

**YHWH's absence or hostility
as two main motifs of suffering and protest
in lament psalms
A Theo-dramatic approach**

**By
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Acknowledgement Declaration

This thesis submitted for assessment is the result of my own work, and no unacknowledged assistance has been received in its planning, drafting, execution or writing. All sources on which it is based have been acknowledged in writing, as has the supervision which I received in the process of its preparation.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to develop a new method of interpretation for lament psalms and to apply it to Psalms 13, 22, 44, 88. The new method is called Theo-dramatic approach.

This method recognizes lament psalms as dialogical prayers, (multi-voicing) which describe the drama of suffering experienced by the psalmists. The Theo-dramatic approach is an imaginative method of interpretation. The most important elements are: the script, the theatre and the performance. The actors are: God, the supplicant, the enemy, the community.

Script: lament Psalms: 13, 22, 44, and 88, were chosen because they demonstrate much of the vocabulary of the absence or hostility of God.

Theatre: the public space provided by the covenant relationship between God and pray-er.

Performance: the dramatized grief and pain of the psalmist, caused by the hostility or absence of God.

This method of interpretation emphasizes the drama presented in the script: protest, argument, accusation of God for being unfaithful to the covenantal responsibilities. It affirms that God's behaviour is sometimes different from how people understand his character. But the relationship between God and the sufferer continues despite God's strange behaviour (absence or hostility), because God is challenged to come onstage and bring deliverance to the supplicant, is invited to walk with him/her and bring onstage the experience of his healing presence. The sufferer

realises that he/she has a choice – he/she could try to stuff the hurt in a closet, pretend it wasn't there and wish it disappeared, or chose to bring it out into the open to face it head-on, trudge through it, feel its full weight, and do the best to confront the feeling of loss and hopelessness with the truth of God's Word at every turn. The power of the performance draws the reader onstage to work through their own experiences of God as absent or hostile, hence giving creative expression to difficult life experiences. To groan with sorrow and anger is part of being human, is that when you lose the relationship with God that is so valuable to you, you agonize over this loss, and there is nothing wrong with that. Your tears and cry of anger do not reflect a lack of faith, but a strong faith in the only one who has the healing power, if he just want to present himself on the stage.

Applying this method helps the reader to be a participant in the drama played onstage. Human life and the journey of faith imply dramatic events. The relationship with God is a risky and adventurous path.

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Abbreviations

AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentary
BCOT	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament
BDB	E. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
CC	Continental Commentary
CEC	Critical Eerdmans Commentary
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
HB	Hebrew Bible
FOTL	The Forms of the Old Testament Literature
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
MJTM	McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry
NIB	New Interpreter's Bible
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OTL	Old Testament Library
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
TDOT	G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds., <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
TLOT	E. Jenni & C. Westermann, <i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>

TWOT	R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke <i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i>
WBC	Westminster Bible Companion
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary (<i>Word</i> in footnotes)

INTRODUCTION

Suffering is a common part of human experience. It is unpredictable and devastating. It always includes loss of something or somebody. It is an experience that marks us as long as we live. Suffering can destroy our dignity and can have a negative impact on faith and God, because those who suffer may feel that God has betrayed them.

According to the Hebrew Bible, the experience of suffering led God's people to complain, protest and even accuse him of unfaithfulness. The experience of suffering gave birth to prayers of lament, prayers that are expressed in poetic language. Even if their prayers were met by a cosmic silence, God's people hoped that YHWH could change his mind. This hope was anchored in YHWH's character: his steadfast love, faithfulness and righteousness. Lament Psalms refuse to accept the situation as it is, protesting against God's behaviour, and pressing him to bring deliverance.

My thesis, *YHWH's absence or hostility as two main motifs of suffering and protest: a Theo-dramatic approach* is occasioned by my own experience of suffering.

It was 2001 when I commenced study on the book of Job with Dr. Francis Andersen at Tabor Bible College. Whilst grappling with the concept of human suffering I had no idea of the dramatic life-changing event about to happen in my own life. I suffered a horrific accident in my workplace, causing extensive injury and paraplegia. Although at first I thought that this accident had smashed all my dreams and I felt there was nothing to live for, in time I discovered that my faith in God remained

intact; and now after 10 years I begin to dream again and my hope that God has a purpose and plan for my life is being renewed. Reflecting upon the past years I recall a myriad of emotions; episodes of grief, anger, depression, discouragement, and even suicidal thoughts. Comparing myself to Job or to the psalmists I confess that at times I felt joyful and confident in my relationship with God and at other times I felt like I was 'in the pit', suffering doubts, loneliness and uncertainty about my salvation. The reality of being unable to walk again has been extremely difficult to comprehend. I can share now that the most difficult aspect of my suffering has been God's silence. I became frustrated when I didn't receive direct answers and occasionally I felt abandoned by God. While continuing to battle emotionally I maintain that God has helped me to cope with all these difficulties, finding myself coming back to the Scriptures. Though I pray daily for healing I have resolved to trust in God regarding the whole package: the accident, physical limitations, God's silence, emotions, etc. I've learned that the fight of faith is about keeping ongoing despite doubts and bad circumstances. Like the psalmists, I won't find all the answers to suffering, but I have a better understanding of it. I can now counsel, help and encourage others who are suffering; I have big plans for the future. I grew up in a communist country where faith existed but was questioned, rejected and negated by many. Atheists deny God's existence altogether; the material world is all there is and any reality beyond the physical realm is denied. The sense of a greater meaning and purpose to life is strange to their belief. Yet they are not able to offer any reasonable answer to the big question of where we come from, or explain the order or the beauty of the universe. What are we to do with God? No one could see God therefore he was something people made up, like a fairy tale, to

help us get through life. Or if he really exists what is he like? People have been debating the reality of God for centuries, and still are. My keen desire when I came to Australia was to become a good exegete. I observed that the people in Romania have very few resources to conduct thorough biblical study. Therefore I was determined to translate English reference material into my language for both pastors and Bible teachers. For a while my ordeal stopped my enthusiasm but I know now where my strength lies and on whom I depend. I'm not a hero. I have many scars and wounds, and depression is a constant companion on my journey. It's been a hard fight that has changed my life and demolished my theology, which I now begin to reconstruct, recognizing that the grace of God is sufficient for every moment of my life, and I thank him for this. These experiences have led me to read and study the Psalter, especially lament Psalms. From them I learned that it is permissible to rage against God when suffering strikes. The dialogical nature of lament Psalms allows for an authentic conversation between the sufferer and God, even if God seems to be absent or hostile. The relationship is dynamic and full of tension. The sufferer puts pressure on God to take the necessary action and bring deliverance.

In many lament Psalms YHWH's behaviour is the cause of suffering. Therefore this behaviour opens the door for protest against him and accusations of breaking the covenantal responsibilities.

A Theo-dramatic approach is a method of interpretation that is based on the world of the text. This method is imaginative: by reading lament Psalms we can visualize them as a drama that is played in the theatre, onstage in front of an audience. The protagonists or actors as YHWH,

the sufferers, the enemies and sometimes even the audience, play their roles in the drama. Sometimes YHWH's absence means that we cannot see him onstage. Many times we see onstage only the sufferer and the enemy. At other times YHWH's hostility presupposes that he is actively involved in bringing destruction on his people. Onstage he is in alliance with the enemy. YHWH's absence and hostility are not abstract ideas but realities experienced by his people who are partners in the covenantal relationship.

I chose the Theo-dramatic approach because it takes seriously the dialogical nature of the laments, and allows the hurt and anger experienced against God to be acted out onstage, leading to new experiences of life and new relationship with God.

For Christians the lament Psalms are important because by using them we can express our own or another's emotions, thoughts and feelings regarding the experiences of suffering. They are good therapy for treating our disappointments with God, and express a solid theological idea: that God can be addressed under any circumstances. This is very important for the sufferers because they can express their thoughts, feelings, frustrations and anger without being afraid that God will punish them for having the courage to be honest.

The Hebrew Bible presents God as male and I respect this; when I mention gender-related issues I will use he/she. The main translation that I used is TANAKH (JPS). When I use other translations I will mention them in brackets.

PART A

THE METHOD: A THEO-DRAMATIC APPROACH

What is now required and permitted is a mode of scripture interpretation quite unlike most of what we have practiced heretofore. In seeking to find a mode of interpretation congenial to our actual life in the world, I propose that we “take” reality as a *drama*, and that we see the text as a script for that drama.¹

Human life in the world is a dynamic process characterized by relationships, actions, dialogues, emotions, ups and downs, pleasures and pains, joys and suffering; it is a drama. This dramatic reality is portrayed in secular and religious literature. The HB unveils the drama of YHWH and his human partners. The relationship is in the context of the covenant² where both partners exercise their freedoms and responsibilities. An adequate expression for describing the relationship between YHWH and Israel in its ambiguity and complexity is ‘*Theo-drama*’.³ This study will focus on how Theo-drama is especially true in lament Psalms as Levine affirms:

¹ W. Brueggemann, *Texts under negotiation*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, pg. 64-65

² I use the term covenant to refer to ‘a solemn agreement between two or more parties, made binding by some sort of oath’ G. A. Herion ‘Covenant’, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. D.N. Freedman, Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 2000, pg. 288. In my thesis I used the Sinaitic understanding of mutual obligation and exclusivity; the responsibility of the suzerain to protect and save, etc, is the basis of the lament (Exodus 19-24). The covenant is YHWH’s initiative, but both parties have responsibilities and freedoms. YHWH is the guarantor of the covenant and he asks for a total loyalty from his people.

³ I borrowed this expression from H. U. von Balthasar’s work ‘*Theo-drama*’, 5 vol. In the first vol. *Prologomena*, he elaborates the elements of dramatic theory, using theatrical categories: the author, the actors, the director, the audience, the theatre, and the performance. Von Balthasar developed his dramatic theory in other volumes of *Theo-Drama: Dramatis Personae: Man in God; Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ; The Performance*, and *The Last Act*. For the purpose of this

...the Psalms are rooted in conflict; they do indeed dramatize arguments with virtually every sacred postulate of Israel's religion. The conflictual drama of Psalms is central to the life of every believer, for all wrestle with recurrent crises in the life of faith. The drama of Psalms affirms doubt, but in the end transforms it. The questioning and petitioning in Psalms – all the urgent imperatives we noted above – ultimately give way to acts of praise, as summed up in the Hebrew name of the book, *Tehillim*.⁴

The tension between YHWH and human partners as it is described in lament psalms necessitates a new kind of interpretation that takes seriously the dramatic tension in all its complexity and ambiguity. This mode of interpretation is a '*Theo-dramatic*'⁵ approach, a methodology that assumes that the tension described in lament Psalms is about real life, life in relationship with YHWH that is dialogical.⁶ Not only this, but the Theo-dramatic approach invites the reader to enter the world of the text and to accept the challenges of the text of being transformed by it, as Claassens writes:

The reader is not only observing the dialogue in the text, but is also participating in the dialogue herself. In the process, the reader is shaped by the dialogical encounter with the text, as all participants are changed by the encounter.⁷

study I chose the script, the theatre and the performance that will be discussed in ch.2. Some scholars who have used the work of von Balthasar for their works: C. K. J. Vanhoozer, *The drama of Doctrine*; Ben Quash, *Theology and the drama of History* and S. Wells, *Improvisation, the drama of Christian ethics*; for further discussion see A. C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2007, pg.62-80

⁴ H. J. Levine, *Sing unto God a new song*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1995, pg. 107

⁵ Theo-drama presupposes action, and the partners in the covenant are YHWH and his people. Theo-drama necessitates a method of interpretation to express the tension created by YHWH's behaviour in his relationship with his partners. This method is a Theo-dramatic approach that derives from von Balthasar's dramatic theory. It will be discussed in ch.1&2.

⁶ Claassens quotes Bakhtin who says: 'Life by very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to hide, to respond, to agree and so forth.' L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Biblical Theology as Dialogue: Continuing the Conversation on Mikhail Bakhtin & Biblical Theology*, *JBL*, 122/1 (2003), 129

⁷ *Ibid*, 138

Claassens applies Bakhtin's dialogism to biblical theology, offering a new method for doing it. Biblical texts contain different voices⁸ and the meaning of the text results from the interaction of these voices, interaction that is dialogical.⁹ She mentions Brueggemann's work in which the author emphasizes the tension between testimony and counter testimony that is dialogical too.¹⁰

The Theo-dramatic approach proposed here will attempt to identify the different voices (performers) that are in dialogue in the Psalms of lament; to examine the tension between testimony and counter-testimony implicit in this dialogue; and outline how the nature of dialogue invites the reader to participate, and so be changed along with other participants.

⁸ W. Brueggemann refers to 'core testimony' and 'countertestimony'. , 'Core testimony' is the normative voice but this is confronted by Israel's countertestimony that is multi-vocal *Theology of the Old Testament, Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1997, pg.359.

⁹ See for further discussion C. Mandolfo *God in the Dock, Dialogical Tension in the Psalms of Lament*, Sheffield Academic Press, 2002, ch.1; W. Brueggemann 'Dialogic Thickness in a Monologic Culture', *Theology Today*, v.64(2007):322-339

¹⁰ L. J. M. Claassens, Biblical Theology as Dialogue: Continuing the conversation on Mikhail Bakhtin & Biblical theology, *JBL*, 122/1 (2003), 129-131. See also W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament, Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1997; of particular importance to this thesis is Part ii, 'Israel's counter testimony'.

Chapter 1

In this section I want to discuss: drama, Theo-drama, Theo-dramatic approach and the relation between Theo-dramatic approach and lament Psalms.

1.0 Drama

Drama is defined as ‘a composition in verse or prose intended to portray life or character, or to tell a story usually involving conflicts and emotions through action and dialogue, and typically designed for theatrical performance.’¹¹ Drama is the best word to describe human life in its relationships and interactions as von Balthasar affirms:

As human beings, we already have a preliminary grasp of what drama is; we are acquainted with it from the complications, tensions, catastrophes and reconciliations which characterize our lives as individuals and in interactions with others, and we also know it in a different way from the phenomenon of the stage (which is both related to life and yet at a remove from it).¹²

Human life is composed of many dramas in which we are confronted by others as we struggle for stability and orientation. This means that we have to recognize that life is a dynamic movement that implies joy and suffering, danger and risk. In this movement YHWH has his role in the

¹¹ www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/drama

¹² H. U. von Balthasar, *Theo-drama, Prologomena*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1988, pg. 17. See also K. J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, WJKP, Louisville, 2005, pg. 49 Ben Quash, *Theology and the drama of history*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, pg. 3

drama; he does not destroy the significance of the other players, but requires our faithful participation.¹³

1.1 Theo-drama

Theo-drama is about divine-human interactions and Scripture is the Theo-drama of God's relationship with creation. When we read and interpret Scripture we are confronted with 'language of action, plot, character and dialogue around which any drama, theological or otherwise is built.'¹⁴ These elements can be found in narrative and poetic parts of the Hebrew Bible.

The relationship between YHWH and his partners is a real Theo-drama because of the interplay of the relationship that characterizes the covenant. And in this context the relationship is sometimes ambiguous. The term Theo-drama concerns itself with people, time, and place *in relation to God's purpose*.¹⁵ Theo-drama is a way of thinking theologically, literarily, rhetorically and socially about divine – human interactions that are dramatic in their nature.

True, in Theo-drama it is God's stage; the decisive content of the action is what he does: God and man will never appear as equal partners. It is God who acts, on man, for man, and then together with man; the involvement of man in the divine action is part of God's *action*, not a precondition of it.¹⁶

A psalm is a language used in relation to God (in relationship with God), which gives utterance to what we sense, or want, or respond to before

¹³ W. Brueggemann, *Texts under negotiation*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, pg.67-69

¹⁴ J. C. Medaille, *The Trinity as the pattern of the world in the Theo-drama*, www.medaille.com/trinity%20and%20the%20the0-drama.pdf, pg.1

¹⁵ B. Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pg. 13-14;

¹⁶ H. U. von Balthasar, *Prologomena*, Ignatius press, San Francisco, 1988, pg. 18

God. Accepting the dialogical way of understanding, the Theo-drama has a new perspective and YHWH is a real agent who plays his role in the drama:

The God of the Bible, of the Old Testament, is a God in *relation*. That in turn means that God's sovereignty is governance in relation, marked not only by power, but also by fidelity and infidelity. This re-characterization of God is enormously important, because it requires that God be acknowledged as agent; the agency of God is decisive for the world.¹⁷

Theo-Drama is part of von Balthasar's Trilogy. In the first volume *Prologomena* the author elaborates his dramatic theory in relation to God's drama of salvation. He introduces in his theological dramatic theory a Trinitarian and soteriological dimension in which the Father is the 'author' of the drama of salvation, the Son in his embodied form is the 'actor' sent by the Father, and the Holy Spirit is the 'director' who orchestrates this drama.¹⁸ The substance of Christian theology is God's drama of salvation through Jesus Christ and made effective in the believer by the Holy Spirit. Both God and believers are actors in realising the drama of salvation.

Von Balthasar's dramatic theory can be applied to lament Psalms that are dramas of salvation and deliverance from a threatening and dangerous situation. The psalmists, Israel's poets, experience an unapproachable or hostile God. In fact the prayers are dramatic discourses that present the complaints of the speakers against YHWH.

¹⁷ W. Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2009, pg. XVI

¹⁸ H. U. von Balthasar, *Prologomena* vol. 1, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1983, pg. 314-343

Theo-drama speaks about the divine action through which YHWH invites human partners to participate in an intimate relationship. Although the relationship is asymmetrical it is still a real relationship that expresses the dynamism and dramatism of human life in its flow. First, Theo-drama accepts the ambiguities of life that are unpredictable, caused by different factors; it expresses the existential truth as it is, not as it might be. Second, Theo-drama does not promote resignation. It has an element of anticipation by faith because there is a higher authority to which the human partner can appeal: YHWH.

Lament Psalms describe the ambiguities and perplexities of human lives but at the same time speak about the hope of the supplicant who anticipates a favourable resolution from YHWH.

1.2 Theo-dramatic approach

God is the ‘author’ of the drama of salvation still, but the ‘actors’ are much more human; the Spirit is not there conceptually in the Psalms, but we may assume the continuity of the salvation story, over which our Christian theology affirms the ‘direction’ of the Spirit. Hence, while not using von Balthasar’s Trinitarian approach, the assumption of the nature of Scripture to have an ultimate purpose of salvation allows us to use his approach in exploring how the drama of salvation is played out in the laments. Perhaps the starting discovery is that accusations of absence or hostility against God are actually part of the drama of salvation.

A Theo-dramatic interpretation of lament Psalms gives credit to what the biblical text communicates; it is interested in real life with its tensions. Both YHWH and human partners have their freedom and responsibilities

in the context of the covenantal relationship, and in lament Psalms the conflict is created by the tension between authority and experience.

The conflict that fuels the drama of psalms is one between authority and experience. Israelite religious authority teaches that there are two clearly antithetical paths for the individual to follow, the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. The first leads to happiness, and the second to ruin... Experience teaches that the righteous path does not necessarily lead to happiness, nor the wicked path to ruin. In fact the opposite is often the case.¹⁹

A Theo-dramatic approach gives a method to enter into the suffering described in lament Psalms, the cause of which is YHWH's absence or hostility. This method presents the dramatic tension between YHWH and the sufferer, tension that is caused by YHWH's failure to fulfil the covenantal responsibilities towards his partners. The psalmists are fully equipped to enter into conversation with God because they are aware of their desperate need for God and their incapacitating weakness. They want to find the heart of God in the darkness of their suffering. And in the brokenness of overwhelming grief sometimes they put aside their feelings of disappointment and confusion and, in a regained perspective of God's power and sufficiency, they move to the praise.

A Theo-dramatic approach is a method of interpretation that is concerned with YHWH's behaviour towards his human partners. Its main elements are: the script, the theatre and the performance.

Wells writes that von Balthasar, in his monumental work *Theo-drama*, searched for a specific genre '...that does justice to the dialogue between God and humanity, to the interaction between the finite freedom of

¹⁹ H. J. Levine, *Sing unto God a New Song*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1995, pg. 106

humanity and the infinite freedom of God...'²⁰ Dialogue and interaction connote the idea of *dramatic* that is always present in the framework of covenant. Informed by von Balthasar's work, Wells argues that epic and lyric genres are not adequate to express fully the *dramatic* perspective of scripture.²¹

The *dramatic* perspective synthesizes the strengths of the epic and lyric dimensions. Like lyric it does justice to the role of the subject, the way that events arise from the hearts and minds and actions of people, rather than from impersonal external forces. Like epic it perceives an object that has reason and validity beyond the subjectivity of the involved observer.²²

This perspective emphasizes the dramatism of the dialogue as it is in Scriptures. Dialogue is an important element in drama, and the Hebrew Bible reveals that God can be approached in prayer. 'Thus God as we actually encounter him emerges as neither purely logical nor purely dialectical, but dia-logical, and dialogue is the language of the drama.'²³

Dialogue is part of the lament Psalms. They are prayers addressed to YHWH. Mandolfo demonstrates their dialogical character and emphasizes the phenomenon of voicing: there is a shift in voice from first person to third person. Her study is informed by Bakhtin's language theory.

Whatever the degree of dialogic interaction assigned to these psalms, there is little doubt that, in spite of their lyric form, they are genuinely dialogical, in fact the very existence of 'complaint' alongside 'words of confidence' or 'recitation of

²⁰ S. Wells, *Improvisation, the drama of Christian ethics*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2004, pg.46

²¹ For a further discussion about lyric and epic genres see Wells' *Improvisation*, pg.46-50

²² *Ibid*, pg. 47

²³ J. C. Medaille, *The Trinity as the pattern of the world in Theo-drama*, www.medaille.com/trinity%20and%20the%20theo-drama.pdf, pg.1

saving deeds' in lament genre predetermines to some extent a dialogical reading.²⁴

Lament Psalms are dramatic prayers in which the supplicant addresses YHWH, and in this dialogue the hurting one is pouring the whole being before God in order to convince him to change his mind. Both God and believer are affected by what has happened in the life of the human partner who uses different means to plead his/her cause in order to obtain a favourable answer from God. These Psalms are prayers of protest²⁵, prayers that 'provide a vehicle for a more elaborate and explicit openness of the self and its disintegration to God.'²⁶

This 'openness of the self and its disintegration' is best expressed in poetic imagery, language that is important for Theo-dramatic approach:

While the poetic form of these prayers means that we may not view their depictions simply literally, they are, for that very reason, vivid presentations of internal, physical, mental and spiritual anguish.²⁷

Lament Psalms for Israel give expression to the real experiences of faith and worship. They provide the necessary structure to express crisis, grief and despair in order to help the supplicant to move from hurt to joy, from

²⁴ C. Mandolfo, *God in the Dock: Dialogical Tension in the Psalms of Lament*, Sheffield Academic Press, 2003, pg.169

²⁵ Regarding protest see J. Goldingay's *Old Testament Theology*, v.2, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 2009, pg. 209-229; W. S. Morrow, *Protest against God*, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007, ch.3, 4 & 5; A. Laytner, *Arguing with God*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, Oxford, 1990, ch.1; J. Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2007, ch.5

²⁶ P. D. Miller, *They cried to the Lord*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1994, pg.80

²⁷ Ibid., pg. 80, see also R. A. Klein 'The phenomenology of lament and the presence of God in time', *Evoking lament*, ed. E. Harasta & B. Brock, T&T Clark, New York, 2009, pg. 15-24; A. C. Cottill: 'The Articulate Body: The Language of Suffering in the Laments of the Individual' *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts*, ed. N. C. Lee & C. Mandolfo, SBL, Atlanta, 2008, pg.103-112 ; for poetic forms see W. P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: a Theology of Metaphor*, WJKP, Louisville, 2002, pg. 1-14

darkness to life, from despair to hope. The movement from lament to praise and worship is not only psychological or physical but also spiritual.

1.3 Lament Psalms and Theo-dramatic approach

The Psalter contains different types or genres²⁸ of Psalms. Westermann affirms that lament genre includes two types of lament: individual (LI) and communal (LP).²⁹ The individual lament has the following structure: address, lament, confession of trust, petition and assurance of being heard, and vow of praise. The structure of communal lament is: address, lament, confession of trust (God's saving deeds in the past for his people), petition and vow of praise.³⁰

There are many approaches regarding the interpretation of the Psalms. The father of the modern study of the Psalms is considered to be H. Gunkel who founded the method known as *form-criticism*. 'He identified and described the basic literary types or genre (Gattungen) in the Psalms.'³¹ Gunkel stressed that the Psalms should be studied not only in the context of OT, but also in the cultural context of ANE worldview. His influence is still present today and modern scholarship recognizes Gunkel's contribution.³²

²⁸ 'A genre is a shared pattern of communication usually shaped in particular social contexts that signals certain expectations of how a text or speech is to be interpreted and used', C. C. Broyles 'Lament, Psalms of', *Dictionary of the Old Testament, Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. T. Longman iii & P. Enns, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 2008, pg.384

²⁹ C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, JKP, Atlanta, 1981, pg.165-194

³⁰ Ibid, pg.52-59, 64. See Westermann's article 'The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament' *Interpretation*, 1974,v.28, 1:pp.20-38; see C. Welz 'Trust and Lament, Faith in the Face Of Godforsakenness' *Evoking Lament*, ed. E. Harasta & B. Brock, T&T Clark, New York, 2009, Pg.118-135

³¹ P. C. Craigie, Psalms 1-50 , *Word*, v.19, Thomas Nelson Inc, 2004, pg. 45

³² Ibid, pg. 45

Building on Gunkel's foundation, S. Mowinckel developed the view that some Psalms are related to cult and ritual; the Davidic king played a major role in autumn and New Year festivals.³³ He affirmed that Israelites borrowed from their neighbours ideas and customs regarding their festivals.³⁴ His insights are still relevant today for liturgical practice.

C. Westermann identified two types of Psalms: praise and lament. He writes that 'in the Psalter there are two dominant categories, the hymn (including the Psalms of thanks) and lament'³⁵. He noticed the fact that there is a transition in the structure of lament Psalms: from lament to praise.³⁶ In LI the enemy belongs to the community and in LP the enemy is political.³⁷

W. Brueggemann influenced by Westermann and Ricoeur, classified the psalms as psalms of orientation, disorientation and reorientation.³⁸ The lament psalms are disorientation psalms. He writes that 'The lament psalm is a painful, anguished articulation of a move into disarray and dislocation.'³⁹ God's people experience seasons of orientation, disorientation and reorientation; the process is not cyclical but spiral.

³³ S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel Worship*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2004, pg.107f

³⁴ Ibid, pg.130f

³⁵ C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, JKP, Atlanta, 1981, pg.18

³⁶ Ibid, pg.267

³⁷ Ibid, pg.193f

³⁸ W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, Augsburg Publishing House, 1981, pg.18

³⁹ Ibid, pg.20

C. C. Broyles picked up Gerstenberger's notion of complaint and developed it. He makes a distinction between lament and complaint. Broyles affirms that lament Psalms contain God-laments in which the supplicant protests against God's disposition or activity. When something doesn't seem fair or something bad happens, when undeserved suffering comes, the psalmist is ready to place the blame on someone and this someone responsible is God. Moreover they are encouraged by their ancestors' examples to express their anger towards him freely. Certainly God can handle their honest emotions, even the ones accompanied with a spirit of resistance and rebellion. In God-laments, God is responsible for his actions.⁴⁰ Floysvik's book *When God becomes my enemy, The Theology of the Complaint Psalms* is built on Broyles' idea of God-laments as protests against God who is the cause of trouble for his partners.⁴¹

In this study I will focus on Psalms 13, 22, 44, and 88⁴² because of the word limit of the thesis. These Psalms contain the breadth of vocabulary that I am examining. I have included a communal lament (ps.44) to demonstrate that the vocabulary of absence or hostility is not limited only to lament of the individual.

A Theo-dramatic approach is a method of interpretation which focuses on the literary and rhetorical world of the text. This approach is an imaginative method of interpretation making vivid the experience of suffering described in lament Psalms, taking into consideration the

⁴⁰ C.C. Broyles, 'Lament, Psalms of', *Dictionary of the Old Testament, Wisdom, Poetry, Writings*, ed. T. Longman iii & P. Enns, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 2008, pg.384-398

⁴¹ I. Floysvik, *When God becomes my enemy, The Theology of the Complaint Psalms*, Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louise, 1997, pg.13-24

⁴² They will be analysed in part B

metaphors used to present the psychological, biological, social and theological dimension of suffering. The method allows the reader to enter into the tension of the experience without needing to solve that tension and by playing out the full dramatic movement it offers a solution that leads the reader from lament to praise. This means that the reader is involved in a hermeneutic of self-involvement through speech-act theory which ‘highlights the ways in which the biblical text is drawn into the life of the reader, as illocutions are discerned amid the locutions.’⁴³ Biblical texts have performative functions and speech-act theory offers the necessary tools for analysing these texts.

I suggest that the strengths of Theo-dramatic approach are: (1) it is imaginative in interpreting the text, (2) it gives voice to the conflict between the normative voice and other voices that is dialogical, (3) it calls the reader to participate in the drama presented in lament Psalms. Its limitation is: (1) it does not solve the tension between YHWH’s character and behaviour, (2) the method doesn’t attempt to theologically explain the dark pictures of God presented by these psalms.

⁴³ R. S. Briggs, ‘Speech-act theory’ ed. D. G. Firth & J. A. Grant, *Words and the Word*, Apollos, InterVarsity Press, Nottingham, 2008, pg.75-106; see also N. Wolterstorff: *Divine discourse*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pg.171-182

Chapter 2

2.0 Elements of Theo-dramatic approach

Von Balthasar analyses the elements of the theological dramatic theory, taken from theatrical categories. My purpose is to concentrate on three of these elements: the script, the theatre and especially the performance.

2.1 The script

The script in Theo-dramatic approach can be applied to the whole Scripture or parts of it. According to von Balthasar the Scriptures: ‘...are documents of their time, they are part of the stream of the horizontal history... they continually need to be reinterpreted in order to remain relevant.’⁴⁴ Having a historical dimension, Scripture is a literary production written according to the literary conventions of the time.

...the biblical text is an imaginative literary enterprise in which the writers are like dramatists who create new scenes about God but who are readily surprised by the moves made by the lead character, almost against the intent and beyond the imagination of the author.⁴⁵

The selected Psalms contain the vocabulary of YHWH’s absence (rejection, hiddenness, forgetfulness, distance and sleep), and hostility (military defeat and near-death experience). These Psalms affirm that YHWH is the cause of trouble emphasizing that there is a discrepancy

⁴⁴ H. U. von Balthasar, *Theo-drama, Prologomena*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1988, pg. 29

⁴⁵ W. Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology, Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, ed. P. D. Miller, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992, pg.35

between YHWH's character and his behaviour. I will use these Psalms to illustrate the Theo-dramatic approach after discussing thoroughly the elements of Theo-dramatic method in this chapter.

2.1.1 Psalm 13

The Psalm begins with four 'how long' questions addressed to YHWH. The first two question God's absence: 'forget me' and 'hide your face'. The psalmist asks YHWH to intervene in order to bring deliverance from enemies. Despite the situation the supplicant affirms trust in God's steadfast love.

2.1.2 Psalm 22

The psalmist complains that YHWH abandoned him/her without reason and despite the continuous crying YHWH does not answer. In this situation the sufferer reminds God about his deeds in the past and contrasts them with the current experience that becomes intolerable. The presence of enemies, as well as the psalmist's physical suffering, is described in vivid images. The plea is expressed clearly: 'but you, O LORD, be not far off' (v. 20). In other words YHWH is implored to come quickly and help his/her partner and this will be a reason for proclaiming YHWH's victory in the community.

2.1.3 Psalm 44

The community is shocked about YHWH's behaviour in helping the enemy to win the victory. The people remembered YHWH's activity on behalf of the ancestors in the past. Comparing the past with the present the community perceives that YHWH acted against it, therefore it expresses the strong accusation against him. The people did not break

the covenant, they fulfilled its obligations: ‘All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten You, or been false to Your covenant’ (v.18). Although the blame is on YHWH, who is the primary cause of the military defeat, the community still appeals to his character: ‘Arise and help us, redeem us, as befits Your faithfulness’ (v. 27).

2.1.4 Psalm 88

The supplicant is in a near death situation: ‘I am numbered with those who go down to the Pit; I am a helpless man abandoned among the dead...’ (vv. 5-6a). The darkness is the context of this poem. The cause of this dark existence is YHWH’s fury: ‘Your fury lies heavy upon me’ (v. 8a). From start to finish this psalm is full of complaint and the only hope for the psalmist is to articulate loudly his/her protest regarding YHWH’s attitude.

To describe their experiences the poets use metaphorical language therefore it is necessary to discuss metaphors and their interpretations.

2.2 Excursus

Metaphors and Theo-dramatic approach

The psalmists used the language with its richness to evoke reality. Poetry is characterized by metaphorical language, and because lament Psalms are the script in this thesis, it is necessary to discuss metaphor which is not only part of poetry but also of our human language. ‘Metaphor is endemic to our created being’.⁴⁶ The life of faith in Psalms is oscillating

⁴⁶ Belden C. Lane, ‘Language, metaphor, and pastoral theology’, *Theology Today*, vol. 43, no. 4, Jan. 1987, pg. 488

between joy, praise and agony, complaint; it is bi-polar and can be described using a metaphorical language.⁴⁷

Definition

Metaphors communicate meaning and they are ‘a specific and identifiable literary form.’⁴⁸

Soskice’s definition: ‘metaphor is a figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another’⁴⁹, is further elaborated as the word ‘speaking’ denotes that metaphor is ‘a phenomenon of language’ and the word ‘thing’ is a general term not ‘a physical object’.⁵⁰ Metaphor discloses something new.

There are many definitions of metaphor but summarizing the above ones, metaphor is a phenomenon of language having a cognitive dimension, a phenomenon in which the familiar is used to give expression to the unfamiliar. Being a form of language metaphor implies a process of engagement in order to discover the meaning; in its nature metaphor has the power to suggest, to capture and to delight.

The paradox of metaphor

Metaphor as a phenomenon of language has its paradox created by the tension between the familiar and unfamiliar.

⁴⁷ W. P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms, a Theology of Metaphor*, WJKP, Louisville, 2002, pg. 2

⁴⁸ Margaret F. Carswell, *Biblical metaphors for God in the primary level of the religious education series: To know, worship and love*. (Ph. D thesis, Australian Catholic University, Fitzroy, Vic.) www.dilibrary.acu.edu.au/digital theses, 2006, pg. 63

⁴⁹ Janet M. Soskice, *Metaphor and religious language*, Oxford University Press, 1985, pg. 15

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 15

Ricoeur affirms that this paradox is characteristic of every metaphor in the sense that something is and is not at the same time.⁵¹

Then, in affirming that ‘x’ is ‘y’ the metaphorical statement sustains that ‘x’ is not ‘y’. This tension in fact creates the metaphorical language and is the controlling factor in interpreting it. Although there is this tension, ‘metaphors make real and substantial claims about reality that cannot be expressed in alternative propositional forms.’⁵²

The role of metaphor

Metaphors are not simply literary devices, but a means to communicate reality: ‘they are a way of thinking and formulating reality.’⁵³

Metaphors are grounded in a network of cultural and social relationships which make a powerful impact on the imagination of the audience, inviting it to participate in the experience. Metaphors appeal to a common experience and knowledge that are part of ‘fields of meaning’ ‘which together make up for a person or a culture, a “world of meanings”... The structure of a field or world of meanings comprises a network of concepts and relations.’⁵⁴

In lament Psalms there is a common language of experience that metaphor exploits: feelings of hurt, anger and abandonment by YHWH or by the loved ones. Ryken explains that metaphors appeal in a vivid way to the imagination of the reader, forcing him/her ‘to ponder or

⁵¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The rule of metaphor*, Routledge Classics, 2006, pg. 293

⁵² Ian Paul, ‘Metaphor’, *Dictionary for theological interpretation for the Bible*, gen. ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2005, pg. 508

⁵³ Leland Ryken, *Words of delight*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2001, pg. 169

⁵⁴ M. Gerhart, J. P. Healey, and A. M. Russell, ‘Sublimation of the Goddess in the Deitic Metaphor of Moses’, *Semeia*, 61 (1993), 167-82

meditate.⁵⁵ Lane writes that ‘suggestiveness is one of the most compelling attributes of metaphor.’⁵⁶ In other words metaphor invites the readers to become active explorers or participants in the reality presented by them.

The language with its tropes is the main source for interpreting lament Psalms. Metaphors are important because the psalmist uses them to narrate the relationship between YHWH and his human partners; to describe both YHWH and human suffering. The text’s depiction of YHWH’s character can only be read in the light of a discussion of metaphor. The paradox between ‘is’ and ‘is not’ is dynamic; the psalms’ language about God as well as the relationship between the performers are also dynamic and dramatic.

2.3 The theatre

The theatre is the place where the script is interpreted and played on the stage for the benefit of the audience. ‘Probably nowhere else but in this interplay of relationships (which is of the essence of the theatre) can we see so clearly the questionable nature and ambiguity not only of the theatre but also of existence itself, which the theatre illuminates.’⁵⁷

The theatre with its stage is a public space, a safe place, where the drama of existence as it is described in lament Psalms, is played for an audience that can be universal. In Theo-dramatic approach the theatre and the

⁵⁵ Ibid., pg. 167

⁵⁶ B. C. Lane, ‘Language metaphor and pastoral theology’, *Theology Today*, vol. 43, nr. 4, Jan. 1987, pg. 497

⁵⁷ H. U. von Balthasar, *Prologomena*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1988, pg. 17-18

stage represent the covenantal relationships.⁵⁸ Within this covenantal existence God can be safely encountered, even if that encounter is fraught with anger and pain. The covenant is not an abstract term but a web of relationships, marked by certain limits, between two parties: YHWH and Israel.

2.4 The performance

In a Theo-dramatic approach, performance is the embodied action of the script by actors. The interpreter/reader is not a passive person detached from the experiences described in lament Psalms, but an active participant who is conscious of the dramatic dimension of the journey of faith.

Christian existence is first and foremost an activity – a performance, if you will. If Christian faith is from start to finish a performance, it is so only because Christians worship a God who is pure act, an eternally performing God.... In short, our God is a performing God who has invited us to join in the performance that is God's life.⁵⁹

As a performer YHWH is continually and fully involved in his creation, being affected by what happens in it. The relationship with God is that of creatures to the Creator, and Israel depended on him for life, sustenance, help in trouble and mercy, although in good times they liked to think of themselves as independent and self-sufficient. It was vital that they acknowledge their need because this was the beginning point of their relationship with him. God is interested in an authentic and interdependent relationship with humanity especially with his people.

⁵⁸ After the Exodus event, YHWH established a covenant with Israel at Sinai. A biblical covenant is an agreement between YHWH and his people. In Sinaitic covenant, Exod 19-24, YHWH is the one who provides the content and the boundaries of the covenant. By entering into covenant, both parties oblige themselves to fulfil the stipulations of the agreement. The relationship is in the context of the covenant.

⁵⁹ S. Hauerwas, *Performing the faith*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2004, pg. 76-77

Everything anyone can experience in relation to God is in these Psalms. These prayers are the best place in OT to explore all the parts of our life and then to say who we are and what is in us - guilt, anger, abandonment, salvation, praise - to the God who judges, loves, saves.

God is sovereign over the world, yet not unqualifiedly so, as considerable power and freedom have been given to the creatures... God is unchangeable with respect to the steadfastness of his love and salvific will for all creatures, yet God does change in the light of what happened in the interaction between God and world.⁶⁰

This interaction presupposes that YHWH can address and can be addressed. Blumenthal considers that this is an attribute of God, and: 'This communication, this mutual addressing of one another, is central to the dialogical nature of creation-revelation-piety.'⁶¹

The relationship between God and humankind and vice-versa is characterized by dialogue. It is the mutual relation between I and You. 'The primary word I – Thou establishes the world of relation.'⁶²

In a Theo-dramatic approach the performance is concerned with the network of relation created by the dialogue between the I and You world in which both I and You have the freedom to address each other, to put questions, to express satisfaction or anger regarding the covenantal responsibilities. Brueggemann argues that in the Psalms, usually the I addresses the You:

The Psalms, with a few exceptions, are not the voice of God addressing us. They rather are the voice of our own common humanity... And so when we turn to the Psalms it means we

⁶⁰ T. E. Fretheim, *The suffering of God*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984, pg. 35

⁶¹ D. R. Blumenthal, *Facing the abusing God*, WJKP, Louisville, 1993, pg. 15-16

⁶² M. Buber, *I and Thou*, Continuum, London, 2004, pg. 13

enter into the midst of that voice of humanity and decide to take our stand with that voice. We are prepared to speak among them and with them and for them, to express our solidarity in this anguished, joyous human pilgrimage, we add a voice to the common elation, shared grief, and communal rage that besets us all.⁶³

Wallace writes that the Psalter is a world in which conversation is the dominant factor: ‘the Psalms are fully a two-way (or multi-way) communication.’⁶⁴

Performance in a Theo-dramatic approach acknowledges the importance of the conversation in lament Psalms and asks for our unreserved involvement in this world full of conversation, therefore we must be prepared ‘... to be carried wherever it takes us, even where you do not wish to go, into areas that are painful, disturbing, and possibly unbearable.’⁶⁵ This means that the performer is fully engaged by the text and the text by the performer.

Good performers of the Christian faith, like good musicians, are those who have refined the art of allowing themselves to be played by the work even as they perform it. The work plays them as much as, if not more than they play the work.⁶⁶

Even if the performer in a Theo-dramatic approach is not a sufferer in the true sense of the word, by performing the lament Psalms, she/he acknowledges the reality of pain and participates in another’s experience of pain: ‘weep with those who weep’ (Rom. 12:15 NRSV).

⁶³ W. Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 2nd Ed., Paternoster Press, UK, 2007, pg. 1-2. See Brueggemann’s book *Disruptive Grace*, ed. C. J. Sharp, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2011, pg.179-205

⁶⁴ H. N. Wallace, *Words to God, word from God*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., Aldershot, 2005, pg. 21-22

⁶⁵ H. U. von Balthasar, *Prologomena*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1998, pg. 309

⁶⁶ S. Hauerwas, *Performing the faith*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2004, pg. 102

Performance or interpretation in the Theo-dramatic approach recognizes and emphasizes the importance of the dialogue between the believer and YHWH, dialogue that is loaded with all kinds of emotions and arguments, and is expressed in metaphorical language.

Chapter 3

3.0 Who is YHWH in the Psalms

The lament Psalms are based on perceived discrepancies between expectations of YHWH's actions and actual experiences. It is important to consider the character of YHWH, as YHWH is one of the performers in the lament Psalms.⁶⁷

Heschel writes that 'in the Bible the realness of God came first...'⁶⁸ and 'God himself is described as reflecting over the plight of man, rather than as contemplating eternal ideas.'⁶⁹ The realness of God and his reflecting are important for the Theo-dramatic approach because in lament Psalms *God is a character in Theo-drama who performs his role as absent or hostile* (italics mine), therefore the sufferer prays to YHWH to manifest his presence and to intervene in order to change the dangerous situations, as, to change his behaviour towards the psalmist.

When YHWH does not seem to fulfil his covenantal responsibilities towards the human partner, the experience of the believer is that the relationship is jeopardized. This creates a dramatic tension that gives occasion for the human partner to express negative emotions and to ask God to give reasons for his attitude that contradicts the recital

⁶⁷ See M. T. Mjaaland 'The Fractured Unity of God, Lament as a Challenge to the Very Nature of God', *Evoking Lament*, ed. E. Harasta & B. Brock, T&T Clark, New York, 2009, pg.99-115

⁶⁸ A. J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, Prince Press, Hendrickson, Peabody 2003, pg. 16

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 5

constituting the “core testimony”⁷⁰ of Israelite faith. In other words, why does YHWH behave in such a way that is against his self-revelation given to Moses, as described in Exodus 34:6-7a?

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed:
The LORD! The LORD! A God compassionate
and gracious, slow to anger, abounding
in kindness and faithfulness, extending
kindness to the thousandth generations,
forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin...

Exodus 34:6-7a is a positive recital to which Israel appeals by praising YHWH for his deeds, or urging him to act in favour of his covenantal partner.⁷¹

This recital ‘is a window into the nature and character of the Deity’⁷² and the knowledge about YHWH is given by him in his terms: ‘this God can only be known on God’s own terms...’⁷³ And this is always God’s purpose: to use whatever means he sees fit to bring the sufferers to a closer relationship with him, to create in them a faith that will give them the strength to keep holding on to hope – not a flimsy wishing or a hope that everything will be fixed in this life but genuine biblical hope that one day the unseen will be seen, on the stage.

Israel’s faith is deeply rooted in this self-affirmation about YHWH made by YHWH himself, and when God’s behaviour does not correspond with

⁷⁰ I borrowed this expression from Brueggemann’s book *Old Testament Theology, Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1997, in which he writes about ‘core testimony’ that refers to God character, and ‘countertestimony’ that speaks about Israel’s experience of God.

⁷¹ See: W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament, Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1997, pg. 219

⁷² C. A. Graham, ‘God, doctrine of’, in *Dictionary for theological interpretation of the Bible*, ed. K.J.Vanhoozer, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2005, pg. 260

⁷³ *Ibid*, pg. 260

God's character as disclosed by this positive recital, Israel has the courage to demand that YHWH act according to his nature and character.

3.1 YHWH in relationship with his world

YHWH as presented in the HB is a relational God, interested in an authentic relationship with human beings, the bearers of his image, with whom YHWH has established a covenantal relationship. By creating according to his image, YHWH endowed his creature with the gift of freedom: '...and this means that there is always a divine-human dramatic tension.'⁷⁴

YHWH is not a remote, deistic god, but the God who has chosen to be involved in creation and its history, to be bound up in time and space⁷⁵, and in order to facilitate this YHWH has limited himself for the sake of the relationship.

In lament Psalms God is pleaded with to restore the broken relationship, to change his mind toward his human partner, the believer, Israel. The relationship between YHWH and his people is dynamic in its nature and a Theo-dramatic approach helps us to understand better the drama of the divine-human relationship.

⁷⁴ H. U. von Balthasar, *Prologomena*, v.1, Igantius Press San Francisco, 1988, pg. 129

⁷⁵ See: T. E. Fretheim, *The suffering of God*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984, pg. 35, 44

3.2 The drama of partnership with YHWH⁷⁶

In the HB there are many covenants: some initiated by YHWH, others initiated by people where YHWH is a third party.

YHWH's partnership is offered in the context of the covenant. Thus YHWH established a covenant with Noah (Gen.9:8-17), Abraham (Gen.15:7-21), the Israelites at Sinai (Exodus 19) and David (2 Samuel 7:5-16), and promised a new covenant for the exiled people (Jer.31:31-34). The Mosaic covenant is the one to which I will refer in my thesis⁷⁷, because the covenant established with Israel at Sinai is at the heart of the HB and is the defining marker of YHWH's people.

A covenant is a solemn agreement between two or more parties, usually based on an oath. Here the parties are YHWH and Israel and the mediator of the covenant is Moses.⁷⁸ The redemption of the Israelites from Egypt by YHWH gave him the right to be their King. 'The understanding of the nature of Israel's Exodus redemption and thus of her covenant state is thus highlighted by the application of the redeemer concept'⁷⁹, the Sinaitic covenant is a suzerain/vassal one.

Cottrill offers another metaphor for covenant- 'patron/client' taken from social relationships:

In describing God as a patron, the psalmist shapes his own self-representation, his desires, and negotiates power as if he were a client. The psalmist represents himself as utterly

⁷⁶ I borrowed this title from Brueggemann's book *Old Testament Theology, Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Fortress press, Minneapolis, 1997, pg. 552

⁷⁷ I intend to take the Sinaitic covenant in its literary context

⁷⁸ This covenant is rooted in the Abrahamic covenant.

⁷⁹ W.J.Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation, A theology of the Old Testament covenants*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1997, pg.100

dependent upon God, relying on the relational values of loyalty and protection that characterize a patron/client relationship.⁸⁰

Both metaphors for covenant are suitable for Theo-dramatic approach. The drama of partnership with YHWH does not preclude the possibility of experiencing the coldness and darkness of the pit. According to the lament Psalms this experience of brokenness is the action of YHWH's behaviour. 'Nonetheless, this drama of brokenness and restoration is the primary ingredient of life with YHWH.'⁸¹, although sometimes the brokenness is overwhelming, and unbearable.

3.3 YHWH's character

The golden calf incident at Sinai gave occasion for YHWH's self revelation of his character, his 'personality profile.'⁸² Even if it is not always explicitly recited, the core testimony is in the background of lament Psalms. The sufferer is fully aware of God's self description and the cry from the pit is based on this YHWH's self revelation (Exodus 34:6-7a). The reason for using the positive part for the recital is to determine YHWH to take action.

The purpose of the prayer is to motivate Yahweh to be Yahweh's true self, and so to overcome the present situation of danger by a powerful show of solidarity... The speaker does not doubt that Yahweh is "merciful and gracious"; that is who Yahweh really is. But Yahweh has become, it would appear,

⁸⁰ A. C. Cottrill, *Language, power and identity in the lament Psalms of the individual*, T&T Clark, London, 2008, pg. 27

⁸¹ W. Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology, Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1997, pg. 553

⁸² J. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, v 2, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2006, pg.160

careless or neglectful or indifferent and must be returned to Yahweh's true self.⁸³

The words that are mentioned often in Israel's prayers are: steadfast love, faithfulness, and righteousness. (Psalm 5:7-8, Psalm 88:11)

Brueggemann writes about the importance of these words which '...bear witness to a single theological reality. All these words are in the service of this peculiar You who is addressed and met in prayer.'⁸⁴

3.3.1 Steadfast love - אהבה

YHWH is characterized by steadfast love ,אהבה and the word is used frequently in the Psalms: 'Of special note is that Israel's poets identify a rich variety of love in the life and person of YHWH, who is fully available as a character in Israel's life.'⁸⁵ H. J. Stoebe writes that:

...*hesed* does not refer to a spontaneous ultimately unmotivated kindness, but to a mode of behaviour that arises from a relationship defined by rights and obligations ... When *hesed* is attributed to God, it concerns the realization of the promises inherent in the covenant.⁸⁶

There is a special connection between covenant and steadfast love, and YHWH's steadfast love is directed towards his people.

Steadfast love is passion plus action toward the other partner, it is an emotion that leads to a desire for doing good. Commenting on steadfast love, its use and significance, Clark writes:

⁸³ W. Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology, Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1997, pg. 219

⁸⁴ W. Brueggemann, *The Psalms in the life of faith*, ed. P. D. Miller, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995, pg.44

⁸⁵ W. Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith*, WJKP, Louisville, 2002, pg. 125

⁸⁶ H. J. Stoebe, אהבה, *TLOT* v. 2, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1997, pg. 451

The use of the word in the Hebrew Bible indicates that **חסד** is characteristic of God rather than human beings; it is rooted in the divine nature, and it is expressed because of who he is, not because of what humanity is or needs, or desires, or deserves.⁸⁷

YHWH's steadfast love is an enduring quality of God, a quality to which God's people appeal when they are confronted by dangerous circumstances as in lament Psalms. YHWH is fully committed to his chosen people, to their wellbeing: '...he has promised life, care, alleviation of distress and preservation... An essential element of Israel's faith is this constant hope in his kindness.'⁸⁸

Sakenfeld argues that *hesed* is the word that describes the relationship between YHWH and his people and emphasizes YHWH's freedom and at the same time his commitment.⁸⁹

Hesed can be defined as faithful love or loyal love, and in lament Psalms the psalmist or community asks YHWH for a new demonstration of his steadfast love:

The Psalms often preface or follow up a request for *hesed* with the statement indicating that the supplicant's relationship with God is in good repair. While this need not imply that the petitioner has a claim on God or a hold over him – indeed, a prime feature of *hesed* is the actor's freedom not to act – the petitioner still may hope and even expect to receive *hesed* because he is fulfilling his part of the relationship. It may even be suggested that these statements of the “deserving” behaviour of the suppliant form the backdrop for the confident statements of praise or assurance of deliverance which often conclude the lament form.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ G. Clark, *Hesed in the Hebrew Bible*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1993, pg. 267

⁸⁸ Zobel, **חסד**, *TDOT*, vol. 5, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1986, pg. 62

⁸⁹ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in The Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry*, Wipf & Stock Publishers Eugene, Oregon, 2002, pg. 149

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 228

Steadfast love is the reason for hope for those who are in the pit in their journey of faith; hope that is made visible in praising YHWH.

3.3.2 Faithfulness - אֱמוּנָה

Yahweh is faithful, and sometimes faithfulness is associated with steadfast love: ‘LORD, where is your *steadfast love* of old, which by your *faithfulness* You swore to David.’ (Psalm 89:49) Covenant relationship is based on faithfulness and also fidelity:

Thus, that the primary and defining issue of that covenantal relationship is fidelity is not surprising. Both parties have sworn primary allegiance to the other and faithfulness concerns the way in which that sworn allegiance is enacted, YHWH toward Israel and Israel toward YHWH.⁹¹

Israel knew very well that Yahweh is trustworthy and totally reliable, therefore in their praising or complaining Israelites evoked God’s faithfulness. Jepsen argues that Yahweh’s faithfulness ‘is a type of behaviour that may be defined as genuineness, reliability, conscientiousness.’⁹² Yahweh is faithful, which means that the believer can trust God’s word and deed; faithfulness is Yahweh’s attitude and action toward his partner that corresponds to God’s true being. That faithfulness:

...is used of God’s conduct, which corresponds to the nature of his deity ... It is God’s stability which is a true reflection of his deity, that is the motivation for calling on him in time of distress and for praising him.⁹³

Kraus defines God’s faithfulness as constancy and reliability.⁹⁴

⁹¹ W. Brueggemann, *Reverberations of faith*, WJKP, Louisville, 2002, pg. 76

⁹² A. Jepsen, אֱמוּנָה *TDOT* v.1, Grand Rapids, 1974, pg. 318

⁹³ *Ibid*, pg. 320

⁹⁴ H. J. Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, Augsburg Publishing House, 1986, pg. 43-44

Faithfulness refers to YHWH's total dependability, to his behaviour as partner in the covenant towards the human partners. It is true that both partners must express fidelity in their relationship, but YHWH's faithfulness is his distinct mark that makes him to be different from other gods.

3.3.3 Righteousness – צדקה

When God's people were in danger caused by different enemies, they asked him in their prayers to act according to his righteousness: 'In you, O LORD, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your *righteousness* deliver me.' (Psalm 31:1)

The righteousness of Yahweh is a perfection of the manner in which he sees through everything, evaluates, judges, and saves. It is the perfection of the one who, true to his responsibilities to the community, helps all who are oppressed, falsely accused, persecuted or suffering, and reveals himself as their deliverer.⁹⁵

As steadfast love and faithfulness belong to the covenant so too does righteousness. Johnson makes clear the fact that righteousness refers to Yahweh's actions toward his people. 'Above all, however, *sedeqa* refers to Yahweh's positive and beneficial intervention... Not surprisingly, the people lament when it is absent....'⁹⁶

Yahweh's righteousness is the starting point from which God's people express their concerns; it 'becomes the premise from which Israel may articulate a range of concerns that run from celebrative doxology to offended protest to righteous indignation.'⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Ibid, pg. 43

⁹⁶ B. Johnson , צדקה, *TDOT*, v. 12, Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 2003, pg. 253

⁹⁷ W. Brueggemann, *Reverberations of faith*, WJKP, Louisville, 2002, pg. 179

Righteousness includes also justice, and God is the right judge.

God must act fairly, appropriately punishing the wicked including ourselves, and appropriately rewarding the faithful, including our enemies. “Loving justice” or “just compassion” are also ways to express God’s fairness.⁹⁸

Yahweh’s righteousness is a relational term and in his righteousness YHWH is fair in dealing with his people; therefore in their lament Israel implores God’s righteousness and waits for a fair judgment.

Steadfast love, faithfulness and righteousness form a cluster of YHWH’s characteristics to which Israel appeals in its experiences of ecstasy or agony.

⁹⁸ D. R. Blumenthal, *Facing the abusing God*, WJKP, Louisville, 1993, pg. 15

Chapter 4

4.0 Argument and protest in lament Psalms

Lament Psalms are the script for Theo-dramatic approach. The script contains arguments and protests that are parts of the dramatic discourse that is initiated by the supplicant in order to convince YHWH to change his behaviour. ‘The Laments are an intensely dialogical discourse, a form of address intended to change life events’⁹⁹, in which the supplicant argues and disputes his/her dire circumstance with YHWH. ‘Disputes can be rational and reasoned, passionate and angry, or a combination of the two.’¹⁰⁰ Argument, protest, dispute, are rhetorical means used to convince YHWH to take action; the debate is loaded with strong words and emotions. Arguing with God implies also the notion of arguing against him. The accusation is powerful and risky because the sufferer is asking God to behave according to his character, to be the God he promised to be.

4.1 ‘Why’ and ‘how long’ questions

The questions ‘why’ and ‘how long’ are used frequently in lament Psalms (6:3, 10:1, 13:1-2, 22:1). They pose a deep quest to understand what is wrong. Are there any more persistent questions on somebody’s mind? Why does YHWH behave in such a way with me? From the

⁹⁹ A. C. Cottrill, *Language, Power and Identity in the Lament Psalms of the Individual*, T&T Clark, NY, 2008, pg. 26

¹⁰⁰ T. Longman iii, ‘Disputation’, *Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, ed. T. Longman iii & P. Enns, IVP, Downers Grove, 2008, pg. 108

depths of their souls the psalmists hunger to see the big picture, to see the purpose for such pain and suffering. The supplicant wants to know the truth; his/her faith seeks understanding and God doesn't mind our search for it, on the contrary.

YHWH is absent or hostile, although the psalmist did not cause a breach in the relationship. The questions are addressed to YHWH; they are not expressions of unbelief but of faith, and of relationships that are hurt. Trusting God when the miracle does not come, when the urgent prayer gets no answer, when there is only darkness – this is the kind of faith God values the most. 'The very use of the lament form expresses a grasping for faith, a clinging to God despite overwhelming discontent with God's treatment of the world.'¹⁰¹

The quest is initiated by the person who is travelling 'through the darkest valley' (Psalm 23:4), who has fallen into the pit. The experience is dangerous for the sufferer, therefore the psalmist cries for help.

These lamenters seek to engage God at all costs; they must have their say... The *lament* proper serves to articulate the problem that has risen for the pray-er. Characteristic in this articulation are hard and accusing questions (e. g. "why") mediating complaints that something terribly wrong has occurred in the life of the supplicant.¹⁰²

The questions the psalmists ask could be reduced to some dramatic statements: God sees, God hears, God knows. Why then doesn't he act and do justice when the helpless, overwhelmed, frightened sufferers appeal to his authority and power?

¹⁰¹ K. M. O'Connor, 'Lamenting back to life', *Interpretation*, A Journal of Bible and Theology, v. 62, 1, 2008, pg. 36

¹⁰² S. E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, pg. 149

The experience of suffering and pain affects the whole person: biologically, psychologically, socially and spiritually.

Pain calls into question earlier ideas about meaning and demands their reassessment; it simultaneously both denies, even destroys meaning, and demands the (re)creation of meaning. Behind pain's many paradoxes lie the questions why? how long? what for? and even: who am I? and what am I for?¹⁰³

In such crises it is normal for the people of the covenant, Israel, to put questions, to talk with God about the pain, to argue and protest. The questions used by the supplicant have the role of challenging YHWH "why thou" because as Balentine suggests the psalmist 'perceives God to be silent, forgetful, even sleepingly disinterested. Why? And for how long? this is his dilemma, and his prayers give ample insight into the way in which he tried to resolve it.'¹⁰⁴ The psalmist recognises that the process of understanding or answering the question 'Why?' will never be complete in this lifetime, but the presence of God will keep him/her walking and hoping even in the darkest pit.

Lament Psalms are stories about suffering and pain told in poetic language that is metaphorical, about a God who seems to be absent, or hostile, and the questions that arise are not an end in themselves; they are part of the process to understand the incongruity between God's character and his behaviour.

4.2 'Lament' or 'complaint'?

Lament is a literary genre that is used many times in the HB, both by YHWH and his people. The terminology used in studies regarding the

¹⁰³ K. M. Swenson, *Living through pain*, Baylor University Press, Waco, 2005, pg. 47

¹⁰⁴ S. Balentine, *The Hidden God*, Oxford University Press, 1983, pg. 117

Psalms of distress is lament Psalms. Sometimes the terms ‘lament’ and ‘complaint’ are used interchangeably, but Broyles affirms that there is a difference between the two terms: lament is focused on the tragic event, and complaint is directed to the one who is in charge or responsible for what has happened: ‘A lament simply bemoans the state of things; a complaint contains a note of blame and rebuke.’¹⁰⁵

Broyles’ distinction between lament and complaint is important for Theo-dramatic approach because the thesis is focused on complaint and protest against God’s absence or hostility, dispositions or actions that create a dramatic tension in the context of covenantal relationship.

These “God-laments” complain about God’s disposition – his wrath, rejecting, forgetting, hiding his face (“Why, Yahweh do you reject my soul? Why do you hide your face from me?” Psalm 88:16). Or they complain about his (non)intervention, whether he is actively hostile (“You have exalted the right hand of his adversaries, you have given all his enemies cause for rejoicing” Psalm 89:42), or passively indifferent (“Why Yahweh do you stand afar off; why do you hide in times of trouble?” Psalm 10:1).¹⁰⁶

According to Laytner, in the HB people argue with God in times of crisis, and this kind of prayer is modelled after the law-court pattern. He affirms that the metaphor of law-court is the foundation for the prayer called ‘the *rib* pattern’. In this context ‘the appeal thus is both against God yet also to God, making him, paradoxically, both judge and

¹⁰⁵ C. C. Broyles, *The conflict of faith and experience in the Psalms*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1989, pg. 40. Broyles’ thesis is that complaints against God are found in God-lament psalms. YHWH is held partly or totally responsible for the distress; in non-God lament Psalms, YHWH is a third party in the psalmist’s distress.

¹⁰⁶ C. C. Broyles, ‘Lament, Psalms of’, *Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings*, ed. T. Longman iii & P. Enns, IVP, Downers Grove, 2008, pg. 387

defendant'. Complaints against God are permissible only in 'rib pattern' prayer.¹⁰⁷

Laytner gives the structure of the law-court pattern of prayer. It implies an address to God the Judge, a presentation of the facts of the case and a concluding petition or request made by the individual, or Israel.¹⁰⁸ The *rib* or the law-court pattern is in itself dramatic because it involves a prosecutor, witnesses, defendant, judge, audience and discourse. The controversy includes arguments, protests, emotions, and tensions, and all of these create a dramatic atmosphere in the court room.

Westermann is aware of the fact that complaint is 'the nerve' in lament Psalms:

The complaint directed toward God – the accusation of God – is the nerve centre of all lamentations in the Psalms. Every lament somewhere strikes at the one who as Creator and Lord allows suffering to come upon his creatures. The laments of the Old Testament search for the cause of suffering, not in some power hostile to God, but in God alone.¹⁰⁹

Laytner explains the 'acting with nerve' in the context of the covenant. In Jewish tradition covenant is understood in two ways: as 'a fealty oath offered by a vassal to a powerful lord', in which case the relationship is marked by submissiveness, and as a 'partnership', where the human partner can challenge YHWH.

In the Jewish cultural context, the sort of communication this second sort of covenantal relationship sometimes requires is called "acting with nerve" (*hutzpah*) against Heaven, after the Aramaic expression *hutzpah k'lapei shemaya*. In this alternate view of the covenantal relationship, the Covenant can serve as

¹⁰⁷ A. Laytner, *Arguing with God, a Jewish tradition*, Rowman and Littlefield Publications, Oxford, 2004, XVII-XVIII, 3

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. XVIII

¹⁰⁹ C. Westermann, *The Psalms*, Augsburg Publication House, Minneapolis, 1980, pg. 32

the tool by which an individual can challenge or even defy the will of God.¹¹⁰

The protests against YHWH are not the irrational outbursts of a sick mind, they are not sinful acts. The cause is YHWH, who is responsible for the trouble, and the psalmists' perception is that YHWH is against them.¹¹¹ Floysvik gives reasons why the psalmists complain and protest against YHWH who: '*rejected* them, is *far away*, is *inaccessible* and even *sleeps* ... These motifs have basically the same functions; they protest that God has abandoned them and does not pay attention to their prayers.'¹¹²

All these actions are performed by YHWH: 'In the complaint psalms God is the one who does the forgetting, human sin does not enter the picture.'¹¹³ For psalmists who are faithful to YHWH this kind of behaviour is not compatible with God's character. It is inexplicable. Through their protests the psalmists argue with and against YHWH in order to remind him about his character, asking him to remain true to himself and to change his behaviour. In their prayers they appeal to YHWH's ego: 'Appeal is made to God because he needs the praise of the living.'¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ A. Laytner, *Arguing with God, a Jewish tradition*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Oxford, 2004, XVI-XVII

¹¹¹ I. Floysvik, *When God becomes my enemy, The Theology of the Complaint Psalms*, Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louise, 1997, pg. 144

¹¹² *Ibid*, pg 146

¹¹³ *Ibid*, pg. 148

¹¹⁴ A. Laytner, *Arguing with God a Jewish tradition*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Oxford, 2004, pg. 29

The HB does not try to resolve or clarify the tension between God's character and his behaviour. Neither does the Theo-dramatic approach. The tension is a mystery. Israel has learned to live with it, but this does not presuppose them to be docile. Why does YHWH behave in a way that contradicts his character? Morrow affirms that: 'There is no answer to this question within the Psalms. The fact is, the Biblical record contains a number of indications that YHWH could act in an arbitrary, negligent and even abusive manner on occasion.'¹¹⁵

Israel's experiences with God are real experiences recorded in the script. On the one hand Israel has affirmed YHWH's character, on the other hand Israel has protested against YHWH's behaviour. Brueggemann writes:

In its core testimony, Israel has uttered Yahweh as a god who is straightforward in dealing with Yahweh's partners. In Israel's cross-examination Yahweh emerges not only hidden as in wisdom theology but also on occasion as devious, ambiguous, irascible and unstable... There is some evidence that Yahweh is *abusive* on occasion, *acting in ways not congruent* with the claim of the core testimony that Yahweh is *steadfast and faithful*¹¹⁶

Israel did not accept resignation; the psalmists struggled with YHWH because they believed that he is just: '... the basis of their complaint rests upon the assumption that God is just and that he rules the world with *tzedakah*, with justice.'¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ W. S. Morrow, *Protest against God, the eclipse of a biblical tradition*, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007, pg. 73

¹¹⁶ W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament, Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1997, pg. 359

¹¹⁷ A. Laytner, *Arguing with God, a Jewish tradition*, Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Oxford, 2004, pg. XX

4.3 The tension: YHWH's character and his behaviour

Yahweh and Israel as partners in covenant enjoy genuine freedom although they are not equal. There is no real relationship without freedom. Of course the relationship is not experienced in the same way: YHWH's experience is different from Israel's experience and vice versa. When the relationship is in danger because of God's behaviour, and Israel recites the core testimony to YHWH to remind him of who he is, the recital is not smooth; it is a dispute between Israel and YHWH.

While Israel's recital of YHWH's deeds can run the gamut, what gets distilled out of that recitation does not always coincide with experience. The result is a disputatious discourse, to some degree, but a sense of dissonance can be kept to a minimum by reading dialogically, in contrast to a monologic reading... Still, disputation is the hallmark of lament theology. Testimony and counter testimony work together to produce a dynamic complex and un-finalized portrayal of the god of Israel.¹¹⁸

Brueggemann explains that this tension is between the core testimony and counter testimony. Israel did not invent the core testimony, YHWH gave it to Israel; 'It is Yahweh and only Yahweh who provides the peculiar norms by which "god-ness is now understood in Israel"'.¹¹⁹

Counter testimony is based on Israel's experiences with YHWH, in which YHWH seems to act not according to the core testimony: 'The counter testimony, rooted in Israel's lived experience of absence and silence, ends in an articulation of Yahweh's hiddenness, ambiguity and negativity.'¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ C. Mandolfo, *God in the dock: Dialogical Tension in Lament Psalms*, Sheffield Academic Press, 2003, pg. 133

¹¹⁹ W. Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology, Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1997, pg. 144

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 400

The core testimony and counter testimony are in tension and Theo-dramatic approach acknowledges and works with this tension, offering a way to enter into the dramatic dialogue to live the tensions of the faith, a faith that is based on both core testimony and counter testimony.

Israel's life as a theological enterprise consists in coming to terms with this particular Thou, coming to terms with the non-negotiable purposes and commands of Yahweh, but also coming to terms with the immense problematic that Yahweh turns out to be: often uttering promise and command, but sometimes silent; often present and visible but sometimes ashamedly absent; often evident in righteous and faithful ways, but sometimes unreliable and notoriously cunning, all to doubtful effect.¹²¹

The tension between YHWH's character and behaviour is a normal experience of faith for Israel and Theo-dramatic approach gives voice to this Theo-drama.

4.4 Israel's character in lament Psalms

According to the HB, arguing with and against God is an intrinsic part of Israel's faith, justified by the covenant. In this relationship both partners have their freedoms and responsibilities, and are accountable to each other. Israel's character is revealed through words and deeds, and at some points of extremity in life, Israel through his prayers of lament was not afraid to protest against YHWH about the reality of the pit¹²², accusing him of indifference.

Israel characteristically met the hurtful dimensions of existence head-on, viewing them as faith crises, times of wondering about God and God's fidelity, but also as faith opportunities, times to articulate again its expectations and

¹²¹ Ibid., pg. 132-133

¹²² 'Pit' is a metaphor for the reality of the dark movements of life, Ps.88:4 (NRSV). Another metaphor for pit is 'depths', Ps. 130:1

assumptions, times to reformulate its position vis-à-vis the world of hurt and the God of faithfulness... Nowhere but with God does Israel vent its greatest doubt, its bitterest resentments, its deeper anger.¹²³

Expressing hurt, doubt and anger against YHWH is in fact the sign of a strong faith.¹²⁴ In situations of crisis, faith seeks to understand, and in search of understanding faith asks but also protests because its great expectations from a 'just and compassionate judge' are not met.¹²⁵

Lament Psalms describe human existence as it comes to us. The pit is an experience of dislocation and disorientation. This metaphor 'includes all facets of our common life and experience', and the supplicants 'are driven to the *extremities* of emotions, of integrating capacity and language'¹²⁶ In lament Psalms Israel is a courageous partner who takes the risk of challenging YHWH.

4.5 Change of mood in lament Psalms

In playing the script, the performers are involved with their whole being. Protesting, arguing the cause, trying to motivate YHWH to take action implies not only the intellectual dimension but also the emotional and physical one. Taking into account the change of mood helps the reader to understand what the script wants to communicate.

¹²³ W. Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. P. D. Miller, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995, pg. 68

¹²⁴ See Sally A. Brown, 'When Lament Shakes the Sermon', *Lament*, ed. S. A. Brown & P. D. Miller, WJKP, Louisville, 2005, pg. 35 'Biblical lament, faith's outcry to God in the grip of trouble, is a rhetoric that wails and rages, protests and interrogates, and finally whispers its hope. Lament discloses at the heart of the biblical tradition a rhetoric of resistance and criticism that has yet to be fully explored...'

¹²⁵ A. Laytner, *Arguing with God, a Jewish tradition*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Oxford, 2004, pg. 27

¹²⁶ W. Brueggemann, *The Psalms and Life of Faith*, ed. P. D. Miller, Fortress Press Minneapolis, 1995, pg. 8

Westermann in analysing the lament Psalms argues that there is a change in lament's structure: from lamentation to praise.¹²⁷ According to Villanueva 'the movement between lament and praise is not one directional but interactive'. The direction is not only towards 'certainty' but also towards 'uncertainty'.¹²⁸ The word 'interactive' expresses very well the change of mood in lament Psalms: from lament to praise or from praise to lament:

As can be seen, although the movement lament-praise is the most common movement, there are also other movements, which, though not as numerous, are nevertheless important for our overall understanding of the sudden change of mood and lament in general.¹²⁹

Israel does not live its life on the edges of lament or praise, but in the middle where lament and praise coexist and alternate. 'The God of Israel's Psalter does not live safely at the two boundaries of obedience and praise. This God is situated in the heart of the Psalter, in the midst of Israel's suffering and Israel's hope.'¹³⁰

A Theo-dramatic approach pays attention to the voices from within the heart of the Psalter. It does not ignore the overall movement from lament to praise, but tries to emphasize the drama of faith by articulating what happened and what is hoped for. The element of uncertainty is present in this dramatic tension:

The possibilities of what may happen in the future can never fully offset the agony of despair and uncertainty which

¹²⁷ C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, JKP, Atlanta, 1991, pg. 265-267

¹²⁸ Frederico G. Villanueva, *The Uncertainty of Hearing: A Study of the Sudden Change of Mood in the Psalms of Lament*, Brill, Leiden, 2008, pg. 20

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 48

¹³⁰ W. Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. P. D. Miller, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995, pg. 213

characterize life “in the meanwhile” ... 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.¹³¹

Lament and praise should be kept in healthy tension. Lament is not a prelude to praise and praise is not the primary goal of lament. Between lament and praise there are sudden changes of mood; it is not a smooth way. Accepting only one dimension movement from lament to praise and ignoring the other movements, can create a false optimism if ‘it fails to take into account the complexities, ambiguities and the untidiness that characterise much of human existence. One value of the Psalm is its capacity to embrace all of life – a characteristic which is true of the Bible as a whole.’¹³²

Israel’s relationship with YHWH is marked by ambiguity and mystery. The past is not forgotten and in such cases it is brought into the present. The appeal to YHWH’s activity in the past, especially the Exodus event, is considered in lament Psalms as a confession of trust. ‘In these sentences, Israel expresses its relation to God, from whom it expects acts of assistance.’¹³³

The reference to YHWH’s past deeds is to emphasize the contrast between the past glory and the woeful present.

¹³¹ S. E. Balentine, *The Hidden God*, Oxford University Press, London, 1983, pg. 166-167

¹³² F. G. Villanueva, *The Uncertainty of a Hearing, A Study of a Sudden Change of Mood in the Psalms of Lament*, Brill, Leiden 2008, pg. 255-256

¹³³ C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, JKP, Atlanta, 1981, pg. 58

In the God-lament Psalms, the predications of God do not extol God but establish the incongruity of the past and the present in the form of a complaint, and thus summon him to his prescribed disposition and conduct.¹³⁴

There are no shortcuts to praise. If we maintain sensitivity to all the Psalms, we will not be insensitive to all the tears, doubts and pain that are summed up into praise.

Putting together YHWH's past deeds and the present situation of the supplicant creates a deep tension. At the macro-level there is a change of mood from lament to praise, but at the micro-level we can observe the change from lament to praise and vice versa too (Psalm 22). In this Psalm there is a gradual falling into the pit. Even if the confession of trust shows the difference between the past and the present, it is the articulation of hope in the midst of despair. And indirectly the confessions of trust testify about YHWH's greatness.

¹³⁴ C. Broyles, *The conflict of faith and experience in the Psalms*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1989, pg. 42, 51

Chapter 5

5.0 YHWH's absence or hostility

YHWH's absence or hostility are perceived by God's people as real experiences. Both YHWH and his people are actors who play the drama of divine-human relationship. As actor YHWH can choose to be present or absent, friendly or hostile – to honour or to dishonour his covenantal responsibilities. Affirming that YHWH is an actor onstage means that he can be absent or hostile *through his actions* towards his partners. He is present by fulfilling covenantal obligations, absent when he ignores the covenant, and hostile when he is actively against his people.

According to Cottrill, in covenantal relationship or 'patron/client' relationship the psalmist has two positions: 'a position of decided inferiority in a vertical relationship with God, and a position of mutuality and entitlement'¹³⁵. These two positions form a tension that is the source of ambivalence: when YHWH is loyal the believer experiences stability; when YHWH is not loyal the believer experiences instability.

Though the presence of loyalty language and trust imagery provides the appearance of stability and assurance, God's potential choice not to abide by loyalty generates a provocative tension in the relationship, a destabilizing factor that the psalmist feels acutely. A significant element of the laments, in fact, is the psalmist's experience of God's failed loyalty.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ A. C. Cottrill, *Language, power and identity in the lament Psalms of the individual*, T&T Clark, London, 2008, pg. 130

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 132

This ‘failed loyalty’ of YHWH generates serious problems for the psalmists. In their distress, they appeal to YHWH even if they experience his absence or hostility; they do not turn away from God but they are ‘holding to God against God’.¹³⁷ The psalmists trust in YHWH’s character, although they are confused by his behaviour.

Characteristically, the experience of God’s passivity does not introduce a theoretical denial of God’s existence, but rather leads the sufferer into deep existential and religious tribulations. In other words, at the heart of the psalmist’s tribulations lies not the theoretical doubt about God’s existence, but the practical experience of God’s temporary inactivity in this world. God is absent, hiding, etc. The tendency is not to blame the victim but to fault the deity himself for this suffering. Experiences of being (unexplainably) abandoned by God belong to the historical and theological core of the book of Psalms.¹³⁸

The psalmists’ experiences of God’s abandonment are real; they are not metaphors or illusions. These experiences have a historical-theological significance and constitute the motives for suffering and protest. YHWH cannot be exonerated from his infidelity. There is always a certain ambivalence in the divine-human relationship.

5.1 YHWH’s absence

YHWH’s absence implies different nuances that I want to describe.

¹³⁷ S. E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, pg. 146

¹³⁸ F. Lindstrom, ‘Theodicy in the Psalms’, *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, ed. A. Laato & J. C. Moor, Brill, Leiden, 2003, pg. 256-257

5.1.1 The vocabulary of absence¹³⁹

The word ‘absence’ connotes the condition of being not present or being away. Absence has a broader meaning and in lament Psalms it can include: rejection, hiddenness, forgetting, far (distant), even sleeping.¹⁴⁰ Because the subject of the verbs is YHWH; he is the agent who causes such actions. Then, the motif of God’s absence contains sub-motifs such as:

5.1.1.1 Rejection (reject, abandon) עזב זנה¹⁴¹

My God, my God,
Why have you abandoned (עזב) me ? (Psalm 22:2a)

Yet you have rejected (זנה) and disgraced us; (Psalm 44:10a)

Why, o Lord, do you reject (זנה) me? (Psalm 88:15a)

The psalmists used these words to express their experiences of being rejected by YHWH. This experience caused by God is a mystery for the psalmist because it is not a punishment for sin or human failure.¹⁴² Sometimes the rejection motif is used in ‘why’ complaints (Psalms 22:2; 88:15). In Psalm 22:2 the rejection motif is described by the word עזב and in Psalms 44:10; 88:15 by the word זנה.

זנה The meaning of this verb is “*reject, exclude*” and in the Psalms chosen for the purpose of this thesis YHWH is the subject and the

¹³⁹ In Hebrew some words for YHWH’s absence have verbal roots. I will substitute substantial English terms for Hebrew verbal roots.

¹⁴⁰ I. Floysvik, *When God becomes my enemy, The Theology of the Complaint Psalms*, Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis, 1997, pg. 146

¹⁴¹ Aprox. 14 times in psalms (to reject, abandon people), *BDB*, pg.276,937

¹⁴² See I. Floysvik, *When God becomes my enemy, The Theology of the Complaint Psalms*, Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louise, 1997, pg.146

covenant partner the object: ‘With God as its subject, *zanach* appears in some psalms of lament to describe the plight of the psalmist: God has rejected him, ignoring him, and refusing to help him.’¹⁴³ It is a tragic experience for the psalmist who cannot understand YHWH’s bizarre behaviour. For example in Psalm 44: 24-25, the motif of rejection is connected with the expression “awake” and according to Ringgren, in such a context ‘*zanach* means that God has totally turned his back on his people’¹⁴⁴. The relationship is inexplicably broken by YHWH, but despite this the individual or community reaffirm their relationship with God by appealing to him in order to change his attitude.

עזב This verbal root means: *to leave, to forsake, to lose, or to abandon* and it is used in Psalm 22:2. Regarding the motif of abandonment or alienation VanGemereren affirms:

Abandonment or alienation is the experience of suffering, when one hopes for deliverance but no help is forthcoming. Precisely because the psalmist was a child of the covenant, he had great expectation that his covenant God, who had promised to hear and to deliver, would come to his aid. But he felt himself abandoned by him.¹⁴⁵

The common translation of עזב is ‘abandoned’. It is used when the relationship is broken because of the infidelity of one of the partners and the result is divorce, but there are biblical texts that speak of YHWH’s abandonment of his partner without any reason, as in Psalm 22.¹⁴⁶

This verb is used in this genre to express the experience of the absence of YHWH and the terrible consequences this has for

¹⁴³ H. Ringgren עזב TDOT, vol. 4, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1975 – 1977, pg. 105

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, pg. 106

¹⁴⁵ W. A. VanGemereren, *Psalms*, EBC, vol. 5, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1991, pg. 200

¹⁴⁶ See E. Gerstenberger, עזב, TDOT, vol. 10, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999, pg 586, 590

the petitioner such as the encounter with the sphere of Death
... the collapse of personality ... and expulsion from the social
cosmos...¹⁴⁷

The sphere of death, the destruction of the body and isolation from community, all of these belong to the sphere of chaos. YHWH's absence exposes the supplicant to the forces of chaos. YHWH's rejection is an intentional action toward his partner. It is a breaking of the covenantal relationship, a lack of solidarity with the sufferer, a turning of his back toward the supplicant and a refusal to offer help. In his/her faith the psalmist perceives these as temporary attitudes of God.

5.1. 1. 2 Hiddenness (hide) סתר¹⁴⁸

How long will you hide your face from me? (Psalm 13:2b)

Why do you hide (סתר) your face? (Psalm 44:25a)

Do you hide (סתר) your face from me? (Psalm 88:15b)

This is another sub-motif that is used in Psalms to give voice to the experience of YHWH's absence. The verb is associated with the word 'face' and the meaning is 'hide the face'. To hide the face means displeasure, disfavour toward another person: 'Just as turning the face towards someone signifies friendliness and favour, turning away or concealing the countenance expresses displeasure.'¹⁴⁹

In BDB 'hide the face' connotes the idea of withdrawing God's favour (Psalms 13:2; 22:25; 27:9; 88:15).¹⁵⁰ Wehmeier affirms that 'Yahweh's

¹⁴⁷ F. Lindstrom, *Suffering and Sin*, Almqvist & Wikrell International Stockholm, 1994, pg. 76

¹⁴⁸ Aprox. 11 times in psalms (withdraws his favour), *BDB*, pg.711

¹⁴⁹ G. Wehmeier סתר *TLOT*, vol. 2, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1977, pg. 815

¹⁵⁰ *BDB*, ed. F. Brown, S. Driver, C. Briggs, Hendrickson, Peabody, 2006, pg. 711

removal of his countenance, his benevolent attention, is the subject of the lament of the pious.¹⁵¹ The enemies of the righteous are a real threat for them, but the experience of suffering is increased by God's behaviour.

Cultic predications make clear that the presence of God's countenance means life, prosperity, and health ... while its absence elicits terror and confusion ... Even though one basically concedes God the freedom to keep quiet ... and hide his face ... still (the innocent) oppressed and persecuted petitioner does ask in his lament why God is hiding his face (from him) and why he who is innocent, must be delivered over to distress.¹⁵²

Balentine in his seminal work *The hidden God* analysing the hiddenness affirms: 'The principal consequence is separation from God, effected by a break in communication, by the threat of death and confinement to Sheol.... Bound up with the separation from God is the further consequence of alienation from family and friends.'¹⁵³

Sometimes God's behaviour seems to be arbitrary. The sufferer affirms his/her innocence and puts questions regarding God's attitude, and this is a dramatic situation because YHWH hides his face, refusing to hear and come to help.

5.1.1.3 Forgetfulness (forget) שכח¹⁵⁴

How long, o Lord will you ignore¹⁵⁵ (שכח) me forever? (Psalm 13:2a)

¹⁵¹ G. Wehmeier סתור *TLOT*, vol. 2, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1977, pg. 817

¹⁵² S. Wagner סתור *TDOT*, vol. 10, Grand Rapids, 1986, pg. 367

¹⁵³ S. Balentine, *The hidden God*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983, pg. 63

¹⁵⁴ Aprox.18 times in psalms, *BDB*, pg.1018

¹⁵⁵ NRSV goes with the verb 'forget' to keep the antonym with 'remember'; whereas the TANAKH goes with 'ignore' to get a better sense of what is alluded to in common English usage (where 'forget' is more a sense of 'slipping one's mind' than deliberate 'turning away from', as this use really means).

Ignoring (שָׁכַח) our afflictions and distress? (Psalm 44:25b)

In Pss 10:1; 13:2; 44:25 YHWH is the subject of the verb שָׁכַח. Balentine writes that the act of ‘forgetting’ is associated with the expression ‘hide the face’: ‘Clearly God’s hiding and his forgetting are two aspects of the same lament...What is clear is that God’s forgetting is perceived as another dimension of his hiddenness...’¹⁵⁶

The word ‘forget’ used in relation to YHWH has as background God’s covenantal relationship with Israel:

Do not deliver your dove to the wild beast;
Do not ignore forever the band of your lowly ones.
Look to the covenant. (Psalm 74:19-20)

In the Old Testament “to forget” in reference to Yahweh is a topos of individual and communal laments.... in which the supplicants attribute their experience of distance from God, which they name as the reason for their distress, to Yahweh’s forgetting them.¹⁵⁷

To forget, to ignore, or to neglect his responsibilities towards Israel, brings great distress upon his people:

Thus for example, the psalmist associates God’s neglect of the poor and the afflicted with the fact that God has hidden his face (pss. 10:11; 44:25)...The idea of protest against God’s forgetfulness may also be seen in those cases where שָׁכַח is set against the plea that God “pay attention” to his covenant with Israel (ps. 74:20) and “remember” the plight of his own chosen people (ps. 74:2, 18, 20).¹⁵⁸

YHWH is implored to remember his promises and commitments towards Israel; ‘Do not forget’ can imply ‘Please remember’.

¹⁵⁶ S. Balentine, *The hidden God*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983, pg. 136-137

¹⁵⁷ W. Schottroff, שָׁכַח, *TDOT*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, v. 14, 2004, pg. 1324

¹⁵⁸ S. Balentine, *The Hidden God*, Oxford University Press London, 1983, pg. 142-143

5.1.1.4 Far, distant (be or become far, distant) רחוק ¹⁵⁹

Why so far (רחוק) from delivering me? (Psalm 22:2c)

But you, O Lord, be not far off (רחוק) (Psalm 22:20a)

Another motif that amplifies the suffering of the supplicant is YHWH's remoteness. The sufferer appeals to God to be near and not far or distant from him/her, because only God's presence brings deliverance from the danger. The experience of YHWH's remoteness is a real experience for the psalmist who is not comfortable with God's behaviour. 'Individual piety thrives on the nearness of God. The afflicted psalmist often laments that God (or God's help) is far away... and has forsaken the supplicant (Psalm 22)',¹⁶⁰

The distance which the supplicant feels between himself and God should not be understood as merely a sense of physical separation. It is rather a real sense of God's absence which has its effects in concrete ways on the supplicant's life.¹⁶¹

The plea to YHWH 'be not far off' (ps. 22:20a) is in fact an appeal for YHWH's presence that is equal to his deliverance.

5.1.1.5 Sleep (be asleep) ישן ¹⁶²

Rouse Yourself; why do You sleep (ישן) O Lord? (Psalm 44:24a)

In Psalm 44, which is a communal lament, YHWH's behaviour is described by using the word sleep:

Rouse Yourself! Why do You sleep, O Lord?
Awake, do not cast us off forever. (Psalm 44:23)

¹⁵⁹ Aprox. 5 times in psalms, *BDB*, pg.934

¹⁶⁰ J. Wachter, רחוק *TLOT*, Vol. 3, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1977, pg. 471-472

¹⁶¹ S. Balentine, *The hidden God*, Oxford University press, Oxford, 1983, pg. 156

¹⁶² Aprox. 4 times in psalms, *BDB*, pg.445

In the context of a lament in face of terrible disaster the apparent absence of Israel's God can be perceived as YHWH sleeping.¹⁶³ In such circumstances the cry is imperative: 'Awake!', 'Arise!' in order to motivate YHWH to act.

The motif of YHWH's absence has a variety of nuances. These expressions are different ways to describe the experience of God's absence or indifference and this behaviour is the source of tension in lament Psalms.

5.1.2 Absence and its consequences

What is at stake in lament Psalms is YHWH's wilful action to be absent without giving reasons for it. This is a disturbing experience for God's people; therefore during such seasons the psalmists protest and even accuse YHWH of his lack of fidelity. A true relationship implies the experience of the other, and Theo-dramatic approach acknowledges the role of experience in relationship and how the other is perceived. The relationship affects both partners, but in covenantal relationship the partner's identity is influenced and formed by YHWH's character and behaviour.

YHWH's absence means lack of proximity; he is not near, and the psalmists perceived that God is not present. Their perceptions are real and the whole being is affected by God's behaviour. For them the experience of God's behaviour is not described in philosophical terms but in terms that match their suffering. When the psalmists experience

¹⁶³ J. Schupphaus ישי *TDOT*, vol. 6, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1980-1982, pg. 441

God's presence they praise him, but when YHWH's absence is experienced they protest and accuse him of indifference.

The consequence of God's absence can cause the resurgence of chaos. YHWH's partner is exposed to forces of chaos that fill the empty space of God's absence. 'When YHWH takes away his saving presence from the individual, a vacuum is created which is immediately filled by evil powers which belong to the realm of chaos and are a potential threat to human existence.'¹⁶⁴

The realm of YHWH's presence and the realm of chaos are two competitive spheres in the perspective of HB. Chaos is a reality that is mastered by YHWH who is strong enough to subdue the realm of chaos which is: 'not simply as a situation of disorder but as an active agency that is engaged in challenging the rule of YHWH, undermining the possibility for life, and so seeking to negate the prospect of well-being in the world.'¹⁶⁵

When chaos attacks the life of the supplicant is threatened. In lament Psalms chaos can be identified with the enemy who is personalized by using poetic imagery and language: dogs, bulls, lions, etc. The cry is for deliverance from the grip of chaos. The inactivity of YHWH, his distance, and/or indifference amplifies the experience of suffering. God's silence determines the psalmists to protest, trying to mobilize YHWH to act decisively in their favour.

When God's silence and inactivity do not end, when the prescription does not come or does not work, several options appear. One is to continue the argument with him in the hope

¹⁶⁴ F. Lindstrom, *Suffering and sin*, Almqvist & Wikrell International, Stockholm, 1995, pg. 80

¹⁶⁵ W. Brueggemann, *Reverberations of faith*, WJKP, Louisville, 2002, pg. 28

that he might yet be cajoled, flattered, shamed, or threatened into acting in deliverance. This is the tactic of the lament literature.¹⁶⁶

YHWH is implored to exercise his power and to demonstrate once again that he is in charge over the chaos, that his presence is the only realm that sustains the life, status and identity of his partners.

Complaint prayer often records the perception that divine control over the world is painfully distant from ordinary experience, a memory and a hope rather than a current reality... The world view of the psalmists is not one in which God is in charge of everything. It is true to say however, that God is always regarded as having power to defeat the forces of chaos and reassert the good order of creation.¹⁶⁷

YHWH's absence means that his saving presence is temporarily suspended inexplicably, and the empty space is invaded by a chaos that threatens the life of the believer who chooses the option to argue and protest against God. The sufferer is restored only in the presence of YHWH.

5.2 YHWH's hostility

YHWH's hostility is his deliberate action towards his covenantal partner. The word 'hostility' implies a hostile disposition, animosity, unfriendliness that can result in a real action. It is not only an emotion; it is emotion plus action. Hostility belongs to YHWH's behaviour and not to his character; it is disturbing and very offensive. As the main actor in the Theo-drama of human existence, YHWH can assume any role without giving reasons for his actions. Because of his hostile actions

¹⁶⁶ J. D. Levenson, *Creation and the persistence of evil*, Princeton University Press, NJ, 1994, pg. XVLLL

¹⁶⁷ W. S. Morrow, *Protest against God, the eclipse of a biblical tradition*, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007, pg. 52

(justified or unjustified), YHWH is perceived as an enemy who is actively present in causing the distress.

The experience of being forgotten, rejected or even attacked by God *has* been very real for people of all times. An untimely death in the family, prolonged sickness, unfair treatment in the community or in court, or, on larger scale, natural disasters, war and persecution; these and other catastrophes may make individuals or whole communities perceive God as being an enemy.¹⁶⁸

The description of YHWH as an enemy, aggressor, or oppressor is bold and risky, but the sufferer does not hesitate to speak the truth by emphasizing the pronoun 'You' (Ps. 44:10-15, 88:7-9).

We've learned to call on God in times of distress but now YHWH is described as a perpetrator of the distress; armies, diseases, and enemies in societies are secondary causes. 'While the presenting problem may be advancing armies, physical diseases or political enemies, these are merely symptoms of a much deeper concern. God stands in opposition to the one praying.'¹⁶⁹ The cry out is an instinctive, heartfelt, urgent, desperate call for help, is a language of intimacy and deep relationship to God, but who do we address when God is our enemy? Brueggemann makes the following observation regarding YHWH's involvement in being against Israel:

The rhetoric is escalated and the stakes are considerably raised in Psalms of complaint that take a very different tack against Yahweh. In these *Yahweh* is not indicted simply for being *disengaged* and thereby leaving Israel to its undefended faith in a world of enemies. In the second wave of Counter testimony, Israel speaks against Yahweh, who has been

¹⁶⁸ I. Floysvik, *When God Becomes my Enemy*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1997, pg. 13

¹⁶⁹ A. C. Cottrill, *Language, Power and Identity in the Lament Psalms of the Individual*, T&T Clark, London, 2008, pg. 71

actively and aggressively opposed to Israel in ways that do direct damage.¹⁷⁰

To summarize, YHWH's hostility can be defined as a specific action through which YHWH intentionally brings distress on his people. He is an aggressor, an enemy whose goal is to destroy without having reasons for doing it. This behaviour is against covenantal responsibilities, therefore YHWH – the Judge, is asked to act against YHWH – the aggressor. Indeed it is a risky prayer but the sufferer is convinced that by appealing to YHWH's character he/she can change the course of the action.

5.2.1 Hostility - YHWH's threatening presence

YHWH's hostility, although not as prominent a motif in the Lament Psalms as his absence, is still significant. Absence and hostility are related to a God/psalmist relationship that is based on loyalty in the framework of covenant.

Hostility, as a specific action wrought intentionally, presupposes the presence of the person who is the cause of it. Therefore I equated YHWH's hostility with YHWH's threatening presence.¹⁷¹ This implies the fact that he is actively involved in the sufferings of his people. The reason behind YHWH's aggressive behaviour is considered to be his

¹⁷⁰ W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament, testimony, dispute, advocacy*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1997, pg. 377

¹⁷¹ A. Cottrill, *Language, Power and Identity in the Lament Psalms, of the Individual*, T&T Clark, London, 2008, pg. 132 'The major categories of ambivalence fall into two categories: language of God's unavailability (absence) and, in contrast, language of God's threatening presence (hostility). These representations evidence the tension between the enduring, loyal relationship and the failures of that ideal.'

*anger or wrath*¹⁷² that can be caused by sin, but sometimes is inexplicable or even irrational from the psalmists' perspective.

One should not presume, as is often done, that the OT invariably presents God's wrath as his deliberate response to human sin. It is not always described as morally motivated, nor is it necessarily considered comprehensibly...In the complaint psalms the motivation behind God's anger is more often than not, unexpressed.¹⁷³

God's anger is described by psalmists by using two different images or metaphors: fire and liquid. These images are connected to the verbs that are used in expressing YHWH's anger.¹⁷⁴ In Psalm 88 YHWH's wrath is mentioned twice:

Your fury lies heavy upon me;
You afflict me with all Your breakers (v.8)

Your fury overwhelms me;
Your terrors destroy me. (v.17)

By using the second person pronoun the psalmist testifies that YHWH is the subject of the verb. In Psalm 44 YHWH's anger is not mentioned, but his direct involvement as divine warrior against his people, presents YHWH as the cause of national disaster. From his action YHWH is experienced as an enemy, and being an enemy presupposes the presence of anger.

YHWH's hostility - his threatening presence is described explicitly in Psalm 88 and implicitly in Psalm 44. Despite this irrational behaviour of YHWH, the sufferers' faith is that YHWH's behaviour is temporary and

¹⁷² The Hebrew words for anger or wrath are: **אָנַף**, **אָפָה**, **חָרָה**, **חָרוֹן**, **חֶמֶה**, **צַבְרָה**

¹⁷³ C. C. Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1989, pg. 66

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* pg.66-67

he can be convinced to change it. The hope of those who experience YHWH's hostility is in his everlasting kindness. Eventually YHWH will be YHWH again by showing his steadfast love, which means to be deeply committed to the other.

5.2.2 Hostility and its consequences

YHWH's hostility has its consequences, and the main ones are military defeat (Ps.44) and near-death experience (ps.88). Military defeat according to Floysvik:

...is interpreted as actively brought by YHWH in psalms 44, 60, 80 and 89. God is said to have broken down the physical structures for defence (Pss. 60:4; 80:13 and 89:41). He has strengthened the enemy (Ps. 89:43) and weakened Israel. Thus he made them lose battle (Pss. 44:11 and 89:44). Worse, he has actually delivered them up "as sheep for food" (Ps.44:12a)... Thus the defeat from first to last with all its consequences is attributed to Yahweh. *He* is the one who brought it upon them.¹⁷⁵

By associating himself with the enemy's army, YHWH's action suggests that he is against the welfare of his people. He is not fulfilling the covenantal responsibilities. 'Behind the enemies' destructive activities stands God who, according to the psalmists is ultimately charged with the responsibility for destruction and, who gives the enemies leave to carry out their hostile plans.'¹⁷⁶

Military defeat is the hostile action of YHWH toward his covenantal partner. YHWH cooperates with the enemies of his people in order to

¹⁷⁵ I. Floysvik, *When God becomes my enemy*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louise, 1997, pg.150

¹⁷⁶ W. C. Bouzard Jr., *We Have Heard with our Ears O God*, SBL, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1997, pg. 133

achieve their destruction. This strange behaviour of YHWH is more painful than the destruction wrought by an enemy, as Bouzard writes:

If the psalmists were uncertain about God's motives in bringing disaster, they perceived with perfect clarity the fact that national calamity jeopardized the elemental beliefs upon which they understood Israel's relationship with God to rest. Natural disaster, wrought by God's active direction of foreign invaders or by God's passive toleration of their misdeeds, challenges the fundamental faith in God's power and in God's covenant relationship with Israel. Indeed, the assault on these beliefs, more than physical devastation caused by enemy, accounts for the excruciating anxiety evident in all of these poem prayers.¹⁷⁷

Even in these situations when Israel's faith is stretched to the limits, the people of God cry to him for help: 'Arise and help us, redeem us, as befits Your faithfulness' (Ps. 44:24).

Another consequence of YHWH's hostility is the near-death experience. YHWH's wrath is the cause of the suffering and his hostility sometimes brings a near-death experience, without any reason. In such dire circumstances, the supplicants protest against YHWH's behaviour, as Lindstrom writes: '... the reaction to this naked wrath is not self-accusation, self-examination, or confession of sin, but protest.'¹⁷⁸

5.3 Conclusion: YHWH's absence and hostility

YHWH's absence and hostility belong to his behaviour. Sometimes this behaviour has a reason, but sometimes it is without reason; and in this case the sufferer is perplexed by the oddity of YHWH's behaviour. This causes the psalmists to complain and protest against YHWH, accusing

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. pg. 134

¹⁷⁸ F. Lindstrom, *Suffering and sin*, Almqvist & Wiksell International, Stockholm, 1994, pg. 213

him and making him fully responsible for the disaster. YHWH's absence means that he is inactive, inattentive, while his hostility means that YHWH is fully engaged in bringing suffering. Swenson writes that:

...the psalms do not together portray one image of God that conforms to a particular profile or formula. Together, the psalms suggest that God looks like a person, yet cannot be personified; God is angry and punishing, yet calm and comforting, God is immediate, yet remote; personable, yet mysterious; in short, paradoxical.¹⁷⁹

Being attacked by YHWH without reason is an odd aspect of YHWH's behaviour. It cannot be denied because of the textual evidence. In a Theo-dramatic approach in interpreting and playing the script on the stage, YHWH is an attacker whose goal is to destroy his people. Both YHWH's absence and hostility are causes for suffering and protest in lament Psalms.

¹⁷⁹ K. M. Swenson, *Living through Pain*, Baylor University Press, Waco, 2005, pg. 77

PART B

APPLICATION OF THE THEO-DRAMATIC APPROACH

In what follows I will apply the Theo-dramatic approach to Psalms 13, 22, 44 and 88. Each Psalm will be analysed according to the element of the Theo-dramatic method: the script, the theatre, and the performance, but I am not attempting a full exegesis of these psalms. I will concentrate on the Theo-dramatic elements mentioned above.

Chapter 1

1.0 Psalm 13

1.1 The script

Psalm 13 is an individual lament which describes the crisis in the relationship between YHWH and his partner. The crisis is caused by YHWH's absence: 'forgetting and hiding his face'. YHWH's behaviour is an opportunity for the enemy to mock the sufferer and implicitly, God. The psalmist prays for YHWH's deliverance and there is a change of mood from lament to praise. The main characters are: YHWH, the sufferer and the enemy.

1.2 The theatre

The theatre, the public space where this psalm is played out might be the family or the community. According to Theo-dramatic approach the theatre and the stage represent the covenantal relationships, a safe space for the drama to be played out. The performance gives the audience the occasion to explore and participate in the experience of the sufferer, to experience the chaotic feelings of the supplicant who is abandoned by YHWH. Even if he is not on the stage, the psalmist addresses his/her complaint to God with the hope that, under the obligation of the covenant, he will hear the prayer and will be convinced by the dramatic situation of his partner to come onto the stage and bring deliverance.

1.3 The performance

How long O Lord?

Under the burden of suffering, the psalmist appeals to YHWH. The prayer begins with questions and finishes with the promise of praise. The speaker is waiting for YHWH to intervene in order to help his partner.

Act 1. Tough questions v. 2-3

How long, O Lord; will You ignore me forever?
How long will You hide Your face from me?
How long will I have cares on my mind grief in my heart all day?
How long will my enemy have the upper hand?

The Psalm begins with four questions ‘How long’ that constitute the complaint of the psalmist. The first two questions are addressed to YHWH who is the cause of suffering; the third question describes the psychological state of the supplicant; the fourth is related to the enemy who takes advantage of the psalmist’s situation. Having reached the limit of patience the supplicant is aggressive in appealing to YHWH. According to Gerstenberger: ‘the prayer begins with a rather impertinent fourfold (or fivefold) query.’¹⁸⁰ In a covenant relationship, such ‘impertinence’ is possible because the sufferer urgently needs YHWH’s help. The impertinence is not rooted in unbelief, it is a cry based on a deep faith and relationship with YHWH.

The complaint is a cry of desperation; it seems that the speaker has reached breaking point in his/her relationship with YHWH. There is a crescendo in the complaint: from YHWH’s negligence to the

¹⁸⁰ Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, part 1, vol. 14*, FOTL, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988, pg. 84

enemy who is very active. In this tormented situation, the speaker wants to know how long YHWH will ignore his/her suffering.

YHWH's behaviour is described by 'ignoring' or 'forgetting' and 'hiding the face.' The Hebrew word for 'forgetting' is שכח (5.1.1.3). YHWH's 'ignoring' is his deliberate action towards the psalmist, without any reason. This behaviour is not provoked by the sufferer's sin: 'There is no confession of sin, no contrition, and no recognition of personal guilt that keeps God's blessing away from the psalmist.'¹⁸¹

סתר refers to 'hiddenness'(5.1.1.2). The word 'hide' is connected with the word 'face.' 'Hiding the face' shows displeasure towards the supplicant. Balentine affirms: 'When God hides his face, or when he does not see, hear, or answer the supplicant, it is tantamount to cutting off all contact with men.'¹⁸² In such a situation it is normal for the sufferer to protest and accuse YHWH because the experience is in contradiction with the covenant responsibility. YHWH is the cause of crisis and trouble in the life of his partner. YHWH does not keep his promise as contained in the Aaronic blessing:

'The Lord bless you and keep you
the Lord make his face to shine upon you
and be gracious to you
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
and give you peace' (Nu. 6:24-26, NRSV)

The shining of YHWH's face means *Shalom* for the psalmist, but ignoring and hiding the face brings separation from the source of life.

¹⁸¹ W. A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, EBC, vol. 5, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1991, pg. 140

¹⁸² S. Balentine, *The Hidden God*, Oxford University Press, London, 1983, pg. 57

‘The estrangement from God has its tangible effects in the suppliant’s personal circumstances.’¹⁸³

YHWH’s behaviour creates a deep introspection: ‘How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my mind all day?’ The question is addressed to YHWH: ‘Do you really care for your servant?’ The suffering is affecting the psychological state of the sufferer. The mind is very active in searching for the cause that provokes this kind of behaviour. The struggle is intense, dramatic. The mind is overwhelmed by dark thoughts and grief characterizes the emotional state of the psalmist. The speaker is in a tormented state: ‘The psalmist is disturbed in his deepest being by God’s lack of interest, by the adversaries (adversities) and by his own feelings.’¹⁸⁴ Being part of the community the psalmist is confronted by the enemy. The attitude and words of the enemy increase and intensify the suffering: ‘How long will my enemy have the upper hand?’ According to Craigie:

The psalmist finds himself torn between two poles. On the one side is the “Lord” to whom he addresses his lament; on the other side is the enemy (v. 3c) who at that moment in time was exalted and appeared to have the upper hand. The tormented “how long”...is rooted in this tension. It is because the enemy is in ascendancy that it seems as though God has forgotten his servant and turned his face from him; he asks how much longer must this go on? And the exaltation of the enemy and the turned face of God aggravate still further the grief of the psalmist: how much longer must it continue?¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Ibid., pg. 120

¹⁸⁴ W. A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, EBC, vol. 5, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1991, pg. 140

¹⁸⁵ P. C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, WBC, v.19. Thomas Nelson Inc., Nashville, 2004, pg. 141-142

The accusation of YHWH in the complaint is very strong and aggressive. There is no mention of YHWH's past deeds, but the speaker experiences YHWH's abandonment.

Act 2. Lord pay attention v. 4-5

Look at me; answer me O Lord my God!
Restore the lustre to my eyes
Lest I sleep the sleep of death;
Lest my enemies say I have overcome him,
My foes exult when I totter.

After presenting the complaint to YHWH, the sufferer asks God to break the silence and pay attention. The verbs are imperative, having a note of command: 'look at me, answer me, restore' and the appeal has a note of intimacy: 'O Lord my God'. The plea is very serious in emphasizing the urgent need of help and the presence of YHWH onstage in order to help his partner:

The invocation "YHWH, my God" increases the pressure on YHWH. There is a relationship between the supplicant and God, a commitment of the supplicant to God. God should respond. The psalms often look for two forms of response: attention and action.¹⁸⁶

Life is on the edge, YHWH's honour is at stake. If YHWH will intervene and bring deliverance, his name will be honoured. If not, the enemy will celebrate the victory. Everything now depends on YHWH, as Brueggemann affirms: 'The psalm succeeds in making the problem into Yahweh's problem, because if Yahweh's partner be ridiculed Yahweh is also diminished.'¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ J. Goldingay, *Psalms, vol. 1: Psalms 1-41*, BCOT, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2006, pg. 207

¹⁸⁷ W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, Augsburg Publishing House, 1984, pg. 59

The decisive movement belongs to YHWH. The sufferer is prepared to wait for YHWH to enact a new creative act. ‘There must be such a wait, perhaps a long wait, because there is no other court of appeal. One must simply wait here until there is a response.’¹⁸⁸

Act 3. I trust and I will sing v. 6

But I trust¹⁸⁹ in Your faithfulness,
my heart will exult¹⁹⁰ in Your deliverance.
I will sing¹⁹¹ to the Lord for He has been good to me.¹⁹²

In this ordeal, the psalmist still trusts in YHWH. In NRSV: ‘But I trusted in your steadfast love’ that denotes a past action. NIV translation is: ‘But I trust in your unfailing love.’ Both translations describe the faith of the sufferer whose journey is through tough circumstances. Limburg writes:

Despite the difficulties of the situation, the psalmist still affirms trust in God, expressing that trust in some of the traditional language of faith. The object of trust is the Lord’s steadfast love, or *hesed*. This *hesed* is an utterly dependable sort of love that exists between persons in a covenant relationship...¹⁹³

The confession of trust, I think, is the turning point in the speaker’s perspective but this with the promise of praise do not resolve the tension of the sufferer, as Goldingay affirms: ‘The suppliant lives with the

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, pg. 59

¹⁸⁹ בָּטַח is in the *qal* perfect – complete action, *Psalms – Hebrew English Translation MassoreticText MT Interlinear*, qbible.com/Hebrew-old-testament/psalms/

¹⁹⁰ יִגַּל is in the *qal* imperfect – incomplete action, Ibid

¹⁹¹ שָׁיר is in the *qal* imperfect – incomplete action, Ibid

¹⁹² גִּמַּל is in the *qal* perfect – complete action, Ibid. The *qal* perfect denotes YHWH’s actions as complete and dependable, while *qal* imperfect denotes that the psalmist’s actions are possibilities are dependent on YHWH’s actions.

¹⁹³ J. Limburg, *Psalms, WBC*, WJK, Louisville, 2000, pg. 39

tension between the questioning of vv. 1-2, the pleading of vv. 3-4 and the expectation of vv. 5-6.’¹⁹⁴ The trust is rooted in YHWH’s character: דסן (3.4.1). The change of mood from complaint to praise is a process. What determined this change is not given, but psychologically and spiritually the sufferer has experienced a big change; the hope is shining again.

1.4 Conclusion

The protagonists in this Psalm are: YHWH who is absent from the stage, the sufferer who appeals to YHWH using four questions in order to persuade YHWH to change his behaviour, and the enemy who has the ‘upper hand.’ The drama, which has an impact on the social relationship, is between YHWH and the supplicant, as Brueggemann writes: ‘...the crisis in the *relationship with Yahweh* is at the bottom of the external problem of *troubles in the world*.’¹⁹⁵ There is a shift in the mood of the sufferer, a shift that determines that the supplicant will promise: ‘I will sing to the Lord...’ Still in trouble the psalmist’s faith is in YHWH’s loyal love.

¹⁹⁴ J. Goldingay, *Psalms vol. 1: Psalms 1-41*, BCOT, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2006, pg. 208

¹⁹⁵ W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, Augsburg Publishing House Minneapolis, 1984, pg. 59

Chapter 2

2.0 Psalm 22

2.1 The script

Psalm 22 is challenging because it describes human life in its agony and ecstasy. This pairing of words is a strange combination but it defines human life in its concreteness. This Psalm has two distinct parts: a cry for help or lament (vv. 1-21) and a song of thanksgiving (vv. 22-31)¹⁹⁶. Although these parts are very distinctive, and the actions they express are different, the psalm is a unity: 'the two situations of affliction and salvation must be comprehended in one ark of meaning to express what is happening.'¹⁹⁷ The players are: YHWH, the supplicant, the enemies, the congregation and the whole world.

2.2 The theatre

The theatre and the stage represent the covenantal relationship that imply for both parties room to move, and to play their role in the drama of existence. YHWH is absent from the stage. He knows the psalmist's situation, but for the time being he appears unconcerned regarding his partner's suffering. Onstage are the supplicant and the enemy, who takes advantage of the psalmist's suffering in order to mock and attack, doubting his/her relationship with YHWH. The psalmist remembers

¹⁹⁶ The scholars are divided regarding the unity of this psalm. Some consider that it contains two psalms that were put together (Broyles, Villanueva) but most of them consider it a unity (Wilson, Mays, Craigie).

¹⁹⁷ J. L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation, JKP, Louisville, 1994, pg. 107

YHWH's past deeds for his people, emphasizing their experiences of trust and deliverance. By bringing them into the present situation the psalmist creates the theatre for YHWH's actions on behalf of him/her. Finally YHWH will come onstage and this is a dramatic move in which he involves himself in the supplicant's experience, bringing deliverance.

2.3 The performance

Life's paradox: agony and ecstasy

In the lament section (vv. 1-21) the tension is

...between intimacy and distance in the psalmist's relationship with God, between past experience of salvation and its absence in the present. It aptly depicts the inscrutable absence of God and the torturing sense of abandonment felt by the psalmist.¹⁹⁸

The whole lament is developed around this tension and it presents a gradual falling into the pit, YHWH being the principal cause of this dramatic situation.

Act 1. The cry of despair vv. 1-3

For the leader; on "*ayyeleth ha-shahar*"
A psalm of David

My God, my God,
why have You abandoned¹⁹⁹ me;
why so far from delivering me
and from my anguished roaring?
My God,
I cried by day – You answer not;
by night, and have no respite.

¹⁹⁸ F. G. Villanueva, *The uncertainty of a hearing*, Brill, Leiden, 2008, pg. 74

¹⁹⁹ עָזַב *gal* perfect, *Psalms – Hebrew English Translation Massoretic Text MT Interlinear*, qbible.com/Hebrew-old-testament/psalms/

The Psalm begins with the sufferer's complaint addressed to YHWH, a complaint that describes the psalmist's situation: God abandoned עזב (5.1.1.1) him/her, is far רחק (5.1.1.4) from him/her – a spatial distance – and despite his/her 'anguished roaring' which is presented to God day and night, YHWH is not attentive. YHWH's behaviour is unbearable; therefore the supplicant protests and accuses him. 'The prayer in this case is a complaint, addressed to God directly as "You": You have forsaken me, You are far from helping me, You do not answer.'²⁰⁰ YHWH is the one who causes this suffering.

Nothing explains his total abandonment. The psalmist has become the prey of a cosmic solitude. The God who until then was a tender companion for him suddenly became mute, invisible, unreachable, absent... God's abandonment violates the promise of God's love. It is as if the divine lover had broken the engagement of his fidelity.²⁰¹

YHWH's behaviour is a mystery surrounded by an impenetrable darkness.

Act 2. Remembering the good times vv. 4-6

But You are the Holy One,
enthroned,
the Praise of Israel
In You our fathers trusted;
they trusted, and You rescued them
To You they cried out and they escaped;
in You they trusted
and were not disappointed.

Even if the crisis is very acute, the psalmist remembers YHWH's deeds which were done to the ancestors. In his/her prayer, like a 'roaring lion' the supplicant tries to motivate YHWH to take action. Three times the

²⁰⁰ J. Limburg, *Psalms*, WBC, WJKP, Louisville, 2000, pg. 69

²⁰¹ S. Terrien, *The Psalms*, CEC, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2003, pg. 237

word 'trusted' is mentioned. By identifying with the community of faith rescued by YHWH, the sufferer confesses his open trust in YHWH who can change the situation. Remembrance of the past in confession of trust, according to Miller, serves two purposes: the sufferer hopes that YHWH did not forget the past, and urges and compels YHWH to intervene in order to bring deliverance from the trouble.²⁰²

By comparing the past with the present the supplicant creates a contrast between them. In the past YHWH acted in favour of this people: trusting in YHWH, the people were delivered and were not disappointed. The sufferer is part of the same people who experienced YHWH's deliverance, but now, in the present, although the psalmist trusts in him, YHWH does not intervene, and this contrast brings disappointment which intensifies the suffering of the psalmist. The confession of trust is shadowed by the possibility that YHWH could remain silent, and this causes a psychological torment. 'The poignant alternation of complaint and trust serves only to make the psalmist's current distress seem all the more bitter.'²⁰³ This means another step towards falling into the pit.

Act 3. Painful experiences vv. 7-9

But I am a worm, less than human;
scorned by men, despised by people.
All who see me mocked me;
they curl their lips
they shake their heads
"Let Him commit himself to the Lord.
let Him rescue him
let Him save him,
for He is pleased with him."

²⁰² P. D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1986, pg. 102-103

²⁰³ J. C. McCann Jr., *Psalms*, NIB, v. 4, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996, pg. 762

The hopeless situation has a negative impact on the psalmist. The destructive power of affliction dehumanizes its object: and the speaker uses the metaphor: 'I am a worm and not a human'. Terrien describes this well: 'He has become a powerless animalcule to be crushed under foot.'²⁰⁴ What significance can a worm have before humans and YHWH? This dramatic exaggeration has the intention of catching YHWH's attention and pulling him into the drama. If for YHWH the ancestors had significance and saved them, now, in the present, the sufferer has no significance. 'Though the crisis is not described... it involves loss of honour that led to ostracism and ridicule.'²⁰⁵

People take advantage and mock the helpless because of his/her trust in YHWH; they wonder if he will save his partner. The words used by the enemy are like a sword that penetrates deeply into the opened wound.

It is not unusual for enemies to be quoted in prayer psalms, but in this case the speaker agrees with their logic! The history of the fathers has established a precedent that if one trusts in Yahweh, Yahweh should deliver him.²⁰⁶

The enemies through their mocking words insult the sufferer and at the same time YHWH. Their attitude toward the sufferer brings another level of desperation into the speaker's life crisis.

Act 4. YHWH as midwife vv. 10-12

You drew me from the womb,
made me secure at my mother's breast.
I became Your charge at birth;
from my mother's womb You had been my God.

²⁰⁴ S. Terrien, *The Psalms*, CEC, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2003, pg. 231

²⁰⁵ R. J. Clifford, *Psalms 1-72*, AOTC, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002, pg. 125

²⁰⁶ C. C. Broyles, *Psalms*, NIBC, Hendrickson, Peabody, 2002, pg. 116

In these verses the trust in YHWH emerges again. Now, from the experience of the ancestors with YHWH, the psalmist moves to his/her relationship with YHWH from birth. YHWH is described as a midwife. This means a special relationship between YHWH and the psalmist, a relationship that has continued until now. The sufferer's affirmation 'from my mother's womb You have been my God' emphasizes that trust in YHWH is still real and active despite his behaviour, therefore the cry of the supplicant asks YHWH to come before it is too late. But the psalmist's cry is not answered; YHWH who was once very close and dependable is now very distant.²⁰⁷ YHWH's behaviour, or lack of behaviour, brings the sufferer to the bottom of the pit which is a terrifying experience.

Act 5. Bulls, lions and dogs vv. 12-19

Do not be far²⁰⁸ from me,
for trouble is near,
and there is none to help.
Many bulls surround me,
mighty ones of Bashan encircle me.
They open their mouth at me
like tearing roaring lions.
My life ebbs away:
all my bones are disjointed;
my heart is like wax,
melting within me;
my vigour dies up like a shard;
my tongue cleaves to my palate;
You commit me to the dust of death,
dogs surround me;
a pack of evil ones closes in on me,
like lions (they maul) my hands and feet.

²⁰⁷ P. C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, vol. 19, WBC, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, 2004, pg. 199

²⁰⁸ רחוק, *qal* imperfect, *Psalms – Hebrew English Translation Massoretic Text MT Interlinear*, qbible.com/Hebrew-old-testament/psalms/

I take the count of all my bones
while they look on and gloat.
They divide my clothes among themselves
casting lots for my garments.

Reaching the bottom of the pit the sufferer appeals to YHWH and describes his/her situation in detail. The play is on the words 'far' and 'near': YHWH is far while the trouble is near. 'Instead of the nearness of God the psalmist experiences the nearness of hostile forces.'²⁰⁹

The hostile forces or the enemies are presented *metaphorically* as 'bulls' 'lions' , 'dogs', 'wild oxen.' The sufferer is surrounded by these forces and there is no exit from this external disaster. 'Animal imagery has mythical and demonic roots...here it serves to give profile to the anonymous evil doers or to materialize the evil suffered.'²¹⁰

Alongside external disaster, the psalmist describes his/her internal state using a series of similes: 'like wax', 'like a shard'. All his/her bones are disjointed. In such circumstances of external danger and internal turmoil:

The psalmist feels the impact of the alienation deep within his inner being. The metaphors of "water" and "wax" expressive of formlessness bring out the inner feelings of an anguished man... He can no longer function as a human being. The "bones", "heart", "strength" and "tongue" failed him, not of any serious disease but because of a traumatic response to being hated and alienated. He can go no further. He is in a state of shock.²¹¹

The worst has come upon the sufferer. In such a hopeless situation, the supplicant accuses YHWH: "You commit me to the dust of death."

²⁰⁹ F. G. Villanueva, *The uncertainty of a hearing*, Brill, Leiden, 2008, pg. 76

²¹⁰ E. S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, part I*, FOTL, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991, pg. 111

²¹¹ W. A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, EBC, v. 5, Zondervan, Grand rapids, 1991, pg. 205

(V.16c). YHWH is the only cause of this intolerable suffering. This is the climax of the complaint: God is a distant God, unresponsive, despite the pleas and the confessions of trust.

Act 6. I need your help vv. 20-22

But You, O Lord, be not far off;
my strength, hasten to my aid.
Save my life from the sword,
my precious life from the clutches of a dog.
Deliver me from a lion's mouth;
from the horns of wild oxen rescue me.

The sufferer does not renounce his/her faith in YHWH and covenantal relationship. Before the last breath the psalmist demands that YHWH should come near, onstage, to be a performer rather than an absent player. 'Having described the worst in the preceding verses he no longer has anyone to go but to God.'²¹²

The psalmist's plea is for deliverance 'from the lion's mouth' and 'from the horns of the wild oxen'. Verse 22b 'from the horns of wild oxen rescue me' is the crux for OT scholars.²¹³ NIV: 'save me from the horns of the wild oxen'; NRSV: 'From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me' (both vs.21b). I choose to stay with NRSV because the tense of the verb is present perfect. This allows for the manifestation of a certain degree of uncertainty that justifies the future promise: 'Then I will proclaim...' We do not know exactly what the answer is, but something has happened in the psalmist's situation that gives new hope:

²¹² F. G. Villanueva, *The uncertainty of a hearing*, Brill, Leiden, 2008, pg. 79

²¹³ The discussion is about how to interpret this verse, because there is a difference between MT and LXX. In MT it is 'and you have answered me' and in LXX 'my poor.'(Villanueva, *The Uncertainty of a Hearing*, Brill, Leiden, 2008, pg.81). Some scholars agree with MT, others with LXX.

‘God is somehow present in the depths and even amid death.’²¹⁴ Finally the sufferer is not alone. YHWH does not abandon his believer forever. YHWH changes his behaviour, and by coming near to the psalmist he demonstrates again his steadfast love. YHWH can be trusted and his presence in the pit is a great comfort to the afflicted.

Act 7. A serious vow vv. 23-27

Then I will proclaim Your fame to my brethren,
praise You in the congregation
You who fear the Lord praise Him!
All you offspring of Jacob honour Him!
Be in dread of Him, all you offspring of Israel!
For He did not scorn, He did not spurn
the plea of the lowly;
He did not hide His face from him;
when he cried out to Him, He listened.
Because of You I offer praise in the great congregation;
I pay my vows in the presence of His worshipers.
Let the lowly eat and be satisfied;
let all who seek the Lord praise Him.
Always be of good cheer!

YHWH’s answer is the reason for the psalmist’s change of mood; he/she has decided to proclaim God’s name in the congregation of faith formed by brothers and sisters. The praises are exuberant and full of positive affirmations about YHWH’s power, character and deliverance. ‘The affirmation that God is present and involved is just as strong as the cries of despair... Here is one who generally experiences God’s transforming and delivering power and it is as real as the sense of hopelessness and death were.’²¹⁵

²¹⁴ J. C. McCann, Jr, *Psalms*, NIB, v.4, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996, pg. 764

²¹⁵ P. D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, Fortress Press Philadelphia, 1986, pg. 108

Act 8. YHWH will be famous again vv. 28-31

Let all the ends of the earth pay heed and turn to the Lord
And the peoples of all nations prostrate themselves before
You;
For kingship is the Lord's and He rules the nations.
All those in full vigour shall eat and prostrate themselves;
All those at death's door, whose spirits flag,
Shall bend the knee before Him.
Offspring shall serve Him;
the Lord's fame shall be proclaimed to the generation to come;
they shall tell his beneficence to people yet to be born,
for He has acted.

From the congregation, the praise of YHWH extends to 'the ends of the earth' including past, present and future generations. This is a dramatic movement inviting the whole world onto the stage to celebrate YHWH's deliverance. YHWH is incomparable, and worthy to be praised and adored. His name must be proclaimed continuously because he is the faithful God of the covenantal relationship and everyone can trust him.²¹⁶

2.4 Conclusion

Psalm 22 speaks about life's paradox, agony and ecstasy. The agony is caused by YHWH who without any reason abandoned and distanced himself from his partner. This behaviour caused a traumatic experience for the sufferer. On the stage is the suppliant, abandoned by YHWH, and his enemy who mocks him.

The experience of agony can be depicted as a gradual falling into the pit. The complaint is combined with the confession of trust. The journey into the pit is illuminated by flashes of memory, both personal and communal. Reaching the bottom of the pit the psalmist accuses YHWH directly: 'You and only You are the cause of my suffering.' This is an important, repeated metaphor throughout the psalm, creating the tension

²¹⁶ See also J. L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation, JKP, Louisville, 1994, pg. 112

between YHWH's 'distance' and the 'nearness' of the surrounding enemy.

The enemy is described by using animal imagery and the psalmist is surrounded by 'bulls, lions and dogs'. In fact the situation has no exit.

But something dramatic happens: YHWH enters into this no-exit situation, because the psalmist manages to pull him onto the stage to bring salvation. By this action YHWH transforms the agony of the sufferer into ecstasy. YHWH is present on the stage as Saviour: 'And from the horns of the ram You answered me'. This implies that YHWH's presence is in the midst of suffering, helping his partner. YHWH's answer gives new hope to the sufferer who promises to proclaim YHWH's name and deeds. This proclamation will be universal and all the world will acknowledge and praise YHWH for his greatness and steadfast love and faithfulness.

Chapter 3

3.0 Psalm 44

3.1 The script

Psalm 44 is a communal lament²¹⁷ that describes the military defeat experienced by God's people, despite their faithfulness to YHWH. Regarding the date and composition of the psalm Boyles affirms:

Yet, the lack of historical specifics is consistent with the genre of corporate prayers, which were written and preserved because they suited recurring occasions...Psalm 44 was probably used for many battle defeats, and may have been edited and adjusted as it was transmitted from generation to generation.²¹⁸

The protagonists in this psalm are: YHWH, community and the enemy that defeated Israel's army with YHWH's help.

3.2 The theatre

The theatre and the stage are the court room and Psalm 44 describes the controversy between the Israelite community and YHWH, regarding his active hostility against the Israelite army, bringing defeat upon his people. In this kind of controversy the community can charge and accuse YHWH for his behaviour. The appeal is both against YHWH and also addressed to YHWH, who is both Judge and Defendant.²¹⁹ Psalm 44 is a

²¹⁷ The elements of communal lament are discussed in section 2.1, THE SCRIPT

²¹⁸ C. C. Boyles, *Psalms*, NIBC, Hendrickson Publishers Inc., Peabody, 2002, pg. 201

²¹⁹ Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God, a Jewish tradition*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Oxford, 1990, pg. XVLLL. See law suit discussion in 5.2 'Lament' or 'complaint'

dramatic portrayal of a law suit which adds a particular form to the drama: acts 1&2 provide evidence of past and the faithfulness of both partners; act 3 brings in the accusation of infidelity and betrayal against YHWH; act 4 demonstrates the community's innocence and act 5 calls, paradoxically, for the accused to judge himself and to save his partner.

The accusation against YHWH is brought by the community who suffered military defeat, because YHWH showed hostility towards his people; he betrayed them without any reason.

3.3 The performance

Did YHWH betray us?

The community is shocked by YHWH's behaviour. In the past YHWH as divine warrior fought for his people, but now in the present he is against his people. In this case the community engages in a law suit against YHWH, affirming its innocence; the community has fulfilled the covenantal responsibilities.

Act 1. The experience of the ancestors vv. 1-4

For the leader. Of the Korahites. *A maskil.*
We have heard O God,
our fathers have told us
the deeds You performed in that time,
in days of old.
With your hand You planted them,
displacing nations;
You brought misfortune on peoples,
and drove them out.
It was not by their sword that they took the land,
their arm did not give them victory,
but Your right hand, Your arm, and Your goodwill,
for You favoured them.

The argument begins with YHWH's deeds in the past. As the divine warrior, YHWH fought the battle for his people helping them to conquer the land of Canaan.

The people knew the great deeds God had done in the past; they had learned of them as children from their fathers (v.2). Indeed, the very existence of their state was a direct consequence of God's actions in the past... These past achievements had not been human achievements; they had been a direct consequence of God's participation in the history of his chosen people (v.4).²²⁰

Acknowledging the primary role of YHWH in their history 'Your right hand', 'Your arm', the Israelites demonstrate a deep humility and a total dependence on YHWH.

Act 2. You are our King vv. 5-9

You are my King O God;
decree victories for Jacob!
Through You we gore our foes;
by Your Name we trample our adversaries;
I do not trust in my bow;
it is not my sword that gives me victory;
You give us victory over our foes;
You thwart those who hate us
In God we glory at all times,
and praise Your Name unceasingly.

There is a dramatic movement from past to present; the past is actualized in the present, by being acted onto the stage. By remembering the past and actualizing it, the community emphasizes its trust in YHWH.

And it was the essence of the Hebrew faith that the past could always be appropriated for the present, that the people in faith could look in the present moment for the continuation of those

²²⁰ P. C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, WBC v.19, Thomas Nelson, Inc. Nashville, 2004, pg. 333

mighty acts of God in the past which had been so pregnant with future implications.²²¹

The community reaffirms its commitment to God by making a promise: ‘in God we glory at all times and praise Your Name unceasingly.’

Act 3. But now you are our enemy vv. 10-17

Yet You have rejected and disgraced us;
You do not go with our armies
You make us retreat before our foe;
our enemies plunder us at will.
You let them devour us like sheep
You disperse us among the nations.
You sell Your people for no fortune
You set no high price on them.
You make us the butt of our neighbours,
the scorn and derision of those around us.
You make us a byword among the nations,
a laughingstock among the peoples.
I am always aware of my disgrace;
I am wholly covered with shame
at the sound of taunting revilers,
in the presence of the vengeful foe.

In vv. 1-9, the psalmist prepares the foundation for expressing the complaint against YHWH; but starting with vv.10-17, which is the climax of the poem, the tone changes into a vehement accusation. The discrepancy between past and present experience is emphasized by using the expression ‘but now’ (NIV) – indicating that in the past You favoured us but now You betray us. The military defeat brought a chaotic situation for God’s people; the community is perplexed by YHWH’s behaviour. Questions arise: What is the reason for such behaviour? Why is YHWH against us; because we have trusted him and fulfilled the obligation of the covenant?

²²¹ Ibid., pg. 333

God is said to have broken down the physical structures for defence (pss. 60:4; 80:13; and 89:41). He has strengthened the enemy (ps. 89:43) and weakened Israel (60:5). Thus he made them lose the battle (pss. 44:11 and 89:44). Worse, he has actually delivered them up “as sheep for food” (ps. 44:12a). He has scattered them among the nations (ps. 44:12b) and sold them as slaves – on sale (ps. 44:13). On the battlefield he has crushed them “in a place of jackals” and covered them with deep darkness (ps. 44:20). Yahweh has made them into a mockery for the peoples that lived around them (pss. 44: 14-15, and 80:7).²²²

Nine times the pronoun ‘You’ is used as the subject of the verb. This means that YHWH is fully responsible for the suffering of his people. The description of suffering is terrifying and shocking.²²³

Act 4. We did not break the covenant vv. 18-23

All this has come upon us,
yet we have not forgotten You,
or been false to Your covenant.
Our hearts have not gone astray
nor have our feet swerved from Your path,
though You cast us, crushed, to where the sea monster is,
and covered us over with deepest darkness.
If we forgot the Name of our God
and spread forth our hands to a foreign god,
God would surely search it out,
for he knows the secrets of the heart.
It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long,
that we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

²²² I. Floysvik, *When God becomes my enemy*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louise, 1997, pg. 150

²²³ See also Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms* v. 1, NIVAC, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2002, pg. 686 ‘Israel’s experience did not live up to her expectations. Victory eluded them, and the reality of defeat took its place.... With harsh and pointed language, the psalmist believes no doubt that the cause of Israel’s suffering and disgrace is God himself... God has rejected and humbled his people. He has caused them to retreat and be plundered. God gave them up and scattered them. He sold them for no personal profit and made them a reproach and a byword among the nations.’

In this devastating state caused by military defeat, the community defends itself by making a protest of innocence that ‘is composed very logically, proceeding step by step to defend the people’s case against God and to reject Yahweh’s verdict that weighs so heavily on them.’²²⁴

The breach of the covenant means punishment, but the community affirms its loyalty and faithfulness to YHWH and its covenant. ‘The protest of loyalty in this psalm goes one step further. In addition to asserting, **we had not... been false to your covenant** the speaker claims that God in turn **crushed us**. In other words, not only are the people innocent, God is guilty of cruel betrayal.’²²⁵

Innocence does not mean sinlessness; it is an honest declaration of the people’s commitment to YHWH and his covenant, and their decision to remain faithful. The community is very courageous in defending its faithfulness to YHWH, and asks him to bear witness himself against himself. YHWH’s presence is demanded now on the stage to witness and to explain his behaviour. God is in the witness box. He must acknowledge the people’s protest of innocence and take full responsibility for the ordeal brought upon them.

Act 5. Arise and redeem us vv. 24-27

Rouse Yourself; why do You sleep²²⁶, O Lord?
Awaken, do not reject²²⁷ us forever!
Why do You hide Your face²²⁸,

²²⁴ Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms part 1*, FOTL, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988, pg. 185

²²⁵ C. C. Broyles, *Psalms*, NIBC, Hendrickson, Publishers Inc., Peabody, 1999, pg. 203

²²⁶ יִשָּׁן *qal* imperfect, *Psalms Hebrew English Translation Massoretic TextMT Interlinear*, qbible.com/Hebrew-old-testament/psalms/

²²⁷ זָנַח *qal* imperfect, *Ibid*

ignoring²²⁹ our afflictions and distress?
We lie prostrate in the dust;
our body clings to the ground.
Arise and help us,
redeem us, as befits Your faithfulness.

Gerstenberger writes that ‘only one thing could still be added after such complaint and protestation of innocence – PETITION, which has the ring of an ultimatum.’²³⁰ It seems that after an active involvement, helping the foreign army to win the victory, YHWH takes a nap and the community cries: ‘rouse Yourself, why do You sleep O Lord?’ Broyles affirms that: ‘This marks a curious twist in the psalm’s description of God’s activity. To this point Yahweh has actively opposed his people; here he is negligent.’²³¹

The petition contains the motifs of sleep ישן (5.1.1.5), rejection עזב (5.1.1.1), hiding the face סתר (5.1.1.2), and ignoring שכח (5.1.1.3). Despite these the community still trusts YHWH, appealing to his steadfast love חסד (3.4.1).

3.4 Conclusion

Psalm 44 is a dramatic poem. The psalm affirms the community’s faithfulness in YHWH, faithfulness that is rooted in the ancestors’ witness about YHWH’s deeds in the past. Affirming its faithfulness the community anticipates YHWH’s intervention as a divine warrior. But YHWH has changed his behaviour. Instead of helping his people he is

²²⁸ סתר *hiphil* imperfect, Ibid

²²⁹ שכח *qal* imperfect, Ibid

²³⁰ E. S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms part I*, FOTL, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988, pg. 185

²³¹ C. C. Broyles, *Psalms*, NIBC, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, Peabody, 1999, pg. 204

against them, helping the foreign army to win. This military defeat provokes the community to accuse YHWH of betrayal. The complaint is harsh, tough, acknowledging that the guilty party is YHWH, who does not fulfil his covenantal responsibility. The complaint is followed by the community protestation of innocence (law suit or *rib* pattern of prayer). There is no reason to excuse YHWH's behaviour. Despite this the community still trusts YHWH by appealing to his character: 'redeem us as befits your faithfulness'. In NIV we have 'redeem us because of your unfailing love' (v. 26b) and in NRSV 'redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love' (v. 26b). In other words this is a call to YHWH to remind him of his character that endures forever.

Chapter 4

4.0 Psalm 88

4.1 The script

Psalm 88 is an individual lament that is considered to be the 'black sheep of the Psalter.'²³² The dominant note in the psalm is darkness, caused by YHWH's wrath. According to Limburg:

Psalm 88 is obsessed with the night and the darkness (vv.1, 16, 12). This psalm reeks with the stench of death, of Sheol (where there is no singing, verse 10) and the Pit and the grave. At the end of the psalm are the lowliness and the silence of darkness.²³³

The Psalm begins with a short petition that is followed by complaints. There is no confession of trust, no vow of praise. The mood of the psalmist is gloomy. The protagonists are: the psalmist and YHWH.

4.2 The theatre

Psalm 88 has only a vague sketch of the theatre ('O God of my deliverance'), barely seen through the darkness. YHWH's presence onstage is proved by his wrath poured upon the sufferer.

²³² C. Mandolfo, 'Psalm 88 and the Holocaust: Lament in Search of a Divine Response', *Biblical Interpretation*, 2007, pg. 152.

²³³ J. Limburg, *Psalms*, WBC, WJKP, Louisville, 2000, pg. 297, 298

4.3 The performance

Darkness and only darkness

Psalm 88 describes the experience of the person who has suffered for many years and is in a near-death situation. The speaker has walked ‘through a valley of deepest darkness’ (Ps.23:4a). Regarding this Psalm, Brueggemann affirms:

Psalm 88 is an embarrassment to conventional faith. It is the cry of a believer (who sounds like Job) whose life has gone awry, who desperately seeks contact with Yahweh, but who is unable to evoke a response from God. This is indeed “the dark night of the soul”, when the troubled person must be and must stay in the darkness of abandonment utterly alone.²³⁴

Mandolfo describes Psalm 88 as a ‘long grievance interrupted by some questions and pointing the finger to YHWH for his behaviour that is not in accord with the covenant as it is presented in Exodus and Deutoronomy.’²³⁵ Some scholars are not comfortable with the theological implications of ps.88, especially ‘its refusal to justify God.’²³⁶

Act 1. Lord hear me vv. 1-4

A Song. A psalm of the Korahites. For the leader; on *mahalath leannoth*.

A *maskil* of Heman the Ezrahite.

O Lord, God of my deliverance,
when I cried out in the night before You,
let my prayer reach You;
incline Your ear to my cry.

²³⁴ W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, Augsburg Publishing House, Augsburg, 1984, pg. 78

²³⁵ C. Mandolfo, ‘Psalm 88 and the Holocaust: Lament in Search of a Divine Response, *Biblical Interpretation*, 2007, pg.157

²³⁶ *Ibid.* pg.155-157

For I am sated with misfortune;
I am at the brink of Sheol.

The poem begins with the sufferer's prayer that affirms his/her loyalty to YHWH: 'O Lord God of my deliverance'. The prayer in fact is a cry of desperation for help, pleading and asking YHWH to do something before it is too late. The psalmist is on the brink of Sheol, therefore he/she cries 'day and night'.

What distinguishes this particular supplication is its special concentration on the terrifying darkness of the realm of death that has almost engulfed the supplicant. In consonance with its focus the psalm displays an unusual abundance of synonyms for the underworld: Sheol, the Pit, the grave, the depths, perdition, the land of perdition.²³⁷

The psalmist is in darkness. The expression 'I cried out' emphasizes YHWH's silence and inaccessibility. The darkness is an obstacle in the communication between YHWH and his partner; it is like a brick wall. There is no intimate contact between the psalmist and YHWH. The only chance is to cry aloud.

Act 2. Look what you have done vv. 5-10

I am numbered with those who go down to the Pit;
I am a helpless man
abandoned among the dead,
like bodies lying in the grave
of whom You are mindful no more,
and who are cut off from Your care.
You have put me at the bottom of the Pit,
in the darkest places, in the depth.
Your fury lies heavy upon me;
You afflict me with all your breakers.
You make my companions shun me;
You make me abhorrent to them;
I am shut in and do not go out.

²³⁷ R. Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2002, pg. 308

My eyes pine away from affliction;
I call to You, O Lord, each day;
I stretch out my hands to You.

The psalmist sees himself/herself as one of those who are already among the dead, whose dwelling is in the Pit where there is no communication with YHWH. The speech is tough, angry and accusatory. There is no place for politeness:

You have put me...
Your fury lies...
You afflict me...
You make my companions...
You make me abhorrent...

YHWH's actions have social consequences for the sufferer and these raise the level of protest.

The poet has now reached a level of protest and terror...The psalmist is bolder: he attacks the divinity when he holds him responsible for the social rejection. He now endures from his intimate community (vv. 9-10). He then takes a step beyond conventional language of piety: he uses sarcasm.²³⁸

The situation is very serious and there is no place for being respectful in prayer. Being embittered against YHWH's behaviour the supplicant's faith is strong and his/her prayer for help continues.

Act 3. Miracles in the netherworld? vv. 11-13

Do You work wonders for the dead?
Do the shades rise to praise You?
Is Your faithful care recounted in the grave,
Your constancy in the place of perdition?
Are Your wonders made known in the netherworld,
Your beneficent deeds in the land of oblivion?

²³⁸ S. Terrien, *The Psalms*, CEC, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2003, pg. 628

Now sarcasm is more evident by using rhetorical questions regarding Sheol and YHWH's activity in that place. After years of suffering and YHWH's unresponsiveness, the speaker is entitled to be ironic. Although the questions are rhetorical the answer is definitely: No! YHWH is not present in Sheol. Those in Sheol do not enjoy his steadfast love, his care and presence. Carney offers the following explanation:

The psalmist had no clear idea of an afterlife and, therefore, no conception of reward or punishment anywhere but in this world. Their concentration is on the problems of life *now* and answers to these problems must be found *now*. God is asked to show his hand, to stand by his people and to do it in a visible way.²³⁹

Therefore, in his prayer the psalmist insists on YHWH helping him now. The goal of the rhetorical questions makes very clear the dissonance between YHWH and YHWH's failure to fulfil those expectations. The statement of this dissonance is then hoped to move YHWH to give an answer, to speak to the sufferer. There is a sense that, if YHWH is shown clearly how his actions are perceived (through the agency of the drama), he will hasten to correct that image.

Act 4. Your terrors destroy me vv. 14-19

As for me, I cry out to You, O Lord;
each morning my prayer greets You.
Why, O Lord do You reject me, do You hide Your face from
me?
From my youth I have been affected and near death;
I suffer Your terrors wherever I turn.
Your fury overwhelms me
Your terrors destroy me
they swirl about me like water all day long;
they encircle me on every side.
You have put friend and neighbour far from me

²³⁹ Sheila Carney, 'God damn God', *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol. 13, 1983, pg. 116

and my companions out of my sight.²⁴⁰

The psalmist's perseverance in prayer is dramatic 'I cried to You' and in the morning 'my prayer greets You'. The supplicant does not only experience YHWH's hostility but also YHWH's rejection עזב (5.1.1.1) and hiddenness סתר (5.1.1.2). Despite YHWH's behaviour, the speaker does not abandon the relationship: 'No doubt, this supplicant professes a singular disappointment with God, but she has not foreclosed the relationship.'²⁴¹ YHWH's actions are personified as 'Your terrors'; in other words 'You have terrorized me every day, Your anger is overwhelming me'. YHWH is described as a tormentor whose pleasure is to afflict and torment his people without giving any reasons. The psalmist uses poetic imagery regarding YHWH's terrors; they are like a flood that destroys everything.

Thus, behind this hostile treatment lies an adverse disposition. The terrors of sickness and death he suffers result from Yahweh's wrath... In view of this divine hostility the central concern is God himself. Thus, like most individual laments it describes the affliction in pitiful tone that would move Yahweh, but unlike most it asserts that he is the problem... The diversity of images to depict the nearness of death combine to convey the horror that presses in upon the speaker.²⁴²

It is clear that YHWH is the agent of the destruction of his partner. The sufferer feels that he/she is alone and the only friend is the darkness: 'the darkness is my closest friend' (NIV).

²⁴⁰ In JPS there is a footnote that translates 'out of my sight' in 'into darkness'. In NRSV we have 'my companions are in darkness'. I prefer the NIV translation which is closer to the overall drama of the psalm: 'the darkness is my closest friend'.

²⁴¹ C. Mandolfo, 'Psalm 88 and the Holocaust: Lament in Search of a Divine Response', *Biblica Interpretation*, 2007, pg.165

²⁴² C. C. Broyles, *Psalms*, NIBC, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1999, pg. 352-353

4.4 Conclusion

Psalm 88 is the darkest Psalm in the Hebrew Bible; it describes the near-death experience caused by YHWH's hostility that makes communication impossible. This increases the level of suffering. The supplicant is on the road of suffering from his/her youth. The mood is gloomy and bitterness is present in the words spoken by the supplicant. After many years of suffering, speaking to YHWH is a catharsis for the psalmist. YHWH's behaviour is unacceptable and it cannot be explained. Despite this, the poet prays to YHWH, and maybe this represents the only element of hope expressed in this Psalm. Even if his/her only friend is the darkness and the result of suffering will be death, the psalmist perseveres in faith and loyalty towards YHWH. This psalm seems to be closer to a monologue –almost no sense of YHWH having part in the conversation (hence the seeming impossibility of communication). However, the dramatic portrayal of the monologue is aimed at demonstrating to YHWH this very one-sidedness, in hope that he will then be moved to enter the stage and turn it back into a dialogue.

PART C

CONCLUSIONS

The drama of God's people is very well illustrated in the Hebrew Bible, in the book of Psalms, and especially the lament Psalms. They are acts of relating to God in the drama of life. These Psalms express the inner turmoil of their protagonists in a vivid poetic language on the stage, of a clearly defined relationship. They also address the audience, teaching it how to talk with God about life's deepest needs, disappointments, and longings with vulnerability, spontaneity, frankness, courage and urgency. Lament Psalms were born out of the conflict between faith and experience, and this is why they don't attempt to be 'nice', or 'polite', or even 'theologically correct'; instead everybody in the Theo-drama is given permission to talk without holding back, and to be exactly where they are and who they are with God. The script offers the gift of expression giving powerful passionate words and images which express their heart cry to God.

Theo-dramatic approach includes three important elements: the script, the theatre with its stage and the performance.

Thinking from a Theo-dramatic approach opens the door for the readers to engage completely with the world of the text, or script, without diminishing their humanity. This approach expands the horizons of imagination and understanding of those who play the script. The interaction between YHWH and the supplicant in the context of the

covenant is profoundly dialogical and Theo-dramatic approach is the instrument that gives voice to the tension created by YHWH's silence, absence, or hostility.

The script is lament Psalms that use metaphorical language with intensity; not only as a decorative speech, but to drag us into the depths of reality; not only by reporting how life is but pushing and pulling everybody into the middle of the stage. Lament arises from crises experienced by individual or community, which can include physical threat, interpersonal conflict, injustice, etc. All of those are referred to metaphorically as: 'enemy', 'foes', 'death', 'chaos' etc. For the purpose of this thesis I selected Psalms: 13, 22, 44 and 88, which depict real life with YHWH as it is experienced by psalmists. YHWH's behaviour is the cause of suffering; and YHWH's people meet this behaviour with anger expressed in complaints and protests. YHWH breaks the covenant and he is accountable for this. The highest court of appeal is YHWH. In lament Psalms YHWH is both judge and defendant. The appeal is always made having in view YHWH's steadfast love, faithfulness, and righteousness. The hope is rooted in YHWH's character. The script in Theo-dramatic approach is performed like a musical score and offers new horizons in understanding divine-human relationships in the context of the covenant.

The theatre/stage represents covenantal relationship which provides both reasons for lament and grounds on which the whole drama has a purpose for playing. In Theo-dramatic approach everything is acted onstage, in the theatre, in front of the audience. It gives a definite location, a 'safe space' for the drama, as it involves mutually agreed and recognised

‘rules for engagement’ that will allow the drama to be played out while the relationship between the protagonists continues.

The performance, or the acting of the script onstage in front of the audience challenges everybody to participate in the drama. Through their complaints the psalmists try to convince YHWH, who is the main actor in the drama, to come onstage and to perform his covenantal responsibilities. The covenantal relationship implies experiencing YHWH’s presence and blessings. But sometimes the expectations of the believers based on YHWH’s character and promises are not met by him.

During the performance the sufferer or the community appeal to YHWH’s past deeds in order to urge him to intervene on their behalf. The recollection of past deeds reminds YHWH about his covenant and his character defined by steadfast love, faithfulness and righteousness. Israel received this core testimony from YHWH himself; but in the flow of life YHWH’s people experience something different: absence or hostility. The relationship with YHWH has an experimental dimension. Although confronted by such a bizarre behaviour God’s people do not take an attitude of submissiveness or resignation onstage. The dissonance between YHWH’s character and his behaviour is important. Speaking out loud the expectations of YHWH in ways that make it plain they are not being met gives a space for him to enter in self-defence, or to correct this view and return to the relationship to one that better reflects the character highlighted in the covenantal expectations.

Their sharp disagreement is a risky path but the faith of YHWH’s people is too bold to accept his strange behaviour. In the drama these

complaints, protests, and accusations towards YHWH are not acts of disrespect and unbelief, but they express a deep and intimate relationship with YHWH, asking him to come onstage and be the God he promised to be. Arguing with God and against God is part of a Biblical tradition. It is the expression of a strong faith that seeks to understand; ‘why’ and for ‘how long’ YHWH will behave in such a way, being absent or hostile. The complaints have the role of determining YHWH to come onstage, to take action and bring salvation to his people. Performance in Theo-dramatic approach gives life to the script. The experiences of YHWH are seen from the performers’ perspective and perceptions. Performance in Theo-dramatic approach keeps the tension between YHWH’s character and his behaviour, and doesn’t solve the mystery of the dark images of YHWH’s behaviour as they are presented in the script.

In Theo-dramatic approach regarding the performance of the script, there is a change of mood from lament to praise that is relevant. The movement is not in circles, but is in a spiral that goes upward, bringing new experiences in the relationship with God. In this movement the speakers experience a profound transformation that can be psychological, spiritual, social or physical. Even YHWH is moved by their insistent prayers.

Theo-dramatic approach is a method of interpretation that emphasizes the importance of experience in relationship with God. The drama changes the dynamics of the relationship, and either requires a response from a God who is not responding, or demands a different response from a God whose presence is threat, not blessing. The good news is that even if the relationship is sometimes disrupted, and the trust in God is

damaged, his steadfast love which endures for ever can heal the wounds and rebuilt the capacity for emotional and physical attachment to him, overcoming all difficulties, when he decides to come onstage.

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