

Raised Eyes and Humble Hearts: The Body as/in Space in Pss 123 and 131¹

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ABSTRACT

As a mobile spatial field, the human body is a space and functions in space. The body governs spatial orientation and perceptions of direction, location and distance and determines human experiences and representations of space on the continuum between positive and negative and/or sacred and profane space. In the Psalter, space is represented and experienced through the eyes of a “lyrical I” whose body is located off-centre, in chaos and despair, or at-centre, in harmony and peace. Supplication and praise, ritual and prayer are all expressions of the lyrical I’s desire to be located at-centre, in the presence of the deity, in sacred space. Sacred space is not an ontological location, but a subjective, bodily experience of being in the presence of the divine. An analysis of the whole-body experience of the lyrical I in Pss 123 and 131 illustrates the poet’s longing for (Ps 123) and experience of being at-centre (Ps 131), in divine presence, i.e., in sacred space.

Keywords: Psalm 123, Psalm 131, body, space, body as space, body in space, spatial orientation, mobile spatial field, whole-body experience, Psalter Book V, Persian Period.

A INTRODUCTION

The body and its parts provide an essential reservoir of images from which the Psalms draw. For the lyrical speakers of the Psalms, the perception of the body is one of the most intensive and important experiences shaping their view of the whole of life. From the perspective of the lyrical speakers, God, enemies and friends as well

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as the lyrical speakers themselves are perceived and described as 'bodies.'²

Psalms 123 and 131 are remarkable poems in the collection of psalms known as the Songs of Ascents (שירי המעלות, Pss 120-134).³ They are the fourth and second shortest poems in a collection of exceptionally short poems.⁴ They share the words יהוה,⁵ עיני⁶ and also They⁸ and explicitly mention other body parts.⁷ נפש⁷ implicitly suggest movement and/or functions of the body and/or body parts.⁹ Both poems imply the presence and actions of individual and collective human bodies¹⁰ as well as the divine body.¹¹ Both also contain an extended simile (123:2a-d; 131:2a-c) associating YHWH with female imagery.¹² In Ps 123:2b, the suppliant's eyes are lifted up "to" (אל) YHWH "as the eyes of a female slave to the hand of her mistress" and in Ps 131:2b, the poet confesses that he has stilled and quieted his innermost being like a weaned child "upon" (עלי) its mother. Both

² Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, "Body Images in the Psalms," *JSOT* 28 (2004):301–326 (301).

³ With the exception of Ps 121:1's שיר למעלות, all the poems in the שירי המעלות collection share the superscript שיר המעלות. See Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, *Psalms Books 4–5* (Wisdom Commentary 22; Collegeville: Liturgical, 2020), 171. I regard the variation as significant. Psalms 120–134 are suggestive of a journey to or being present in Jerusalem. The only poem *describing* a journey through dangerous territory is Ps 121. Hence, it is שיר למעלות "a song *for* the upgoings," and not שיר המעלות "the song of the upgoings." Psalm 121 has a specific intention while the other fourteen are poems generally associated with the מעלות experience.

⁴ With one exception (Ps 132 with its 131 words), the שירי המעלות have on average 49 words per poem. The collection constitutes a tenth part of the Psalter but in length represents less than a twentieth. Cf. Thijs Booij, "Psalms 120–136: Songs for a Great Festival," *Biblica* 91 (2010):243. Psalm 134 with 25 words is the shortest, Ps 133 with 40 words the third shortest. Psalm 131 has 33 and Ps 123 has 41 words.

⁵ Cf. 123:2b, 3a; 131:1a, 3a.

⁶ Cf. 123:1a, 2a, 2b, 2c; 131:1a.

⁷ Cf. 123:4a; 131:2a, 2c.

⁸ Cf. יד in 123:2a, 2b; לב in 131:1a.

⁹ Cf. נשא in 123:1a; ישב in 123:1b; הניח in 123:2d, 3a; שבע in 123:3b, 4a; גבה in 131:1a; רום in 131:1a; הלך in 131:1b; שוה and דמם in 131:2a.

¹⁰ For individual human bodies, cf. 123:1a, 2b, 2c; 131:1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, 2c. For collective bodies, cf. 123:2a, 2c, 2d, 3a, 3b, 4a, 4b, 4c; 131:3a.

¹¹ Cf. 123:1b, 2c, 2d, 3a; 131:1a, 3a.

¹² I do not share the bold assumption by Patrick D. Miller, "'Things Too Wonderful': Prayers of Women in the Old Testament," in *Biblische Theologie und gesellschaftliche Wandel: Für Norbert Lohfink* (ed. Georg Braulik, Walter Groß, and Sean McEvenue; Freiburg: Herder, 1993), 237–251 (245), that Ps 131 was *written* by a woman. Gillmayr-Bucher, "Body Images," 304, states that, "as far as the language of the body is concerned, the psalms are open for male and female reconstructions and identifications."

poems explicitly refer to spatial locations¹³ and by means of verbs and prepositions suggest the presence in and movement through space.¹⁴

Numerous studies focus on the שירי המעלות as a collection, their function in Book V of the Psalter or the nature of the action implied by the noun מעלות in the superscript of each poem. The present study does not focus on these issues.¹⁵ I depart from and refine an opinion expressed previously.¹⁶ I read the collection as five triads of poems that can be conceptualised – physically, mentally and emotionally – on the *horizontal* axis of ancient Near Eastern spatial orientation as a journey from the furthestmost extremes of the world to its centre, the temple in Jerusalem; and *at the same time* on the *vertical* axis a journey from the deepest pit of *Š^e’ōl*, far from the saving presence of YHWH, to the dizzying heights of *Šāmayim*, safe in his protecting and blessing arms.¹⁷ Psalms 120-122 and 132-134 focus on the *horizontal* journey from the dangerous extremes of the world to the safe haven of Jerusalem where the protective presence of YHWH can be experienced. From this focal point, Israel—as a family living together in harmony—experiences YHWH’s constant blessing. Psalms 123-125 and 129-131 focus on the *vertical journey*. YHWH, who is enthroned in heaven, prevents Israel from plunging into the depths of שאול. His protective presence, symbolised by Mount Zion and Jerusalem, ensures the survival of his people even in times of severe oppression, an experience that is nothing short of residing in the depths of שאול. At the heart of the collection lie Pss 126-128, formally constituting an *inclusio*, “with the saving acts of YHWH originating in Zion forming the protective ‘arms’ around the small individual performing his mundane tasks of sowing and reaping, building a house and raising a family.”¹⁸ From this perspective, “Pss 123 and 131 are the first and last poems of the triads focusing

¹³ Cf. שמים in 123:1b; כגמל עלי אמו in 131:2b.

¹⁴ For verbs, cf. נשא in 123:1a; ישב in 123:1b; הניח in 123:2d, 3a; שבע in 123:3b, 4a; גבה and רום in 131:1a; הלך in 131:1b; שוה and דמם in 131:2a. For prepositions, cf. אל in 123:1a, 2a, 2b, 2c and 131:3a; ב and מן in 131:1b; כ and על in 131:2b, 2c.

¹⁵ Cf. the excursus “The Composition of the So-Called Pilgrim Psalter Psalms 120-140,” in Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101-150* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 286–299; deClaisse-Walford, *Psalms Books 4-5*, 171–176.

¹⁶ Gert T. M. Prinsloo, “The Role of Space in the שירי המעלות (Psalms 120-134),” *Biblica* 86/4 (2005):457–477.

¹⁷ Prinsloo, “The Role of Space,” 472–474. Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 536, state that, “the message of the collection as a whole is that Jerusalem is the place for the coming together of the people of God for celebrations and commemorations and for acknowledging the goodness and help of the God of the Israelites.”

¹⁸ Prinsloo, “The Role of Space,” 473. The references to Zion in Pss 126:1-3 and 128:5-6 constitute an *inclusio*. Sowing and reaping are addressed in Ps 126:4-6 and building a house and raising a family in Pss 127:1-5 and 128:1-4.

on Israel's *vertical* spatial journey (Pss 123-125; 129-131), framing the central triad (Pss 126-128) describing "life at-centre, in the presence of YHWH."¹⁹ They constitute the bookends of the collection's centre, while the two outer triads (Pss 120-122; 132-134) focus on the effect of Israel's *horizontal* journey to and being present in Jerusalem. The present study focuses on individual and collective human bodies in relation to the divine body in Pss 123 and 131 and argues that the experience of these bodies *as* space and *in* space constitutes the essence of the theological message conveyed by the Songs of Ascents. The two poems resonate with each other and provide a lens through which YHWH's *terrestrial and cosmic presence* can be appropriated by his people, individually and collectively, in their everyday lives. The study thus focuses on *bodyspace* in Pss 123 and 131,²⁰ in particular, the functioning of the various bodies both *as* space(s) and *in* space(s).

B THE BODY AS/IN SPACE

My analysis of Pss 123 and 131 is first and foremost based on a detailed intratextual reading of both poems, which provides data for inter- and extratextual perspectives on the poems and allows the interpreter to arrive at a holistic interpretation of the texts in their literary and socio-historical context(s).²¹ I deliberately emphasise the importance of a detailed intratextual analysis as a reminder that when we interpret ancient texts, "the level of narrative discourse is the only one directly available to textual analysis."²² Leonard Thompson asserts that "three worlds interact in the interpretation of any work: the social-historical milieu from which the work arose, the world of the reader or hearer, and the world created in the work itself."²³ Psalms 123 and 131 create

¹⁹ Prinsloo, "The Role of Space," 469.

²⁰ The neologism *bodyspace* echoes the title of a collection of essays by Nancy Duncan, ed., *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1996), 1. The book explores "the far-reaching implications of a new epistemological viewpoint based on the idea of knowledge as embodied, engendered and embedded in the material context of place and space . . . BodySpace intends to 'place' gender and sexuality (in both corporeal and discursive terms) squarely on the academic agenda by emphasizing place, space and other geographic concepts that are useful in contextualizing and situating social relations."

²¹ My holistic approach is rooted in Jurij Lotman's cultural semiotic approach, cf. in particular, Jurij Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (trans. Ronald Vroon; Michigan Slavic Contributions 7; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1977), 50–56. See also Gert T. M. Prinsloo, "Analysing Old Testament Poetry: An Experiment in Methodology with Reference to Psalm 126," *OTE* 5/2 (1992): 225-251 (230-231); *ibid.*, "A Contextual and Intertextual Reading of Psalm 118," *OTE*/216 (2003), 401-421 (402 n.5).

²² Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (trans. Jane E. Lewin; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 27.

²³ Leonard L. Thompson, *Introducing Biblical Literature: A More Fantastic Country* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 4.

a “world of words,”²⁴ a “*representational* world related to but not identical to the ‘real’ world.”²⁵ They *speak* about space in general and *bodyspace* in particular and “speaking about space can be a way of bridging physically distant but emotionally and ethically close worlds.”²⁶ The very act of speaking represents “an interpretative horizon where *vertical* and *horizontal* positioning of one’s body in the *living space* has socioethical implications that, once recognised, can establish a cultural continuity that is otherwise defied by the built environment in which the interaction takes place.”²⁷

My reading of Pss 123 and 131 is influenced by three theoretical points of departure. First, I engage in a *critical-spatial reading* of the two poems.²⁸ Yi-Fu Tuan argues that *experience* is “a cover-all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs reality.”²⁹ Reality is a *spatial* concept, as every human experience transpires in a space and/or at a place of some kind. Critical-spatial theorists postulate that space as a geometrical concept is known and *constructed* through the interaction between human beings and their environment. Positivistic, binary classifications of space imply that space is *either* physical *or* abstract and consequently objective, measurable and quantifiable. Critical-spatial approaches argue that all space is *social space*,

²⁴ Gert T. M. Prinsloo, “Place, Space and Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Theory and Practice with Reference to the Book of Jonah,” in *Constructions of Space V: Place, Space and Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (ed. Gert T. M. Prinsloo and Christl M. Maier; LHBOTS 576; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 3-25 (7)..

²⁵ Gert T. M. Prinsloo, “Suffering Bodies – Divine Absence: Towards a Spatial Reading of Ancient Near Eastern Laments with Reference to Psalm 13 and An Assyrian Elegy (K 890),” *OTE* 26/3 (2013), 773-803 (781 n. 55).

²⁶ Allesandro Duranti, “Indexical Speech across Samoan Communities,” *American Anthropologist* 99 (1997):342. Italics added for emphasis.

²⁷ Duranti, “Indexical Speech,” 342. Italics added for emphasis.

²⁸ My critical-spatial reading of Pss 123 and 131 departs from the notion that space is not a geometrical concept but a social construct. My reading is informed by the seminal approach to spatial analysis by the French Marxist philosopher, Henri Lefebvre and the adaptation and modification of Lefebvre’s theory by the American geographer, Edward Soja. For the notion of space as a three-dimensional concept, cf. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith; Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 38–39. Lefebvre differentiates between physical or “perceived” space, mental or “conceived” space and social or “lived” space. Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real- and Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 66–67, uses the terms *Firstspace*, *Secondspace* and *Thirdspace* for this trialectic of spaces.

²⁹ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (6th printing; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 8.

experienced by human beings *at the same time* as a concrete reality, an abstract conceptualisation and a social construction.³⁰

Second, my analysis takes into account that human beings are *embodied creatures*,³¹ which means that they are "'emplaced' or rooted creatures."³² Yi-Fu Tuan asserts that, "in a literal sense, the human body is the measure of direction, location and distance."³³ Two fundamental principles determine spatial organisation namely "the posture and structure of the human body and the relations (be it close or distant) between human beings."³⁴ Humans "impose a schema on space by their mere presence."³⁵ Every person "is at the center of his world, and circumambient space is differentiated in accordance with the schema of his body";³⁶ we "meet the world through our bodies."³⁷ Consequently, "the body is an integral part of spatial analysis,"³⁸ as our bodies "allow us to experience and conceptualise the relationships between things, places, persons (as well as regions), and to identify differences."³⁹ As such, the body *is* a space and functions *in* space.⁴⁰ It is "the original tool with which humans shape their world and the substance out of which the world is shaped."⁴¹ The body is *at the same time* "a physical and biological entity, lived experience, and a center of agency, a location for speaking and acting on the world."⁴² Henri Lefebvre

³⁰ Barney Warf and Santa Arias, "Introduction: The Reinsertion of Space into the Social Sciences and Humanities," in *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (ed. Barney Warf and Santa Arias; Routledge Studies in Human Geography 26; London: Routledge, 2009), 1. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 30–31, observes that physical space disappears as "the productive forces of a variety of social systems have forged their particular spaces."

³¹ Setha M. Low, "Embodied Space(s): Anthropological Theories of Body, Space, and Culture," *Space & Culture* 6 (2003):9–18. The concept of "embodied space" resolves "the dualism of the subjective and the objective body and distinctions between the material and the representational aspects of body space" (p. 10).

³² Patrick Schreiner, "Space, Place and Biblical Studies: A Survey of Recent Research in Light of Developing Trends," *CBR* 14 (2016):341.

³³ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 44.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁷ Erica Reischer and Kathryn S. Koo, "The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004):307.

³⁸ Low, "Embodied Space(s)," 9.

³⁹ Kim Knott, "Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion," *Temenos* 41 (2005):157.

⁴⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 170, observes that "each living body *is* space and *has* its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space" (italics original).

⁴¹ Low, "Embodied Space(s)," 12.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 9.

claims that the “whole of (social) space proceeds from the body,”⁴³ which functions as a *mobile spatial field* “that can be understood as a culturally defined, corporeal-sensual field stretching out from the body at a given locale or moving through locales.”⁴⁴ As a mobile spatial field, the human body is an *acting body* that allows human beings to assign unique, new meanings to spatial experiences. Space becomes “‘embodied’ in an actor-centered, mobile body, separate from any fixed center or place,”⁴⁵ which “makes its own place in the world.”⁴⁶ The notion of *embodied* space implies that places “are not in the landscape but simultaneously in the land, people’s minds, customs, and bodily practices.”⁴⁷

Third, my critical-spatial analysis of the body *as* space and *in* space not only allows for cross-cultural perspectives on similarities in human beings’ spatial construction(s) and thus for a universal spatial analysis but also acknowledges that these constructions find culture-specific expressions.⁴⁸ What I present in this study is the concept of embodied space as it finds expression in ancient Near Eastern worldview(s) and spatial orientation(s). Nicolas Wyatt asserts that the ancient Near East shares the universal principle that orientation in space departs from the self (i.e., the human body).⁴⁹ It is “the necessarily irreducible basis for all experience. We have to start from our own self-awareness.”⁵⁰ The ancient Near Eastern body orientated itself in a geocentric universe imagined as consisting of three basic building blocks—heaven, the realm of the gods; earth, the dwelling place of humans; and the netherworld, an entirely negative space, the realm of the dead.⁵¹ Earth “generally lies as a flat

⁴³ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 405.

⁴⁴ Low, “Embodied Space(s),” 14. For the concept of the body as a mobile spatial field, Low draws upon the fieldwork of the anthropologist, Nancy D. Munn, “Excluded Spaces: The Figure in the Australian Aboriginal Landscape,” *Critical Enquiry* 22 (1996):446–465.

⁴⁵ Low, “Embodied Space(s),” 14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁸ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 34. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 31.

⁴⁹ Nicolas Wyatt, *Space and Time in the Religious Life of the Near East* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 35. According to Tuan, *Space and Place*, 34–50, spatial orientation departs from the upright human body that experiences reality on two planes, the vertical and the horizontal. Vertically, top and bottom represent the extremes of positive and negative experience. Horizontally, front-back and left-right represent binary orientation points intersecting in the self. Front/right signifies positive space, back/left negative space. Far and near represent the extremes of positive and negative experience. These universal principles find culture specific expression in the ancient Near East where the basic orientation point of the upright human body is towards the east (Wyatt, *Space and Time*, 36 n. 4).

⁵⁰ Wyatt, *Space and Time*, 35.

⁵¹ Cf. Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (MC 8; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1998), xii; Annette Krüger, “Himmel—Erde—Unterwelt: Kosmologische

plate... horizontally at the centre of a great sphere. Outside this sphere, above, below, and around ... lies the 'cosmic ocean.'"⁵² Two axes, horizontal and vertical, intersect at the centre of this geocentric universe.⁵³ To use Lefebvrian terminology, this centre was *perceived* as the universe's cosmic centre, *conceived* as a temple on a high mountain, the terrestrial dwelling place of the high god and *experienced* as "reality ... the source of all benefits, and a point of intersection of all dimensions of the world. It is the point of access to heaven, and the place at which benefits may be drawn up from the underworld."⁵⁴ It represents the most sacred space, the meeting point of the divine and human spheres. In the Hebrew Bible, the temple in Jerusalem is regarded as the universe's spatial centre.⁵⁵

In this regard, the work of Mircea Eliade on sacred and profane space is well-known and often quoted. Eliade asserts that for "religious man, space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others."⁵⁶ There is "sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous."⁵⁷ Sacred space is "the only *real* and *real-ly* existing space," all other spaces represent the "formless expanse surrounding"

Entwürfe in der poetischen Literatur Israels," in *Das biblische Weltbild und seine altorientalischen Kontexte* (ed. Bernd Janowski and Beate Ego; FAT 32; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 65–83; Bernd Janowski, "Das biblische Weltbild: Eine methodologische skizze," *Das biblische Weltbild und seine altorientalischen Kontexte* (ed. Bernd Janowski and Beate Ego; FAT 32; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 3–26; Bernd Janowski, "Die heilige Wohnung des Höchsten: Kosmologische Implikationen der Jerusalemer Tempeltheologie," in *Gottesstadt und Gottesgarten: Zu Geschichte und Theologie des Jerusalemer Tempels* (ed. Othmar Keel and Erich Zenger; QD 191; Freiburg: Herder, 2002), 24–68; Angelika Berlejung, "Weltbild/Kosmologie," in *Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe zum Alten und Neuen Testament* (ed. Angelika Berlejung and Christian Frevel; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), 65–72.

⁵² Wyatt, *Space and Time*, 55.

⁵³ Tuan, *Place and Space*, 38, observes that, "the prestige of the center is well established. People everywhere tend to regard their own homeland as the 'middle place,' or the center of the world."

⁵⁴ Wyatt, *Space and Time*, 147.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; Menahem Haran, "Temple and Community in Ancient Israel," in *Temple in Society* (ed. Michael V. Fox; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1988), 17–26. According to Janowski, "Die heilige Wohnung," 26–27, the temple thus becomes heaven upon earth. Jerusalem thus imagined could function as source of hope for the people of Judah even during the exile; cf. Klaus Seybold, "Jerusalem in the View of the Psalms," in *The Centrality of Jerusalem: Historical Perspectives* (ed. Marcel Poorthuis and Chana Safrai; Kampen: Pharos, 1996), 7–14.

⁵⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (trans. Willard R. Trask; New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 20.

⁵⁷ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 20.

sacred space.⁵⁸ The sacred manifests itself in a "*hierophany*," which simply means "that *something sacred shows itself to us*."⁵⁹ This manifestation of the sacred "reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation."⁶⁰ Eliade's "religious man" lives life "on a twofold plane; it takes its course as human existence and, at the same time, shares in a transhuman life, that of the cosmos or the gods."⁶¹

Jonathan Z. Smith acknowledges Eliade's immense contribution to the field of *Religionsgeschichte*⁶² but is critical of his assumption—to use Lefebvrian terminology—that the "sacred" manifests itself *ontologically* as perceived (real) and/or conceived (mental) space, thereby negating the important role of *lived experiences*,⁶³ i.e., of "the human processes involved in making space 'sacred'."⁶⁴ Smith distinguishes "between a *locative* vision of the world (which emphasizes place) and a *utopian* vision of the world (using the term in its strict sense; the value of being in no place)."⁶⁵ Both "have been and remain coeval existential possibilities which may be appropriated whenever and wherever they correspond to man's experience of his world."⁶⁶ Both are available "at any time, in any place."⁶⁷ It resonates with Edward Soja's insistence on the creative possibilities that may be unlocked by lived experience. Humans can imagine and thus create a "counterspace,"⁶⁸ a thirdspace, "another" world or, maybe more aptly, "*an other*" world. The concept of thirdspace "opens up our spatial imaginaries to ways of thinking and acting politically that respond to all binarisms... by interjecting an-Other set of choices."⁶⁹ For Smith, place is more than material space, it is lived "in hearts and minds, and is socially organised."⁷⁰ Space is "not the recipient but rather the creation of the human project."⁷¹ Human beings *bring sacred space into being* and they do it through *ritual*. Ritual "is a creative process whereby people make a meaningful world that they can inhabit."⁷² Ritual is not "a response 'to the sacred'; rather, something or someone

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 11 (italics in the original).

⁶⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁶¹ Ibid., 167.

⁶² Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot," *JR* 52 (1972):137–142.

⁶³ Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot," 142–149. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 21 remarks that: "The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world."

⁶⁴ Knott, "Spatial Theory and Method," 169.

⁶⁵ Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot," 147 (italics in the original).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 60

⁶⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁰ Knott, "Spatial Theory and Method," 170.

⁷¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 26.

⁷² Knott, "Spatial Theory and Method," 171.

is made sacred by ritual."⁷³ This perspective on sacred space, on Jerusalem as a holy place in the Hebrew Bible and, in particular, the spatial orientation of the body in relation to the sacred site is a much-neglected theme in biblical scholarship.⁷⁴

The ancient Israelite body orientated itself in *this* imagined universe on two planes. On the *horizontal axis*, orientation was towards the east. It represents what is known, what is in front of the self, hence also the past. The east represents new beginnings, vitality, life and, consequently, positive space.⁷⁵ The west is behind the self. It represents darkness, the unknown, the end, death and, consequently, negative space.⁷⁶ The south lies to the right of the self. It is associated "with security, well-being and the morally 'right'. Its geographical direction is a metaphorical extension of the body-term";⁷⁷ hence, it represents positive space. The north then lies to the left of the self. The north represents "dangerous things and functions, including where the gods dwell, for they are dangerous powers"; hence, it signifies negative space.⁷⁸ On the *vertical axis*, ascending and descending represent the extremes of positive and negative spatial orientation. The temple on Mount Zion represents the *axis mundi* and orientation towards this centre, both horizontally and vertically, represents the ideal existence of the self. Proximity to the centre implied holiness, reality in the sense of a real and meaningful existence and wholeness in the sense of a whole-body experience. Distance from the centre signified the breakdown of reality, approaching the end of the world and experiencing the disintegration and destruction of the self.⁷⁹

⁷³ Smith, *To Take Place*, 105.

⁷⁴ Mark K. George, "Jonathan Z. Smith's *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual After 20 Years*," *JAAR* 76 (2008):781–782, indicates that Smith's important work on ritualised human agency in the creation of sacred space has been largely ignored by biblical scholars. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Earth and Gods," *JR* 49 (1969):103–127, acknowledges that in Jewish spatial imagination Jerusalem serves as a cosmic orientation point. The land of Israel is an enclave of sacredness surrounded by a demonic wasteland. Jerusalem with its temple on Mount Zion is the centre of the universe, the *axis mundi*, the midpoint between creation and re-creation. Any experience of "exile" is excruciating, to be cut off from land, blessing, life, creation, reality and the deity. Nonetheless, "the exile may be overcome in moments of sacred time" by enacting rituals. Smith argues that through ritual the Jewish "living room, the *hic et nunc*, is abolished, and once more the participants in the ritual 'go up' to Jerusalem as in the days before the exile" (p. 124).

⁷⁵ Wyatt, *Space and Time*, 35–36.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

In recent decades, the body and its parts have been the subject of several influential studies in the Hebrew Bible in general and the Psalter in particular. Dörte Bester provides a wide-ranging overview of the state of research.⁸⁰ She indicates that, although numerous body parts, their functions and emotions associated with those functions are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, from an anthropological point of view the Hebrew Bible conceives the body as a unit.⁸¹ To understand these conceptions, the literary technique of *synecdoche* and the principle of *stereometric thinking* should be kept in mind.⁸² These phenomena allow us to view the whole biblical body as a unit integrated in the whole biblical cosmos. Jerome H. Neyrey argues that wholeness is intrinsically linked to the concept of holiness; to experience wholeness is to experience the sacred while dividedness equals to being blemished or maimed.⁸³ Wholeness finds “vivid expression in terms of the human body. One aspect of a ‘holy’ body is that it must be bodily whole.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, wholeness is concerned “with the integrity of human thought and action.”⁸⁵ Wholeness of thought and action ignites a human being’s spatial imagination to open ways of thinking and doing which enables him/her to embrace the paradox between sacred and profane space and to become an embodied sacred space in profane space.⁸⁶ My reading of the body in/as space in Pss 123 and 131 can be enhanced in subsequent research by Hebrew Bible scholarship’s rekindled interest in biblical anthropology.⁸⁷

My analysis will be enhanced by two often-overlooked perspectives on the body. First, I find adherents of social-scientific criticism’s notion that the body consists of interpenetrating yet distinct zones of activity particularly helpful in my analysis of Pss 123 and 131. The zones of activity are eyes-heart, mouth-ears and hands-feet. In abstract terms, “eyes-heart is the zone of emotion-fused thought;

⁸⁰ Dörte Bester, *Körperbilder in den Psalmen* (FAT II 24; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 6–22.

⁸¹ Bester, *Körperbilder*, 22–23.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 22. Both 22. According to Thomas Staubli and Sylvia Schroer, *Body Symbolism in the Bible* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Collegeville: Liturgical, 2001), 23, *synecdoche* (i.e., the figure of speech in which a part is meant to represent the whole) as well as *stereometric thinking* (i.e., the phenomenon of multiperspectiveness) collects “various aspects of reality and combines them synthetically instead of organizing them artificially as dualistic systems.” Cf. also Bernd Janowski, *Konfliktgespräche mit Gott: Eine Anthropologie der Psalmen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2003), 13–21.

⁸³ Jerome H. Neyrey, “Wholeness,” in *Handbook of Biblical Social Values* (ed. John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 204).

⁸⁴ Neyrey, “Wholeness,” 205.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Smith, “Earth and Gods,” 103–127.

⁸⁷ Cf. the enhanced edition of Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments: Mit zwei Anhängen neu herausgegeben von Bernd Janowski* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2010); Bernd Janowski, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments: Grundfragen—Kontexte—Themenfelder* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

mouth-ears is the zone of self-expressive speech; and hands-feet is the zone of purposeful activity."⁸⁸ Second, Leonard Thompson reminds us that the biblical world is constructed "... in such a way that it realistically represents the life of man with all its limitations while it brings that representation in dialogue with a construct of the religious imagination that passes beyond those limits."⁸⁹

In the Book of Psalms, we encounter poems written from the vantage point of an "I" who "carves out a world and posits a complex of forces."⁹⁰ The "I" experiences two typical situations, "either the 'I' is at-centre, the desideratum of human existence; or he is off-centre, in a state of distress and disequilibrium."⁹¹ Since the temple in Jerusalem was conceived as the spatial centre of the universe, to "be at the temple is to be in harmony with the covenanting God. To be away from the temple is to be out of harmony with the covenanting God."⁹² Two binary opposites determine the lived experience of the "I"—far/near and ascend/descend.⁹³ Consequently, "off-centre/at-centre is a spatial image on the horizontal plane; waters-of-the-deep/presence-of-God is a spatial image on the vertical plane."⁹⁴ In my reading of *bodyspace* in Pss 123-131, I will indicate that the vertical spatial image especially plays a crucial role in these poems.

C THE BODY AS/IN SPACE IN PSS 123 AND 131

Any interpretation of Pss 120-134 should consider the negative *lived* realities implied in the collection. It includes the presence of a universal Persian Empire, a small, impoverished satrapy of Yehud, a growing priestly aristocracy and the deep longing of marginalised groups ("servants"; "poor"; upright"; pious") to be "near" and "at-centre," i.e., to experience מעלות.⁹⁵ They dared to imagine *an other* reality of several מעלות experiences such as the return from exile, pilgrimages to the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals of *pesah*, *sukkôt*, or

⁸⁸ Bruce J. Malina, "Eyes-Heart," in Pilch and Malina, *Biblical Social Values*, 68–69. Cf. Bruce J. Malina, "Hands-Feet," in Pilch and Malina, *Biblical Social Values*, 98–102; Mark McVann, "Communicativeness (Mouth-Ears)," in Pilch and Malina, *Biblical Social Values*, 27–30.

⁸⁹ Thompson, *Introducing Biblical Literature*, 13.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53. Thomson indicates that 123 of the 150 poems are written at least in part from a first-person perspective.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 60.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹⁵ W. Dennis Tucker Jr., *Constructing and Deconstructing Power in Psalms 107-150* (SBLAIL 19; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 95–96; Ulrich Berges, "Die Knechte im Psalter: Ein Beitrag zu seiner Kompositionsgeschichte," *Bib* 81 (2000):153–178. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 346, regard the tension between the post-exilic community in Yehud and a powerful empire and growing inner-Jewish tensions between an impoverished majority and a new upper class as a conceivable social-historical context for the שירי המעלות.

šābu ʾôt (Exod 23:14–17; 34:18-23; Deut 16:1, 9-10, 13, 16-17) or מעלות experiences appropriated by the imagination.

For a proper understanding of Ps 123, its spatial point of departure must be accounted for. We meet the lyrical I of Ps 123:1 already in the first triad of poems in the *שירי המעלות* collection (Pss 120-134). That triad (Pss 120-122) is suggestive of movement on the *horizontal* spatial axis. Psalm 120 commences with the plaintive cry of the lyrical I,⁹⁶ who is *far* in “the demonic land, the wasteland, the dangerous land”; it is “not a place which is a homeland, a world where men may dwell.”⁹⁷ Psalm 121 contains numerous hints that the lyrical I is on the move through dangerous territory.⁹⁸ In spite of many obstacles and dangers, the poet is acutely aware of YHWH’s protective presence accompanying him on his journey.⁹⁹ In Ps 122, the lyrical I completes his horizontal spatial journey from *far* to *near*. He arrives at-centre and in the company of fellow travellers, his feet are standing in Jerusalem’s gates (122:2).¹⁰⁰

In Ps 123, the point of arrival for the *horizontal* journey becomes the point of departure for a *vertical* journey, ascending into the presence of YHWH on his heavenly throne. Two stanzas can be demarcated in this short poem. **Stanza 1** (vv. 1a-2d) is a confession of complete dependence on YHWH’s mercy while **Stanza 2** (vv. 3a-4b) contains an urgent prayer for merciful divine intervention.

PSALM 123 (Looking to heaven)				
<i>Superscript</i>		שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת	1	A song of ascents.
1	.1	1	אֶלֶיךָ נִשְׂאתִי אֶת־עֵינַי	1a To you I have lifted my eyes,
			הַיֹּשֵׁבִי בַשָּׁמַיִם:	b the one who sits enthroned in the heavens. ¹⁰¹
	.2	2	הִנֵּה כְעֵינַי עֲבָדִים אֶל־גֵּד אֲדוֹנָיִקָּם	2a Indeed, as the eyes of servants
			כְּעֵינַי שִׁפְחָה אֶל־גֵּד גְּבֵרָתָהּ	b as the eyes of a maid
			כִּן עֵינָיו אֶל־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ	2c so our eyes (are lifted) to YHWH our God
		3	עַד שִׁחֲמוּנוּ:	d until he shows us mercy.

⁹⁶ The lyrical I is mentioned nine times in verses 1–2, 5–7.

⁹⁷ Smith, “Earth and Gods,” 108. משך (“Meshech,” 120:5a) and אהלי קדר (“the tents of Qedar,” 120:5b) signify “the northern and southern extremities of the experience of being in exile” (Prinsloo, “The Role of Space,” 462).

⁹⁸ The lyrical I is present in verses 1-2, with four explicit first-person singular references.

⁹⁹ Prinsloo, “The Role of Space,” 463–464.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. The lyrical I is explicitly mentioned six times in verses 1, 8-9. For first time in the *שירי המעלות* collection, the lyrical I is in the company of fellow travellers, explicitly referred to by three first-person plural references.

¹⁰¹ הישבי (Qal Participle active) contains a *hīreq compaginis* (cf. GKC § 90m) that serves as an ornamental device of poetic style (cf. Pss 113:5, 6, 7, 9; 114:8; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 344).

2	.1	4	תַּחֲנוּן יְהוָה תַּחֲנוּן	3a	Have mercy on us, YHWH, have mercy on us,
			כִּי־רַב שָׂבְעָנוּ בְּזוֹ:	b	for we are exceedingly satiated by contempt.
		5	רַבַּת שְׂבָעָה־לָּהּ נִפְשָׁנוּ	4a	Exceedingly our very being is satiated
			הַלְעַג הַשְׂאֵנָנִים	b	by the ridicule of the proud,
			הַבְּזוּ לַגְּאוּוֹנִים:	c	the contempt of arrogant people.

Stanza 1 consists of two strophes. **Strophe 1.1** (1ab) contains a single bicolon. A first-person singular speaker confesses his/her trust in YHWH by addressing the deity directly in the second person. The deity is not overtly identified. The delayed identification serves to heighten tension.¹⁰² Colon 1a is characterised by its inverted word order. The prepositional phrase אליך, “to you,” opens the colon, followed by the first-person singular verb נשאתי, “I lifted up” and the object עיניך, “my eyes.” The first word of the poem thus receives special emphasis, anticipating the suppliant’s complete dependence on the deity. The second person masculine singular suffix אליך is qualified in colon 1b by means of the relative clause הישבי בשמים, “the one who sits (enthroned) in the heavens.” The perfect verbal form נשאתי, “I have lifted up,” suggests an action that commenced sometime in the past while the temporal phrase עד שיהננו, “be merciful to us,” repeated twice in verse 3a, indicate that the deliverance longed for in verse 1ab has not materialised yet. In spatial terms, verse 1ab describes movement from the human to the divine sphere. The עינים, “eyes,” of the suppliant are longingly directed towards the heavenly sphere as the locus from which help can be expected. The phrase הישבי בשמים, “the one who sits (enthroned) in heaven,” in verse 1b, suggests that the suppliant is completely dependent on his sovereign who is none other than the deity on his heavenly throne.¹⁰³

Strophe 1.2 (2a-d) consists of two bicola. It is linked to verse 1ab through the threefold repetition of both the noun עין and the preposition אל (1a) in verses 2a, 2b and 2c. The repetition indicates that the verb נשא (1a) is presupposed in verses 2a-c. The delayed identification of the referent of the second person masculine singular suffix in verse 1a is resolved in verse 2c; it is none other than יהוה אלהינו, “YHWH our God.”¹⁰⁴ The strophe represents an intensification and delineation of the image of the lifting of the eyes (v. 1ab). Intensification is suggested by the emphatic particle הנה in verse 2a. The first-person singular

¹⁰² Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 347.

¹⁰³ Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms* (EBC 5; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 783. Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms* (NCBC; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 531, state that, “the prayer appeals to the entire liturgical drama of divine enthronement so central to the Jerusalem temple.”

¹⁰⁴ VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 782, indicates that 1a and 2c thus constitute an extended chiasm and inclusio (עין + אליך in 1a; עין + יהוה אלהינו in 2c). Cf. also Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 345.

perspective of verse 1ab is broadened to a collective perspective, indicated by the threefold repetition of the first-person plural suffix נו in verse 2cd. The action of the lifting of the eyes in verse 1ab and the concomitant relationship between the suppliant and the deity suggested by the action finds clear definition in Strophe 1.2 by means of an extended simile.¹⁰⁵ Cola 2ab constitute an antithetic parallelism. The cola are structured in similar fashion ($\text{אל יד} + \text{noun} + \text{עִינֵי} + \text{כ}$ + noun + suffix) but verse 2a contains nouns in the masculine plural and a third-person masculine plural suffix while verse 2b contains nouns in the feminine singular and a three feminine singular suffix. In verse 2cd, the action is applied to the suppliants and their deity. Verse 2c is parallel to verse 2ab while verse 2d qualifies the action of the uplifting of the eyes with a temporal clause עד שִׁיחַנּוּ , “until he shows mercy to us.”¹⁰⁶

Stanza 2 (vv. 3a-4c) consists of a single strophe consisting of a bicolon and a tricolon. *Anadiplosis* links the two stanzas.¹⁰⁷ The root חנן of שִׁיחַנּוּ (v. 2d), i.e., the last word of Stanza 1 is repeated in חננו (v. 3a), the first word of Stanza 2. The same word is repeated as the last word of the colon with יהוה inserted between the two verbs. In this way, יהוה receives special emphasis.¹⁰⁸ The reason for the double prayer for mercy is introduced in verse 3b by means of the particle כי and expressed in bodily terms. The ongoing contempt experienced by the suppliants is metaphorically likened to the extreme discomfort caused by overindulgence: רב שבענו בוו “we are exceedingly satiated by contempt.”¹⁰⁹ All three words are repeated in verse 4abc (cf. רב in 4a; שבעה in 4a; הבוז in 4c). There is clear progression and intensification in the poem’s final tricolon. Satiation is not expressed in general terms as in verse 3b. It is specifically נפשנו , “our innermost being,” which is satiated. Contempt is no longer expressed in general terms, but defined in two ways. It is הלעג השאננים , “the ridicule of the proud,” (4b) and הבוז לגאייונים , “the contempt of arrogant people,” which cause the suppliants’ distress.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ VanGemerem, *Psalms*, 782.

¹⁰⁶ According to Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 531, the contrast between YHWH enthroned in heaven (v. 1b) and the counterterms “servants” (v. 2a) and “maid” (v. 2b) indicates that the “relationship of the two characters in this prayer is servant to king.”

¹⁰⁷ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 345.

¹⁰⁸ VanGemerem, *Psalms*, 783. According to Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 532, the “term ‘mercy’ signifies unconditional regard for, love that is completely gratuitous. The master gives himself over to the well-being of the servant.”

¹⁰⁹ בוו occurs mainly in wisdom literature and “describes the antisocial attitude toward the weaker and is thus an indicator of a distorted order of society; cf. Job 12:5; 31:34; Prov 11:12; 15:20; 23:22; 30:17” (Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 348).

¹¹⁰ שאנן (cf. Isa 32:9, 11; Amos 6:1; Zech 1:15) refers to one who is “nonchalant” or “at ease” (Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 532). Parallel to it, the *hapax legomenon* גאיון is used. It is usually translated by “arrogant.” It seems best to retain the Masoretic text (cf. also the Septuagint’s τοῖς ὑπερηφάνοις “the arrogant”) and rejects the

In Ps 123, we meet three distinct bodies. The *individual human body* is present as a mobile spatial field and it is indeed on the move. The body *as* space is moving *in* space. It is ascending by lifting up (יִשְׂאוֹתַי in v. 1a) “my eyes” (עֵינַי in v. 1a) to YHWH enthroned in heavens (v. 1b).¹¹¹ The eyes represent the longing gaze, emotion-fused thought; hence, “the gaze overcomes distance and leaves misery behind, the hope of the person is reaching out.”¹¹² The *divine body* is qualified by an action (הִישְׁבֵי בַשָּׁמַיִם in v. 1b) that signifies it as the royal body of the deity of Israel. That body is universal and unlimited; it represents ultimate and effective power.¹¹³ The divine body *as* space is enthroned as royal body *in* the heavenly sphere. It is suggested by the repetition of יָד (cf. v. 2ab), which represents the zone of purposeful activity. The kind of purposeful activity imagined is defined by the threefold repetition of חַנּוּן “show mercy.” The lyrical I hopes for YHWH’s undivided attention. As slaves are completely dependent on their masters and a servant girl on her mistress, so is the lyrical I dependent on YHWH in the patron-client relationship established through YHWH’s covenantal relationship with his people.¹¹⁴

We meet the *collective body* in two guises—first as the *collective dependent body*. The terms עֲבָדִים, “(male) slaves” and שֹׁפְחָה, “(female) servant,” define the collective body. Dependence is suggested by the terms אֲדוֹנֵיהֶם, “their masters” and גַּבְרַתָּהּ, “her mistress.” Surprisingly, female imagery is associated with YHWH. The lyrical I “thinks of YHWH as having male *and* female features.”¹¹⁵ The deity of Israel allows his followers, male and female, to enjoy a whole-body experience. The threefold repetition of עֵין in v. 2abc underscores the collective body’s longing gaze (cf. v. 1a). The twofold repetition of the root שָׁבַע (cf. vv. 3b, 4a) signifies the grave danger faced by this collective body. They are fed up to the core with hard-to-digest food.¹¹⁶ Their longing is for the life-sustaining nourishment of YHWH’s presence. What is at stake is נַפְשׁוֹ—their very lives—due to the threatening presence of the *collective hostile body*; that body is described by בּוֹז, “contempt” (v. 3b); הִלְעַג הַשְּׁעֲנִיִּים, “the ridicule of proud” (4a); הַבּוֹז לַגְּאִיוֹנִים and “the contempt of the arrogant” (4b). It suggests the zone of self-

suggested *Qere* reading לַגְּאִי יוֹנִים, “the pride of the oppressor” (Van Gemeren, *Psalms*, 784; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 345). Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 532, emphasise that the “speaker voices an urgent petition out of unbearable humiliation.”

¹¹¹ See Ps 121:1 where the action suggests anxiety but also the hint of hopeful expectation (Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 347). Here the emphasis is on dependence (deClaissé-Walford, *Psalms Books 4 and 5*, 188).

¹¹² Gillmayr-Bucher, “Body Images,” 317.

¹¹³ הִישְׁבֵי בַשָּׁמַיִם alludes to YHWH’s universal kingship (Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 347).

¹¹⁴ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 531, emphasise that, “the look is one of gladness, awe, dependence, and glad submissiveness that is rooted in trust.”

¹¹⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 348; emphasis original. Cf. also deClaissé-Walford, *Psalms Books 4 and 5*, 188.

¹¹⁶ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 346.

expressive speech and the speech attests to self-centredness and pride. It is the ability of the lyrical I to imagine *an other* reality amidst negative lived experiences that allows her/him to *transpose* the self *from the earthly to the heavenly sphere* and *enjoy a whole-body experience*.¹¹⁷

My reading of Ps 123 suggests that it represents the suppliant’s point of departure on a *vertical journey* to the heights of heaven. Psalm 131, then, represents his/her *safe arrival* in the comforting presence of YHWH. This brief poem consists of two stanzas. In **Stanza 1** (vv. 1a-2c), a first-person singular speaker confesses his/her complete acquiescence in the presence of YHWH. In **Stanza 2** (v. 3ab), the perspective broadens to include the people of Israel and consists of a call to Israel to always put their hope in YHWH.

PSALM 131 (At mother’s breast...)				
			שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד	<i>A song of ascents. Of David.</i> ¹¹⁸
1	.1	1	יְהוָה לֹא־גָבַהּ לִבִּי וְלֹא־רָמוּ עֵינַי	<i>YHWH, my heart is not proud, nor are my eyes haughty,</i>
			וְלֹא־הִלַּכְתִּיו בְּגָדֹלֹת וּבְנִפְלְאוֹת מִמֶּנִּי:	<i>and I don’t dwell upon great matters, things too wonderful for me.</i>
	.2	2	אִם־לֹא שְׁוִיתִיו וְדוּמְמַתִּי נְפֹשִׁי	<i>On the contrary, I have stilled and quieted my innermost being,</i>
			כְּגִמְלַת עָלַי אִמִּי כְּגִמְלַת עָלַי נַפְשִׁי:	<i>like a weaned child upon its mother, like a weaned child upon me is my innermost being.</i>
2	.1	3	יְהִי לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֱלֹהֵי־יְהוָה מִעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם:	<i>Put your hope, o Israel, in YHWH, both now and for evermore.</i>

Stanza 1 consists of two strophes, each having a single verse line with the first stating the lyrical I’s state of mind in negative terms and the second in positive. **Strophe 1.1** (v. 1ab) consists of a single bicolon. It is introduced by the vocative יהוה. The word significantly appears again as the last word of the first colon of the last verse line (v. 3a) thus, the explicit mentioning of Israel’s deity forms an *inclusio* emphasising that the deity is the focal point of the brief poem.¹¹⁹ Colon 1a constitutes an internal syntactic and semantic parallelism (cf. לֹא־ // לֹא־גָבַהּ לִבִּי, i.e., negative particle לא + perfect verb + body part with first-person singular suffix). In contrast to the arrogance and self-centredness of the collective hostile body in Ps 123:3-4, here, neither the לב as centre of human intelligence

¹¹⁷ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 5; Neyrey, “Wholeness,” 204. Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 532–533, poignantly state, “(w)hat a way to think of prayer, as a recharacterization of social relationships with the new character, YHWH, God of mercy, as the defining reference.”

¹¹⁸ Psalm 131 is one of four in the *שירי המעלות* collection ascribed to David (cf. Pss 122:1; 124:1; 133:1). The significance of this ascription to David cannot be discussed in the present study. I agree with deClaissé-Walford, *Psalms Books 4-5*, that the poem’s “metaphoric imagery allows the reader or hearer to move past the psalm’s ‘royal’ overtones and find a rich feminine picture of God.”

¹¹⁹ VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 802.

nor the עין as instrument of the longing gaze is engaged in frenetic activity.¹²⁰ Colon 1b is semantically parallel to colon 1a but whereas the references to body parts in 1a function as *pars pro toto* for the suppliant's body, no explicit reference is made to any body part in 1b. However, the feet are implied by the verbal action ולא־הלכתי, "I don't dwell upon." Colon 1b contains an internal chiasm (cf. ולא־הלכתי בגדלות, i.e., first person singular verb + preposition ב + adjective feminine plural X ובנפלאות ממני, i.e., preposition ב + noun feminine plural + preposition with first person singular suffix). The strophe thus suggests the lyrical I's whole-body experience as lacking frantic activity.¹²¹

Strophe 1.2 (v. 2abc) consists of a tricolon introduced by the adversative particle אִם־לֹא, "on the contrary." The adversative particle suggests that the actions described in this strophe are the opposite of those described in the previous one. Colon 2a contains an internal syntactic and semantic parallelism (cf. שוּיִתִּי וְדוּמְמִתִּי נִפְשִׁי, i.e., two synonymous first person singular perfect verbs with נִפְשִׁי doing double duty as object for both verbs). Cola 2bc contains a simile and through repetition of כַּגְּמֹל, "like a weaned child" (cf. 2b, 2c), likens the stilling and quieting of the lyrical I's innermost being (cf. the repetition of נִפְשִׁי in v. 2a and 2c) in YHWH's presence to the content a weaned child experiences on its mother's lap (v. 2c).¹²² In the presence of YHWH, the lyrical I enjoys a whole-body experience of peace.¹²³

Stanza 2 (vv. 3a-4c) consists of a single strophe with only one bicolon. The perspective extends from the lyrical I to include the people of Israel. The vertical journey of the lyrical I (Ps 123) becomes an admonition to Israel to put its trust also in YHWH (יִהְיֶה יִשְׂרָאֵל אֱלֹהֵיהוּהָ in v. 3a; cf. Ps 130:7). By means of the

¹²⁰ deClaissé Walford, Jacobsen, and La Neel Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 565.

¹²¹ deClaissé-Walford, *Psalms Books 4-5*, 217–218, remarks that, "(t)he reference to 'heart' (לֵב, mind) reflects the inner demeanor of the psalm singer, while 'eyes' and 'occupied' (הֵלֵךְ, walk about) reflect the outer demeanor and actions of the psalmist."

¹²² VanGemeran, *Psalms*, 803 argues that the emphasis should not be on the *age* of a גְּמֹל, "weaned child," but on the image of utter content on the mother's lap (so also Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 553). The interpretation of the image is controversial (cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 444–445). deClaissé-Walford, Jacobsen, and La Neel Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 565–566, remark that, "the metaphor suggests a child who no longer cries out in hunger for the mother's breast, but who seeks out the mother for her warm embrace and nurturing care. The verb, however, might also describe a suckling child who is well-fed and fully satisfied, resting peacefully in the mother's embrace. Both metaphors are a powerful image of one who finds calmness and quiet in the embrace of God."

¹²³ Gillmayr-Bucher, "Body Images," 321, indicates that נִפְשִׁי here "evokes the image of an accelerated breathing that can be calmed once anxiety or excitement has passed. Simultaneously the נִפְשִׁי is used as a synecdoche and represents the psalmist's state of mind. Most important, however, is her/his relation to the body. From that point of view the psalmist becomes the integrating instance."

merism ועד-עולם מאתה (“both now and forever more” in v. 3b), the lyrical I implies that it should not be a temporary emergency measure in a time of crisis but a constant way of life.

In both poems, a first-person singular speaker commences the narration (123:1ab; 131:1a-2b). In Ps 123:1ab, the first-person singular narration is short, consisting of a single verbal form (נשאתי) and pronominal suffix (עיני) in colon 1a. In Ps 123:2abc the first-person singular narration extends to a first-person plural perspective by means of two first-person plural pronominal suffixes (עינינו in 2b; שיהנונו in 2c). The collective perspective is expanded in Ps 123:3ab by means of two first-person plural pronominal suffixes (הנונו [2X] in 3a) and one first-person plural verbal form (שבענו in 3b) and in Ps 123:4ab by means of one first-person plural suffix (נפשנו in 4a). In Ps 131:1-2, the first-person singular narration is longer, consisting of six first-person singular pronominal suffixes (לבי and עיני in 1a; ממני in 1b; נפשי in 2a; עלי and נפשי in 2c) and three first-person singular verbal forms (הלכתי in 1a; שויתי and דוממתי in 2a) and never extends to a first-person plural perspective.

Psalm 123 resonates in many ways in Ps 131. Again, we meet three distinct bodies but this time the collective hostile body is absent. In contrast to the moving, ascending *individual body* of the lyrical I in Ps 123:1, the body of the lyrical I in Ps 131 is at rest. The mobile spatial field arrived at-centre and it is at rest. The body *as* space is at rest *in* positive space. Both “my heart” לבי and “my eyes” עיני (v. 1a) represent the complete opposite of the arrogance and self-centredness of the collective hostile body in Ps 123:3-4. The lyrical I’s longing gaze and emotion-fused thought brought it to its goal. It is לא גבה, “not proud” and לא רמו, “not haughty” (v. 1a), “and I don’t dwell upon great matters, things too wonderful for me.” The lyrical I is no longer ascending, no longer involved in purposeful, even frantic activity. In verse 2a, the adversative particle אִם־לֹא suggests a strong contrastive attitude, שויתי ודוממתי, “I have stilled and quieted my innermost being.” The entire human being came to rest to the core. נפש here indeed “does not represent any specific aspect of life, but life itself.”¹²⁴

The associations created by the extended simile נפשי → אמו → כגמל in verses 2bc suggest complete tranquillity. All anxiety or excitement has passed. The *royal divine body* of Ps 123 becomes the *caring, nurturing body of a mother*.¹²⁵ The repetition of the root שבע in Ps 123:3b, 4a resonates in this extended simile in Ps 131. Through the repetition of נפשי in Ps 131:2a, 2c, the negative implications of שבע are completely reversed. The hard-to-digest food of

¹²⁴ Gilmayr-Bucher, “Body Images,” 320.

¹²⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 452 state, “psalm translates the relationship child-mother to the relationship human being-God.”

suffering has been replaced by the nurturing presence of YHWH, the caregiver, the "mother-god" of Israel.

This experience of being "at-centre" becomes the basis for the lyrical I's call upon the *collective human body* in Ps 131:3a: יהל ישראל אל-יהוה, "put your hope in YHWH, o Israel!" (cf. Ps 130:7).¹²⁶ This is a call to Israel to persevere in the face of enmity and adversity based on YHWH's covenant loyalty (cf. Ps 130:7-8). That hope is not intended to be a temporary emergency measure in times of crisis. The phrase מעתה ועד-עולם, "both now and forever more" (cf. Pss 121:8; 125:2) indicates that the lyrical I challenges Israel to make his/her experience of contentment in the presence of YHWH a constant way of life. The lyrical I's ability to imagine *an other* reality amidst hardship and life's uncontrollable and unimaginable challenges provides her/him the opportunity to enjoy a *whole-body experience* in the presence of the divine caregiver.¹²⁷

D CONCLUSION

In this study, Pss 123 and 131 are read from a bodily perspective with three specific perspectives on the ancient Near Eastern body namely the body *as* space, the body *in* space and the body as a *mobile spatial field*. In the context of the שירי המעלות (Pss 120-134), Pss 123 and 131 form the bookends of Israel's vertical journey to be "at-centre." Psalm 123 represents the starting point of this journey and Ps 131 the destination. The lyrical I of Pss 123 and 131 dares to imagine *an other* reality through various מעלות experiences. The two poems resonate with each other and provide a lens through which YHWH's *terrestrial and cosmic presence* can be *appropriated* by his people, individually and collectively, through their bodies *as* space and *in* space in their everyday lives, a perspective expressly emphasised in Pss 126-128, which can be regarded as the heart of the collection of fifteen מעלות songs.

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¹²⁶ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 452–453 note the close, but contrasting relationship between Pss 130 and 131. In Ps 131, YHWH is depicted as the forgiving father and in Ps 131, as the nurturing mother. Both images are a source of hope for Israel (Ps 130:7;131:3) and pave the way for admission into the sanctuary, an encounter that will be described in Pss 132–134.

¹²⁷ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 5; Neyrey, "Wholeness," 204. Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 532–533, poignantly state, "(w)hat a way to think of prayer, as a recharacterization of social relationships with the new character, YHWH, God of mercy, as the defining reference."

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