the Spirit: The Cry of a Prophetic Hermeneutic* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 76-78.

[4] Ibid., 98.

[5] Jean-Daniel Plüss, *Therapeutic and Prophetic Narratives in Worship* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1988), 186.

am interested in one widely agreed upon feature of postmodernity, namely its refusal to grant a privileged place to any single metanarrative, that is, to any single story which claims to define what is absolutely or universally true. To quote Jean-François Lyotard's well-known statement, "Simplifying in the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives."[6] Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh have maintained that postmodernists reject metanarrative for two reasons. Firstly they argue that no single narrative can describe anything other than local truth because perceptions of truth are socially constructed and are , therefore, all relative. Secondly, postmodernists maintain that all metanarratives are "essentially violent and oppressive in their claim to totality", that is, one narrative can only make a claim to absolute truth by suppressing the voices of the marginalized who would offer a different version of the truth and a different narrative.[7]

The story which derives from Israel's memories as they are utilized in the Psalms may be defined as a metanarrative under both of these criterion, that is, it claims to be true throughout all generations and all nations of the earth and it is inherently violent to those who are outside of the community which accepts the metanarrative. Ps. 143 is perhaps the clearest illustration of this partiality and violence with its prayer to "not enter into judgment with your servant" but "in your steadfast love cut off my enemies, and destroy all my adversaries".

It has been my argument that the relationship which Israel enjoys with Yahweh and their commitment to the story of that relationship provides them both with their sense of identity and with a resource for addressing experiences of suffering and injustice. The Postmodern rejection of the metanarrative, so this present study would suggest, will lead to a loss of identity, of belonging to something larger than the local community and the present moment, and of a key resource for standing before the experiences which negate life. It would be worthwhile to examine postmodern approaches to biblical studies to test the theses that such an approach inherently leads to the loss of identity, to the atomization of communities into smaller and smaller subgroups, and to an inability to the sustain dual assertions that "God has abandoned me" and "God can and will be present to act and save".

6.3.3 The Way Ahead in Old Testament Theology

The approach to Old Testament theology which most closely approximates the process of protest, remembrance, and testimony found in the psalms of lament is that of

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[6] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

[7] J. Richard Middleton & Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (London: SPCK. 1995), 70-71.

Walter Brueggemann.[8] Brueggemann explores the openendedness of the Old Testament with its multiple and competing testimonies. His approach recognizes the narrative quality of Israel's memories and their claim to be not a history which can be proven objectively, but a testimony to the nature of truth and reality which is open to contradiction and testing. Brueggemann explores that contradiction, expressed in terms of the cross-examination of Israel's testimony, by attending to the various counter-testimonies contained in the text. Only briefly, though, does Brueggemann allude to the "reality of justice" through which the present experience of injustice challenges Israel's testimony.

Both Brueggemann's approach and my own seek to describe the functioning of testimony in the biblical writings. If, however, story and testimony offer a way forward in Old Testament theology, the question remains, what is the place of the modern reader in that story? Put another way, is it still possible for the modern reader to test the veracity of Israel's testimony that Yahweh is a God who protects, blesses, and judges against his or her experience of life, so that he or she can confirm the story to be true and appropriate it as his or her own? The lament psalmists bring a specific experience to God and, as long as the crisis goes unresolved, he or she refuses to affirm the story's truth. But is it still possible, in the face of the tremendous suffering of the people of God around the world today, to speak of God responding to the test of the reality of justice? For this present study to be more than simply an interesting exercise in text study and biblical theology, the questions "Is the story still true today?" and "What is the present community of faith's place in that story?" will have to be addressed.

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8 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1997.

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