

The Righteous Suffering Servant: Observations about a Theological Problem in Four Individual Complaint Psalms

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the theological problem of a righteous sufferer in four psalms (Pss 22; 27; 69; 109), and what emerges is a coherent image. The psalmist(s) who refers to God feels himself like a righteous servant; he is a religious man, but he faces suffering. The righteous sufferer is also aware of his innocence and that his pain has no real, understandable explanation. The awareness of his innocence is also the motivation to complain and search for God because God is the only one who can give an answer and a meaning to the painful situation. In the end, the righteous sufferer also realise that he does not need to be healed from suffering, instead he had to recognise the importance of God's role in his life. This is the primary liberation that also allows him a real comprehension of his situation.

KEYWORDS: Psalms, Righteous, Suffering Servant, Individual, Complaint, Theology

A INTRODUCTION

The theme of suffering that does not find a rational explanation is typical of many antiquity writings.¹ For instance, the theological vision of some Babylonian and Sumerian Poems is quite frightening: The sufferer is convinced of his innocence and is also aware that his suffering comes from God, but his pain is not really

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¹ There are many examples in the Old–Babylonian literature as well. See for instance the poem titled "A Man and His God," (Willelm Römer and Wolfram von Soden, "Weisheitstexte, Mythen und Epen," *TUAT III*: 135–140), or the song "Ludlul bēl nēmeqi," in Donald J. Wiseman, "A New Text of the Babylonian Poem of the Righteous Sufferer," *AnSt* 30 (1980): 101–107. For examples in Sumerian literature, see Samuel N. Krämer, "'Man and His God': A Sumerian Variation on the 'Job' Motive," in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (eds. Martin Noth and D. Winton Thomas; VTSup 3; Leiden: Brill, 1955), 170–182.

motivating. In the middle of the Babylonian composition "Ludlul bēl nēmeqi" (II, 36–37) we find an attempt to understand this situation: "Who can know the will of the Gods in heaven? The author asks, "Who can understand the decisions of the Gods, who live below the ground?" However, these questions are not the attempt to find a solution to the painful situation, but only a sceptical effort to bear the human condition. At the very end of the poem, the psalmist again hopes to understand the real motivation for his suffering, and as he realises that this is impossible, he finally accepts his pain as a consequence of the absolute sovereignty of his deity, Marduk. However, the sufferer is aware that the divinity always has the possibility to redeem him and eliminate his painful situation. Between scepticism and a practical fideism, the psalmist has to live his life. He can only hope that God will be favourable to him. This is at the same time the distressing truth of this vision of life: human beings find themselves in the unforeseeable mercy of the and cannot do anything to change or to ameliorate such situation.

This terrible and fretful awareness is also a central topic in many of the psalms.² This biblical book is divided into hymns of praise and songs of complaint and lament. One of the most developed themes in the Psalter is the origin of the suffering of the righteous.³

The righteous man suffers, often without guilt, often without a concrete motivation. A fascinating description of this situation is presented in some psalms, so that the image of the righteous man becomes similar to the image of the suffering servant.⁴

In the context of the book of psalms motif-oriented analysis requires the following analytic choices: First, a reading of each psalm synchronically as a

² Distress is one of the most common themes of the Psalter. The psalmists are frequently helpless and occasionally also hopeless. They cry out to God for relief and deliverance. Distress is almost differentiated in the psalms: personal suffering, communal suffering, oppressive enemies, death and natural problem. Both enemies and God can be the causes of distress. For details see Philip S. Johnston, "The Psalms and Distress," in *Interpreting the Psalms* (eds. Philip S. Johnston and David G. Firth; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), 63–84.

³ This is also the final thesis of R. Kelvin Moore, *The Psalms of Lamentation and the Enigma of Suffering* (MBPS 50; Lewiston: Mellen Biblical Press, 1996). Distress and pain are always recounted in an appeal to God. Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *JSOT* 36 (1986): 57–71, notes additionally the psychological, sociological and also theological importance of lament.

⁴ See the study by Horacio Simian-Yofre, *Sofferenza dell'uomo e silenzio di Dio nell'antico Testamento e nella letteratura del Vicino Oriente Antico* (StudBib 2; Rome: Città Nuova, 2005), 33–113. He underlines the connection in content either in form and

coherent composition – even if it is clear, that some compositions are the fruit of a long growing process. The goal is not to investigate the development of psalms but their final message, or better a part of it. Second, a selection of the focus psalms within the Psalter as a whole. Therefore, in this study, I have selected four Psalms (Pss 22; 27; 67; 109). The selected psalms show in a paradigmatic way the development of the theological vision about the righteous suffering servant.

Psalm 22 deals with the problem of God's absence, which causes a painful situation. This motif of God's absence is a basic model within the individual complaint psalms, but it does not explain why personal suffering happens. The theology of Ps 22 does not fit in with the idea of individual retribution that depends on individual sin.⁵

The second important motif is that of God's anger and wrath. Psalm 27 is a paradigmatic example of a composition that contains no confession of sin, and, nevertheless, it deals with the consciousness that God can "turn away from [the servant] in anger" (Ps 27:9).

Some psalms express explicitly the idea that God knows the psalmist's sin. The motif of individual retribution is central in these compositions to be central. Therefore, it could confirm that there is a connection between worse actions and the punishment connected to this. However, the example of Ps 69 shows that despite the mention of sin, there is no real connection between guilt and punishment. The servant presents himself as a faithful man who puts his hope in God's mercy.

The last example (Ps 109) is concerned with the definite possibility that the righteous servant could be accused and charged in court. Even in such a challenging situation, the servant remains confident. He does not waive any juridical defence but acknowledges that the Lord protects the poor and the one who is falsely accused. He can recognise that only in God's complete trust can he find the meaning of his situation and a solution for his status.

B THE SUFFERING PSALMIST OF PSALM 22

Psalm 22 is an individual complaint psalm, and it is an excellent example with which to begin this study.⁶ The form-critically oriented analysis of this psalm

vocabulary between some Psalms and in Isa 40–55 about the idea of the righteous servant.

⁵ Only a few psalms contain a direct confession of sin and/or a plea for absolution and forgiveness. See Pss 38:18; 51:2; 130:3.

⁶ The Gospel of Matthew and of Mark read this text as a parallel to Jesus' passion. The motif of God's absence and of being abandoned by God are in this context very

recognises a change between a mood of prayer and complaint on the one hand, and on the other a mood of confidence and thanksgiving that reaches even praise.⁷ Together with the change between an individual sufferer and God's dealing with a larger group of individuals, these differences are the objects of many diachronic studies. The boundary between vv. 22 and 23 is a consensus in modern scientific investigations.⁸ After a complaint psalm (vv. 2–22) an individual thanksgiving psalm begins: "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you" (Ps 22:23).

Nevertheless, there are also numerous attempts to read the two parts of the psalm as one composition.⁹ Therefore, it is possible that the invitation to praise God in v. 23 is the logical reaction to the hope or indeed of the experience of being saved in v. 22: "Save me from the mouth of the lion from the horns of the wild oxen! You have rescued me!"¹⁰ It is more likely that the psalm is a literary unity, and that there are other reasons for its compositive character. The poem is a thanksgiving in which the lamentation section describes the troubles which the author has experienced.¹¹ The transition from lamentation and petition to thanksgiving and praise is a development which is peculiar to the Israelite

important, thought they are not the only fundamental motifs of Ps 22. See also Wolfgang Reinbold, "Die Klage des Gerechten (Ps 22)" in *Die Verheißung des Neuen Bundes: Wie alttestamentliche Texte im Neuen Testament fortwirken* (ed. Bernd Kollmann; BibThSch 35; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 143–156, and Johannes Heidler, "Die Verwendung von Psalm 22 im Kreuzigungsbericht des Markus: Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der Christologie des Markus" in *Christi Leidenspsalm: Arbeiten zum 22. Psalm: Festschrift zum 50. Jahr des Bestehens des Theologischen Seminars "Paulinum"* (ed. Hartmut Genest; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1996), 26–34.

⁷ The psalm contains at least three different kinds of material: laments, prayers, and praise and thanksgiving.

⁸ See for instance Peter Weimar, "Psalm 22: Beobachtungen zur Komposition und Entstehungsgeschichte," in *Freude an der Weisung des Herrn: Beiträge zur Theologie der Psalmen: Festgabe zum 70. Geburtstag von Heinrich Gross* (eds. Ernst Haag and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld; SBB 13; Stuttgart: Verl. Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1986), 471–494, who differentiates between two independent psalms and three different redactional processes.

⁹ Thus, Hans H. Schmid, "'Mein Gott, mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen?' Psalm 22 als Beispiel alttestamentliche Rede von Krankheit und Tod," *WD* 11 (1971): 122–126, and more recently Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (WBC 19; Waco: Word Books Publisher, 1983), 197–202, in the first part of his commentary.

¹⁰ This is also the opinion of Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 197–198, who recognises a liturgical dimension in the structure of the psalm.

¹¹ Arnold A. Anderson, *Introduction and Psalms 1–72* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 184–185.

psalms (see also Ps 28).¹² This change in the structure and in the content of the psalm is fundamental in order to analyse its main theological motif: the absence of God and the suffering of the praying person.¹³

The psalmist's self-consciousness emerges in the description of his suffering – "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast" (Ps 22:15). This pain is, however, caused by other people. As the lament continues, it is the awareness of enemies which dominates the psalmist's thought. The words evoke the terror of one who is powerless. The enemies are described with very plastic metaphors: they are big bulls (v. 13), ravening and roaring lions (v. 14) and dogs (v. 17). The desperate situation forces the psalmist to prayer. His petition and hope is that God will not be far away and will help him quickly: "deliver me from the sword" (v. 20). Thus, in this psalm praying person is a pious person, who understands himself to be a righteous and honest man. This hopeful faith in his God is the best indication that he still believes. His tragic situation persists, but he does not protest or require punishment for his enemies. These three characteristics – faith in God, acceptance of his own suffering and innocence – allow us to consider this psalm as the prayer of a suffering servant.

The absence of God is, therefore, all the more incomprehensible. This motif is expressed by the Hebrew root *rhq*,¹⁴ to be far away from somebody. God is for the psalmist "my God" (v. 2a) and "my salvation" (v. 2b). Thus, he associates a lot of characteristics with God: help, deliverance, protection. In this context, the use of the accusation "Why" (*lmh*) at the very beginning of the psalm makes more sense. God's abandonment has no motivation but a great deal of consequences that influence the psalmist's self-awareness. The psalmist's condition is to be interpreted as a near death experience. The one abandoned by God is also subject to the mockery and ignominy of those who see him. They show their contempt for the sufferer's broken body. "I'm a worm" (v. 7), he says. And this statement implies that he has been deprived of his worth as a human being.¹⁵

In this contest, the vow of praise in v. 23 is surprising: "I will tell your name," "I will praise you." The interior development of the suffering psalmist

¹² Claus Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), 79.

¹³ Personal distress is often tied up with a sense of isolation. Psalms 42–43 give an extended portrait of physical, social and spiritual isolation. See also Johnston, "Psalms and Distress," 67.

¹⁴ See vv. 2, 12, 20.

¹⁵ In this statement, it is also possible to see the similarities with the "man of Sorrow" of Isa 53. He has lost his humanity as well.

now leads to a fundamental reflection. Affliction is presented as the absence of God and its end as a return to the saving presence of YHWH.

In this way, the psalmist reflects his situation and understands that he is the object of God's special attention. At the end of the psalm (vv. 27–32), the cultic hymn underlines the universal value of suffering. There is a movement away from the individual perspective to a more cosmic perspective.¹⁶ Pain, distress and maybe sickness are interpreted from the perspective of a spatial distance. God has taken his protective presence away. This vacuum is now filled by hostile forces that have the possibility to deprive the servant of his humanity.

The experience of suffering in the psalmist's perception is not automatically connected with sin or guilt but only with God's absence. This arbitrary and unexplained absence produces a critical situation. This experience is the necessary condition for complaint and for an appeal for help. The sufferer calls his God. Without describing the motivation of God's intervention, the psalmist is, however, convinced that God will restore his presence. Thus, he praises him.

Suffering is now suddenly health and the psalmist can universalise his own sentiment: "They shall eat and praise him, all who sleep in the earth" (v. 30). The true and deep sense of suffering is not the object of a rational reflection. The suffering servant praises God and inserts in this way his pain in a new dynamic relationship with him. The alternatives in the vision of Ps 22 are either understanding suffering within the framework of a harmonic rapport with God or sufferings is nonsense without explanation. The questions in vv. 1–2 have found their answer. God is no longer far away. Psalm 22, however, does not give a definitive answer.

C GOD'S ANGER AS A RESPONSE TO HUMAN SIN: THE CASE OF PSALM 27

Psalm 27 has also been understood as a mixed psalm or even as a composition of two original independent psalms—a joyful psalm of confidence (vv. 1–6) and a lament of an unjustly accused servant (vv. 7–14). Like many other psalms, there is a shift in the mood within the psalm. The two parts are different in tone and content, structure and rhythm. Many terminological connections between the two parts¹⁷ and the inclusion of vv. 1 and 14¹⁸ seem to support the fact that the second part of the psalm never existed without its present introduction. The

¹⁶ Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 201.

¹⁷ Salvation in vv. 1 and 9; adversaries in vv. 2 and 12; heart in vv. 3, 8, and 14; rise in vv. 3, 12; seek in vv. 4, 8, 13; hide in vv. 5, 9.

¹⁸ The psalm begins and ends with the word "Lord" and this word occurs twice in each of these verses.

psalm is a unity; both distinctive sections contribute to an understanding of this prayer.¹⁹ It is precisely this unity that integrates trust and anxiety into the relationship, making the whole into a prayer.

The second part of the psalm is an individual complaint and begins with a plea.²⁰ In this appeal, the motif of wrath appears in a negative prayer, "do not turn your servant away in anger (*b'p*), you who have been my help." This second part, after the invocation in v. 7, is enveloped by an inclusion that twice refers to the heart of the psalmist (vv. 8 and 14).

In this psalm, the absence of God is also the crucial problem. The psalmist interprets his suffering as a consequence of the fact that God has abandoned him. This abandonment by God has its counterpart in the presence of the enemies (vv. 11–12). The servant (v. 9) is in a hostile area, in the sphere of the influence of death. However, the self-awareness of the psalmist as "servant" implies that God has to protect him. The suggested relationship is characterised by an experience of presence and safety.²¹ The definition of God as "my Help" (v. 9) is also a quality that defines the real relationship between the suffering servant and his deity.²²

Thus, the psalmist's plea with the expression "God of my salvation" (v. 9) is clearly defined by the consciousness that God's sphere of influence brings a decisive power over life and health. In this theological understanding, it is impossible to consider the suffering as an expression of God's response to human sin. The motivation of God's absence is not to be sought in one's own guilt.

The only remaining possibility to explain the servant's painful situation is the divine wrath in v. 9, but how is this wrath to be understood? How is God's role in the suffering to be understood? Is He the reason, or even the author of suffering, or does he merely permit it? Moreover, why does he carry out such actions?

The answer of Ps 27 is unequivocal: Suffering has its foundation in the fact that God has abandoned his servant; he has hidden his face (v. 9). In the particular relationship, the psalmist considers himself as God's servant, he is able

¹⁹ Howard N. Wallace, *Words to God, Word from God: The Psalms in the Prayer and Preaching of the Church* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 93.

²⁰ It is very similar to that which occurs at the beginning of Ps 4. Eight imperatives addressed to the Lord comes from the mouth of the psalmist.

²¹ YHWH lets his face shine (Pss 31:17; 69:18); gives *šalom* (Ps 35:27), joy (Ps 86:4) and salvation (Ps 86:2).

²² See also with the same vocabulary Ps 22:20–21. The expressions are formulaic. See Robert C. Culley, *Oral Formulaic Language in the Biblical Psalms* (NMES 4; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 35–96.

to protest against his situation and against God's responsibility for it. The tone of the request in v. 9 seems to be inquiring, and it is often found in individual complaint psalms. The psalmist wonders and asks himself how he could be in such a terrible situation. His incomprehension is sincere, and that is the pre-eminent witness of his innocence. The causal chain is sin, God's wrath, punishment. In which case, the psalmist argue against God's wrath. However, the psalmist appeals to God, not to turn away from him in anger (v. 9). This is his perception and also his explanation for his situation: God is angry with him. Nevertheless, this wrath is not the description of activity of YHWH, but rather the psalmist's attempt to explain a concrete situation. The psalmist tries to clarify a concrete experience behind which one cannot really penetrate.²³ The experience of finding oneself under divine wrath can hardly been described. Psalm 27, like Pss 6 or 30, expresses the painful experience that God can remove his saving presence even when a person has no concrete consciousness of his sin or guilt. Moreover, God can remove his saving presence even when this situation cannot be explained absolutely in terms of human sin or guilt.²⁴

The motif of wrath emphasises the common interpretation of the mysterious role of God in suffering.²⁵ The possibility that the saving God, the God with whom the psalmist has a "servant" –relationship, has left the psalmist in wrath is the main theological problem. Therefore, the psalmist is in a painful situation. He accuses God and complains about his enemies, but he is not aware of his sin. He has no sin. Psalm 27 deals not with forgiveness of sin, but with the absence of God. Wrath is in this sense not an affect which releases a punitive action, but the description in human categories of a negative experience which the psalmist refers to in God's works. God's wrath underlines the inexplicable circumstance that the deity has removed his presence. The motif of wrath cannot be used to explain the reason of suffering and it does not imply any divine reaction to the sufferer's sin.²⁶ The logical consequence in Ps 27 is the lack of any request for forgiveness, reconciliation or cultic purification.

The two motifs of trust in the presence of God (vv. 1–6) and complaint about his absence (vv. 7–13) have been combined in Ps 27. This redactional arrangement finally allows a theological interpretation of the suffering situation of the righteous servant. Suffering is real. The psalmist reproaches indeed the

²³ This is the same process in Ps 30:6.

²⁴ Thus, also referring to Pss 6 and 30. See Fredrik Lindström, *Suffering and Sin: Interpretation of Illness in the Individual Complaint Psalms* (ConBOT 37; Stockholm: Almqvist, 1994), 142–143.

²⁵ The motif of wrath in Ps 27 is found in a negative prayer. See Lindström, *Suffering and Sin*, 152.

²⁶ See also Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

deity referring to his wrath as the reason for this suffering. However, this cannot be considered as evidence that YHWH's role in suffering implies punishment for a person's sin. Psalm 27 lacks any references to the idea of sin–punishment framework.²⁷

The psalm concludes with an exhortation not to lose hope: "Wait for YHWH, and let your heart take courage; wait for YHWH."²⁸ Thus, for the psalmist God's anger does not set aside the possibility of trust and confidence in the face of suffering and human threats.²⁹

D GUILT AS THE CAUSE OF DISTRESS AND AFFLICTION

The motif of sin and its function in the individual complaint psalms is very diffuse.³⁰ But very often – as we see in Ps 27 – it is impossible to recognize a causal relationship between sin and suffering, so that the person in pain cannot be considered guilty for the situation.

In the Psalter, a lot of compositions apparently can be read as a demonstration of a causal context between sin and punishment. Furthermore, in the case of expressions such as found in Ps 38: "There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me" (vv. 4–5), and "I acknowledge my guilt, I am anxious because of my sin" (v. 19). In the context of Ps 38, the causal relation between sin and punishment must be interpreted in the context of the situation described. In its present form, Ps 38 is a psalm of penitence. It has to be used in a situation where the separation between God and the psalmist is unequivocally connected with the psalmist's sin, or better with the psalmist's awareness of his sin. However, this is the psalmist's vision and not a generalised absolute anthropological dimension. A confession of sin does not provide any evidence about God's activity as the one who has to punish this sin.³¹ The question, why God has removed his saving presence, also remains in this case, unanswered. The described situation in the following Ps 39 is also similar. The psalmist's personal condition here is a mirror of the condition of human existence as a whole. The psalmist uses motifs of the personal complaint psalms to reflect and meditate

²⁷ That is, to the Fall, for instance in Ps 41:5.

²⁸ See also Simian–Yofre, *Sofferenza*, 65.

²⁹ Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 95.

³⁰ See also Mignon R. Jacobs, "Sin, Silence, Suffering, and Confession in the Conceptual Landscape of Psalm 32," in *Text and Community: Essays in Memory of Bruce M. Metzger* (ed. Harold J. Ellens; NTM 20.2; Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2007), 14–34.

³¹ Lindström, *Suffering and Sin*, 341–343.

upon the human condition in a godless world. Consequently, his suffering is not considered a concrete experience, but rather as a theological problem. Sin is, therefore, a condition of human existence. It belongs to human beings (Ps 39:28). Reducing the relevance of the sin of Ps 39 to merely individual guilt, which generates suffering, is theologically very dangerous and a misunderstanding.³²

However, these considerations should be corrected, considering the central content of Ps 69. Verse 6 is often interpreted as the theological explanation of the origin of suffering which is described in the rest of the psalm: "O God, you know my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you." The difficulty in interpreting this expression and in the final analysis of the whole psalm lies in its particular way of looking at the idea of suffering before God.³³

In contrast to most of the individual complaint psalms, in Ps 69, it is possible to define the psalmist's afflictions.³⁴ He has experienced mockery and persecution (vv. 2–5). Thus, his confession is to be understood as a declaration of his loyalty to God. The psalmist is convinced that his love of God has caused the enemies to hate him. The expression of sin in v. 6 cannot be understood as an indication of rational origin of suffering, but rather as a plea for the psalmist's assurance of his innocence. He is attacked without reason by his neighbours (v. 5). Thus, he admits that he is guilty, but only in his relationship with God, who knows him completely. The mention of sin in this psalm does not consequently explain a theological reason for the psalmist's suffering, but rather the awareness that there is no rational connection between personal guilt and suffering.

While Ps 69 is obviously not a systematic description of a theological concept, we can nevertheless perceive some very important characteristics of the psalmist's personality. The urgency of his plea (vv. 14–16) indicates the depth

³² The same situation is also presented in Ps 40, where disease and sin are so parallelised that they seem to be two sides of the same coin. Again, in this case the confession of sin (Ps 40:13) shows no causal connection between guilt and affliction but expresses the connection between one's own condition and the universalistic vision of a society, that does penitence.

³³ Alphonso Groenewald, "'And Please, Do Not Hide your Face from Your Servant!'" (Ps 69:18a): The image of the 'Hidden God,'" in *Vom Ausdruck zum Inhalt, vom Inhalt zum Ausdruck: Beiträge zur Exegese und Wirkungsgeschichte alttestamentlicher Texte: Festschrift der Schülerinnen und Schüler für Theodor Seidl zum 60. Geburtstag* (eds. Theodor Seidl, Maria Häusl and David Volgger; ATS 75; St. Ottilien: EOS-Verlag, 2005), 121–138.

³⁴ Christiane de Vos and Gert Kwakkel, "Psalm 69: the Petitioner's Understanding of Himself, his God, and his Enemies," in *Psalms and Prayers: Papers Read at the Joint Meeting of the Society of Old Testament Study and het Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap in Nederland en België, Apeldoorn August 2006* (eds. Bob Becking and Eric Peels; OtSt 55; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 159–179.

of the crisis in his life. However, the text allows a differentiated view of the connection between sin and suffering. God is not the cause of the suffering, but rather the witness of the psalmist's innocence. In the context of the psalm, the psalmist thinks about his situation of suffering and recognises the profound meaning of his life. The main concern is unequivocal: he is just waiting for salvation, which comes from God (v. 30). God will demonstrate his favour to his suffering servant, and the servant will praise him (v. 31).

E SOCIAL PROCESS FOR THE PRAYER: THE SUFFERING SERVANT IN PSALM 109

Psalm 109 is an extreme case in relation to the development of the suffering servant's image in the book of Psalms. The general tone and its form are those of a lament. The concrete nature of the crisis is clearly indicated by the recurring use of the word "accuse."³⁵ The introduction in vv. 1–5, with an appeal for God's intervention, describes the basic problem and subsequently introduces the reasons for the complaint. The prayer's experience is negative. Instead of receiving good for the good, he has experienced evil and hate. This hate's content is not described in detail but introduces the opponents' claims in the central part of the psalm (vv. 6–19). The psalm moves in a juridical direction.³⁶ The setting of the psalm may be the religious court.³⁷ The psalmist does not pronounce a lamentation or a long prayer. The description of his suffering is at the beginning a speech about himself in the third person (vv. 6–19) and only later an anthropological description of his self-consciousness in the first person (vv. 22–25). In this way, he presents a kind of indictment to a judge during a juridical hearing. The psalmist does not curse or insult; he rather describes – almost in a detached way – his situation. This leads to a plea in the form of a petition (vv. 20–21). This prayer is dictated by the awareness that God will assuredly bless him and that his enemies will not succeed. This prayer of trust and petition that begins in v. 21 is, however, a surprise. After v. 1, God is not mentioned. Thus, v. 21 represents a very important shift of tone, mood and intention.

The divine figure suddenly becomes important. The psalmist, who organised his defence without paying attention to his situation's theological implications abruptly turns to God. In this way, the psalmist's perspective, which so far had shown faith in human justice, changes radically. With a petition to the court, the language makes it clear that the psalmist is not expecting a "heavenly" judgment. God's justice has to be mediated through legitimated human justice.

³⁵ The term is used in vv. 4, 20, 29 and as noun in v. 6.

³⁶ See also Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalm and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 271–275.

³⁷ See Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150* (WBC 21; Waco: Word Books Publisher, 1983), 76.

The contrast in vv. 21–31 is all the more surprising. The theological content is very important. The psalmist does not plead to win the case; he wants to celebrate God's faithfulness. He alone is able to turn wrong things to right (v. 31).³⁸

At this point, the theology of the servant is revealed in its fundamental aspect. He does not waive his right to defend himself in the court against his enemies. He does not passively accept his destiny of suffering. But he is able to recognise, in his existence, the role of God as the one who protects and saves. The Psalm finishes with a vow of thanksgiving and praise.

F CONCLUSION

This short examination of a particular theological aspect in four psalms has developed a coherent image of the psalmist who refers to God. He is a righteous servant, and he is suffering. He is a religious man, and he is facing the experience of suffering. He is also aware of his innocence and that his suffering does not have any intelligible explanation. The awareness of his innocence is also the motivation first to complain and further to search for God. He is the only one who can give an answer and a meaning to the painful situation.

Thus, the psalmist's most tragic experience is not his suffering but his feeling of being abandoned by God. A change of the painful situation is not described in any of the psalms. The psalmist goes on suffering; the position of his enemies is unassailable.

Even if the servant's suffering situation, which is often dramatically introduced does not change, a process of inner development within the individual psalms can be realised. The psalmist understands himself as being a part of the people, and he can perceive and reflect his situation in a brighter context.

In the end, he can also realise that he does not need to be healed from suffering, but that he has rather to recognise the importance of God's role in his life. This is the main liberation that also allows him a real comprehension of his situation. Therefore, the psalmist despite the background of his situation of suffering was still able to praise God, both personally and in the context of a renewed and recovered community.

³⁸ See also Brueggemann, *The Psalm*, 268–282.

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