

ALEC BASSON

Divine Metaphors in  
Selected Hebrew Psalms  
of Lamentation

*Forschungen*  
*zum Alten Testament 2. Reihe*

15

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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Mohr Siebeck

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## Preface

The present book is a reworked version of my doctoral dissertation which was accepted at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa in April 2005. Even though the journey was at times long and arduous, a number of people accompanied me and assisted me in the completion of this work. I would like to express my gratitude to the following persons and institutions:

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Stellenbosch, 29 November 2005

Alec Basson



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# Introduction

## 1. Problem Statement and Focus

The biblical Hebrew Psalms mirror humankind's entire spectrum of emotions and experiences in its relation to the deity ranging from praise, hope and joy to anxiety, desperation and lament.<sup>1</sup> The biblical Hebrew Psalms of lamentation reflect the struggle and affliction of the individual and the Israelite community.<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann maintains that even though the lament articulates a religious problem, it is much more than a religious action "Rather, the religious speech always carries with it a surplus of political, economic and social freight".<sup>3</sup> Research on the psalms of lamentation has neglected these aspects in the past – especially the way the poet portrays and experiences Yahweh in the face of danger. These poems bombard the reader with a multitude of portrayals of the deity such as father, shepherd, rock, judge, warrior, lion, and shield. As De Vos observes "Das Gottesbild des Beters zeigt sich in der Art, wie er JHWH benennt, wie er welche Erwartungen an ihn äußert und welche Gotteserfahrungen, aktuelle, vergangene und erhoffte, er ins Spiel bringt".<sup>4</sup> Nowhere else in biblical Hebrew literature is Yahweh portrayed in so many ways. In their various studies, Balentine<sup>5</sup> and Broyles<sup>6</sup> emphasise the poet's experience of Yahweh in the psalms of lamentation, but their theoretical argumentation of the problem is inadequate and their solutions are not profound enough. The psalms of lamentation bear witness to the fact that the psalmist's suffering determines the thoughts about and depictions of God. These representations also afford the reader insight into the cognitive world of the psalmist. The cognitive factors, which give rise to the unusual divine images, have not been adequately investigated. The aim of this study is to establish the relation between the portrayals of Yahweh and the cognitive organisation of the supplicant's experience, and to try to find cultural explanations for these conceptions on the deity.

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<sup>1</sup> WESTERMANN, Psalms.

<sup>2</sup> HAYES, Psalms; COETZEE, Psalms of Lamentation.

<sup>3</sup> BRUEGGEMANN, Lament.

<sup>4</sup> DE VOS, Klage, I.

<sup>5</sup> BALENTINE, Hidden God.

<sup>6</sup> BROYLES, Conflict.

## 2. Preliminary Study

In the research on the Psalms, scholars have examined several aspects of the psalms of lamentation.<sup>7</sup> One of the major issues studied, is the form-critical aspects and *Sitz im Leben* – more specifically the cultic *Sitz im Leben* of this literary form<sup>8</sup> and its various content elements (e.g. the aspects of praise and lament). Coetzee evaluates the most important approaches to the study of the psalms of lamentation in the twentieth century and categorises these methods as follows:<sup>9</sup> (1) literary interpretations (e.g. form criticism, canon-critical questions, etc.), (2) religious perspectives (where the emphasis is on cultic facets), (3) anthropological explanations<sup>10</sup> and (4) a functional-psychological analysis of the textual information. The functional-psychological approach deals with the poet's existential positions, which may vary from orientation to disorientation to reorientation.<sup>11</sup>

All the aforementioned approaches made valuable contributions to the study of the psalms of lamentation. It should, however, be added that one of the limitations of past research was the lack of attention paid to the poet's cognitive utilisation of cultural information in these psalms and the divine portrayals resulting from such an organisation. Assuming that the textual information in the psalms of lamentation is more than literary information as such but also a cognitive and cultural representation of the world the psalmist lived in, then there are still many interesting aspects of the psalms of lamentation awaiting to be investigated. Insights from the social sciences, which gained ground over the last more or less twenty years, will be useful in this regard. Eilberg-Schwartz claims that “a turn toward anthropological cross-cultural traditions can provide a fresh set of questions to ask ... *and new ways of answering those questions*” (emphasis added).<sup>12</sup> The nature and understanding of the divine images in the psalms of lamentation in particular,

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. KEEL, *Feinde*; WESTERMANN, *Praise*; FUCHS, *Klage*; BRUEGGEMANN, *Message*; MILLER, *Interpreting*; BRUEGGEMANN, *Lament*; COETZEE, *Psalms of Lamentation*; BROYLES, *Conflict*; BALENTINE, *Prayer*; MILLER, *Lord*; RIEDE, *Netz*; JANOWSKI, *Konfliktgespräche*.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. MOWINCKEL, *Psalms*; WEISER, *Psalmen*; GUNKEL & BEGRICH, *Einleitung*; WESTERMANN, *Praise*.

<sup>9</sup> COETZEE, *Psalms of Lamentation*.

<sup>10</sup> “Anthropological” does not refer to the study of humankind in its cultural context, but to the experience of man in relation to the deity (cf. WESTERMANN, *Gebet*; JANOWSKI, *Konfliktgespräche*).

<sup>11</sup> BRUEGGEMANN, *Message*.

<sup>12</sup> EILBERG-SCHWARTZ, *Judaism*, 24.

have not previously been analysed from a cognitive perspective. This study aims to do just that.

### 3. Theoretical Presuppositions and Method

This investigation will draw upon some of the insights from cognitive anthropology, which forms part of the wider spectrum of “cognitive sciences” of which cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics are the most significant.<sup>13</sup> D’Andrade defines cognitive anthropology as “the study of the relation between human society and human thought.”<sup>14</sup> This implies that there is a close link between human experience of reality and human thought. Cognitive anthropology studies how people in social groups conceive of and think about objects and events which make up their cultural world – including everything from physical objects to abstract categories.<sup>15</sup>

Cognitive anthropologists investigate cultural knowledge, knowledge embedded in words, stories, and artefacts, learned from and shared with members of a particular culture. The way people organise, understand and utilise material objects, events, and experiences that make up their world<sup>16</sup> is an important area of investigation. Cognitive anthropology does not claim to predict human behaviour, but purports to describe what is culturally expected or appropriate in given situations, circumstances and contexts.<sup>17</sup> Cognitive anthropologists focus on the cultural aspects of human beings’ cognitive worlds.<sup>18</sup> The aim is to reveal some inner workings of the mind, in order to provide a better understanding of how people perceive and structure the world around them. This method also attempts to present a detailed and reliable description of cultural representations.<sup>19</sup>

Cognitive anthropology focuses on the intellectual and rational aspects of culture (culture and mind), particularly through the study of language use. Another theoretical underpinning of this approach is that semantic categories marked by linguistic forms are related to meaningful cultural categories. Any cognitive anthropological investigation into culture, therefore, has to take into account the role language plays, especially the language of metaphors. Casson

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<sup>13</sup> CASSON, *Schemata*, 429.

<sup>14</sup> D’ANDRADE, *Cognitive Anthropology*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> D’ANDRADE, *Cognitive Anthropology*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> TYLER, *Cognitive Anthropology* 3; SOLOMON, *History*, 2; ROBERTSON, *Cognitive Anthropology*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> SOLOMON, *History*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> BOYER, *Religious Symbolism*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> D’ANDRADE, *Cognitive Anthropology*, 251.



emphasises the importance of metaphorical language “The systematicity of metaphorical concepts is reflected in the language used in talking about these concepts and that as a consequence, linguistic expressions are a source of insight into and evidence for the nature of the human conceptual system.”<sup>20</sup>

Metaphors appear to introduce information from the source domain (physical reality) into the target domain (abstract world). Studying metaphorical linguistic expressions thus makes the cognitive world of an individual or a group more accessible. Assuming that metaphoric linguistic expressions abound in the psalms of lamentation, it means that the poet cognitively construes reality as it is perceived. In this construction, images of Yahweh are prominent. This investigation therefore regards certain insights from cognitive anthropology as a useful means of explaining why the psalmist uses this particular strategy. The current study will focus on the nature of the supplicant’s experience in a selection of psalms of lamentation and the relation between the physical world and its cultural representation in terms of metaphors.

#### 4. Plan of the Present Investigation

The investigation will be conducted as follows:

Chapter 1 evaluates the most important approaches to the research on the psalms of lamentation in the twentieth century. This chapter also examines the extent to which researchers have made use of “cultural information” in the interpretation of the psalms of lamentation and how this is reconciled with the predominantly literary approaches which characterised the study of these poems in the twentieth century.

Chapter 2 will investigate the relation between culture (which includes a general outlook) and cognition, and the representation of these elements in language. Given that language embeds itself in a particular cultural milieu, linguistic expressions can only be understood when cultural aspects – which include cognition – are also taken into account in the interpretation process.

Chapter 3 elucidates metaphor as a literary and cognitive phenomenon, for the descriptions of Yahweh in the psalms of lamentation are of a metaphorical. Metaphors are one of the primary strategies for interpreting the abstract reality. Furthermore, metaphors are valuable tools for deciphering the divine images in the psalms of lamentation. Since this trope allows for the mapping of elements of source domains unto elements of target domains, the cognitive function of metaphor will be emphasised. Chapters 4 to 11 will be the focus of the study. In this section, a selection of psalms of lamentation

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<sup>20</sup> CASSON, *Schemata*, 451.

with a significant concentration of images of Yahweh will be analysed from a literary and cognitive perspective. The psalms to be studied are Psalms 7, 17, 31, 35, 44, 59, 74 and 80. This selection attempts to be a representative choice of the divine portrayals found in the psalms of lamentation. Viewed from a cognitive perspective, these psalms seem to best highlight the function of the nominal and verbal metaphorical descriptions of Yahweh. The analysis will be conducted as follows: Firstly, a translation with textual-critical notes on the various psalms is offered, whereafter the literary genre of every psalm will be determined. Secondly, the literary aspects of every selected psalm are discussed with special reference to the unique poetic and stylistic elements of each. Finally, the unique nature and character of the divine images in each psalm will be studied and explained within a cognitive anthropological framework. This study argues that a cognitive analysis of this (cultural) aspect in the psalms of lamentation can afford new and fresh insights, especially in finding explanations for the affinity of these poets for the recurring images of Yahweh.

## Chapter 1

# The Psalms of Lamentation: A Survey of Research

Throughout the centuries, the Psalms have captured the imagination of biblical scholars. These lyric poems best describe the human being's relation to Yahweh and *vice versa*. It is therefore not surprising that the Psalms have been the topic of various discussions, which in a sense complicate any survey of these poems in just one chapter. Coetzee<sup>1</sup> is justified in his observation that a study of the history of research on the psalms of lamentation presupposes a specific focus. On the one hand, it implies reviewing the psalms of lamentation as a genre and, on the other hand blending it with psalm research in general. Owing to the vast amount of literature, this investigation will focus, in a rather eclectic manner, on the major twentieth century approaches and attempt to highlight their contribution to the exegesis of the Psalms in general and the psalms of lamentation in particular. Coetzee<sup>2</sup> offers a helpful schema for the analysis of the key approaches.

### 1.1 Form Criticism

It is common knowledge that Gunkel's work on the Psalms revolutionised the way scholars viewed this corpus of the Hebrew Bible. Without discarding the contributions of earlier expositions, this study deems it in order to begin with the contributions of Gunkel. As the pioneer of the form-critical method, Gunkel postulates that the particular experience that calls forth the composition simultaneously shapes its literary form at the same time. He maintains that "Ein literarischer Stoff muß zunächst nach Gesetzen seiner eigenen Art, also nach Gesetzen, die der Literaturgeschichte entnommen sind, geordnet werden. Der Forscher soll danach streben, dieser Dichtungsart ihre eingeborene, natürliche Gliederung abzulauschen."<sup>3</sup> The notion of genre<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> COETZEE, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> COETZEE, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> GUNKEL & BEGRICH, Einleitung, 9, 10.

<sup>4</sup> CLINES, Postmodern, 666-686, offers an illuminating exposition of the genre criticism that followed the work of Gunkel; cf. also NASUTI, Defining, 30-56. SEYBOLD, Psalm-auslegungen, discusses the research on certain individual psalms.

which was initially mainly oral, developed from this. Texts belong to a specific genre when they share certain thoughts and moods, a particular linguistic form and a common setting in life.<sup>5</sup> Content, form and experience all interact and are interdependent, so that by a close examination of the first two, the proper setting of the composition in real life (*Sitz im Leben*) can be determined.<sup>6</sup> Sociological and literary elements combine in the form-critical definition of genre.

The linguistic types underlying the individual texts are genres that arise out of a typical societal or life setting.<sup>7</sup> They are governed by patterns, appear in typical formulaic expressions, convey a typical mood and have a typical function. In order to identify a genre one has to recognise the coherence of all these factors, or at least that of the mood, the formulaic language and the setting.<sup>8</sup> Form criticism treats the practical life context as the logical primary one, in a sequence that proceeds from the occasion, to the content, to the form of expression.<sup>9</sup> The psalms of lamentation belonged to the cult and were initially transmitted orally by the priest.<sup>10</sup> In the course of time, these psalms became disengaged from their cultic settings, ultimately developing into “spiritual songs”. Some laments thus originated outside the cult. They emanated from private pious circles, usually consisting of poor, oppressed laymen.

Almost concurring with Gunkel, Gerstenberger<sup>11</sup> asserts that the psalms had their origin in the non-institutional circles of ancient Israel, that is, in the family and smaller settings of life.<sup>12</sup> He also focuses on cultic activities

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. BUSS, *Sitz im Leben*, 159; NASUTI, *Defining*, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. SARNA, *Prolegomenon*, XX.

<sup>7</sup> KNIERIM, *Old Testament*, 435.

<sup>8</sup> KNIERIM, *Old Testament*, 436.

<sup>9</sup> BUSS, *Form Criticism*, 247.

<sup>10</sup> GUNKEL & BEGRICH, *Einleitung*, 260-265.

<sup>11</sup> GERSTENBERGER, *Psalms*, 33.

<sup>12</sup> COETZEE, *Psalms of Lamentation*, 160-162, discusses the life setting of the psalms of lamentation. This investigation illustrates the diverse positions held by various scholars on this subject. Some of the proposed life settings are a sacral judgement (SCHMIDT, *Gebet*), the Covenant festival (WEISER, *Psalmen*), an institutional cultic ordeal (BEYERLIN, *Rettung*) and the sanctuary as a place for asylum seekers (DELEKAT, *Asylie*). In his work on the enemies in the Psalms, KEEL, *Feinde*, endeavours to explicate the *Sitz im Leben* of the lamentation psalms psychoanalytically. The adversaries are the physical personification of the supplicant's affliction. The life setting is thus transferred from the institution to the subjectivity of the plaintiff (COETZEE, *Psalms of Lamentation*, 161). The problem of *Sitz im Leben* connects with the change in mood found in the psalms of lamentation (COETZEE, *Psalms of Lamentation*, 161). The difficulty of postulating a unified life setting for these psalms complicates the matter. One is therefore “forced” to focus on individual psalms or certain groups of lamentation psalms.

outside the purview of the official temple cult; in other words, on family rituals that descended from long-standing traditions circulated among kinship groups. The Psalter proceeded from religious poems composed in these humble settings to the temple where it became the instrument of worship and teaching of the priest and temple officials.<sup>13</sup> Although Gerstenberger supports the cultic interpretations of the Psalter, he rejects Gunkel and Mowinckel's myopic view of cult.<sup>14</sup> The key notion is that these psalms were more than mere outpourings of a solitary poetic genius; they also reflected the varied liturgical traditions of a worshipping community.<sup>15</sup> Nasuti is of the opinion that the impetus behind Gunkel's form criticism was the desire to move beyond the sterile concerns of the historical criticism of his own day.<sup>16</sup>

Historical criticism insisted on situating the text in a specific setting of a particular historical period. Scholars emphasised the authenticity and integrity of a text, its origin and date, and the background and intention of the author.<sup>17</sup> Historical criticism focused on the "uncovering of the history of Israel in each psalm."<sup>18</sup> The objective was to determine "how it really was."<sup>19</sup> The way in which the poet expresses the experience of historical events was foregrounded. It was especially difficult to achieve these goals from a form-critical viewpoint in the case of the Psalms because of their stereotypes. Gunkel did not discard the historical matters pertaining to a text; instead, he shifted the focus from historical settings to typical institutional settings in the life of the community. He concentrated on the very aspects that had frustrated historical criticism, viz. the general, formulaic and repetitious character of the language in which the Psalms were composed.<sup>20</sup> The Psalms were not so much rooted in unique historical circumstances, but were instances of a genre that belonged to recurring occasions in the course of Israel's religion.<sup>21</sup> The dawn of a more cultic interpretation liberated scholars from speculative efforts to reconstruct the historical background of the Psalms.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. also BULLOCK, *Encountering*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> MANDOLFO, *God*, 152.

<sup>15</sup> MUDDIMAN, *Form Criticism*, 241.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. NASUTI, *Defining*, 46. WELLHAUSEN, *Prolegomena*, applies and explicates the basic assumptions of the historical-critical method. For a discussion on Wellhausen's contributions to the study of the Israelite religion, cf. KRAUS, *Geschichte*; KNIGHT, *Wellhausen*; MILLER, *Wellhausen*; SMEND, *Wellhausen*.

<sup>17</sup> FITZMYER, *Historical Criticism*, 249.

<sup>18</sup> GERSTENBERGER, *Psalms*, 180.

<sup>19</sup> FITZMYER, *Historical Criticism*, 246.

<sup>20</sup> MAYS, *Past*, 149.

<sup>21</sup> MAYS, *Past*, 149.

<sup>22</sup> NASUTI, *Defining*, 46.

Gunkel's revolutionary study of the Psalms elicits what could be regarded as rather harsh criticism from Kroeze who asserts that Gunkel's "... formal tendencies don't make him a reliable guide to a better understanding of the Psalms; his constructions rest on debatable premises, followed by faulty inferences."<sup>23</sup> Buss maintains that, despite the criticism levelled against Gunkel, his most important contribution to the study of the Psalms in general was his overt characterisation of the genres as trimodal, with reference to their life situation, content and linguistic form.<sup>24</sup> He combines the classification of literary form with the discernment of that form's social setting. Gunkel regards the aesthetic features of the text (mood and literary features) and its social *Sitz im Leben* in the life of ancient Israel as important.<sup>25</sup> Muilenberg and Hossfeld & Zenger, however, claim that form criticism's preoccupation with speech patterns undermines the individual, personal and unique characteristics of a specific psalm.<sup>26</sup> This method overlooks important inner correspondences that would connect psalms of apparently diverse types.<sup>27</sup> The traditional way of practising form criticism did not consider the artistic creativity of the individual poetic units. Buss claims that form-critical research foregrounds the correlation of content, linguistic form and life setting.<sup>28</sup>

Muddiman accuses form criticism of abstract idealisation and logical circularity.<sup>29</sup> It is open to doubt whether the short, pure forms reconstructed by form criticism ever existed, because surviving textual material is often complex and mixed. To reconstruct the life setting from form and to explain the form by an appeal to its life setting is to argue in a circle, and to ignore the possibility that a particular form may be transmitted in a variety of different settings, whilst not being entirely subordinate to any of them.<sup>30</sup> The relation between the forms of oral tradition and their social function is much more complicated than the form-critical method is willing to acknowledge. Consider for instance Buss's remark in this regard "Gunkel's major error lay in believing that the connection between the three aspects is a tight one in oral life."<sup>31</sup> Form criticism has traditionally been concerned with issues of "form", "time", "place", and "occasion", while "function" has been largely neglected.<sup>32</sup> Despite a fair amount of criticism, Gunkel highlighted those

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<sup>23</sup> KROEZE, *Studies*, 42.

<sup>24</sup> BUSS, *Form Criticism*, 259.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. MUILENBERG, *Form Criticism*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. MUILENBERG, *Form Criticism*, 5; HOSSFELD & ZENGER, *Psalmen*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. SARNA, *Prolegomenon*, XXII.

<sup>28</sup> BUSS, *Form Criticism*, 73.

<sup>29</sup> MUDDIMAN, *Form Criticism*, 241.

<sup>30</sup> MUDDIMAN, *Form Criticism*, 241-242.

<sup>31</sup> BUSS, *Form Criticism*, 259, 260.

<sup>32</sup> BALENTINE, *Prayer*, 17.

aspects of the Psalms neglected by his colleagues and, in so doing, offered new insights and enhanced the interpretation of the Psalms in the twentieth century. The form-critical approach has "... provided a literary context out of which one can interpret each individual psalm."<sup>33</sup>

### 1.1.1 *Excursus: New Stylistics*

The Gunkelian *Gattungsforschung* has been challenged by the "new stylistics" as part of the new literary criticism.<sup>34</sup> The following remark of BLENKINSOPP best characterises the basic position of this school "A poem is an indivisible entity which cannot be divided into matter and form and which should not be used as a document to prove anything outside itself; the critic's only approach is to study the different stylistic procedures as so many levels of articulation, all simultaneously present and dynamically interactive within the poem. His work must begin and end in the concrete, unique and non-recurring event which the poem is."<sup>35</sup> It can be inferred that, according to this stance, asking questions about life setting and form and answering them would be a valueless endeavour, since the Psalms do not lend themselves to the asking and answering of such questions.

WEISS, as an adherent of the new stylistics, takes a far more radical stance towards the *Gattungsforschung* of Gunkel.<sup>36</sup> He proposes to do away with the *Gattung* study, which he brands a Germanic notion quite unrelated to Hebrew ways of thinking and Hebrew poetical procedures that, unlike classical poetry, paid little attention to formal precision and structure. In his view, Gunkel was not able to appreciate the individuality of the Psalms.

Although REVENTLOW declares his support for the new stylistics, he nonetheless criticises Weiss's rejection of *Gattung* study as one-sided and calls for the co-operation between the study of the *Gattung* and the style analysis of the individual poem.<sup>37</sup> VAN DER PLOEG argues that, although the classification of genre is important, it should not dominate the study of the Psalms.<sup>38</sup> While attention should be paid to the style and genre of each psalm, it is the concrete reality of the individual psalm and not the abstraction of a literary genre that must be dominant in exegesis.<sup>39</sup>

Concurring with other exponents of the "new stylistics", ALLEN asserts that the "stylistic aspects of the psalm need to be taken seriously as yielding insights into the intricate exegetical development of the Psalm. They shed light upon the psalmist's handling of standard forms, upon the major and minor pauses within the composition, and upon textual issues. In the quest for meaning, style is an invaluable guide."<sup>40</sup> A rhetorical-critical study of the Psalms is thus advocated. Although the new stylistics can make a very important contribution to the interpretation of the Psalms, CLINES doubts "whether the outright rejection of *Gattung* study has proved beneficial."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>33</sup> NASUTI, *Defining*, 13.

<sup>34</sup> COETZEE, *Psalms of Lamentation*, 162; CLINES, *Postmodern*, 676.

<sup>35</sup> BLENKINSOPP, *Stylistics*, 353.

<sup>36</sup> WEISS, *Wege*.

<sup>37</sup> REVENTLOW, *Psalm 8*.

<sup>38</sup> VAN DER PLOEG, *Psalmen*.

<sup>39</sup> COETZEE, *Psalms of Lamentation*, 163.

<sup>40</sup> ALLEN, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 598.

<sup>41</sup> CLINES, *Postmodern*, 679.

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