

'O GOD, HEAR MY PRAYER:
PSALM 55 AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN*

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No-one Hears my Cry

The psalms of lament allow individuals to articulate human experiences of violence, experiences which destroy social, psychological and physical integrity. The wall of silence which keeps the victim an isolated prisoner is broken down by such a naming of violence; the downtrodden can regain their strength and their identity through identification with the 'I' of the lament psalms: 'In this way the lament itself becomes a source of liberation.'¹ Scholars of the Psalms are agreed that the psalms of lament are open to human needs of all kinds and that their liberating potential is directed towards the end of all violence.² Despite this general assertion, no one has ever considered whether particular experiences of violence towards women can be located in the Psalms. This is the question with which this

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1. Konrad Raiser, 'Klage als Befreiung', *Eintürfe* 5 (1988), p. 27.
2. Odil Hannes Steck, *Friedensvorstellungen im alten Israel. Psalmen. Jesaja. Deuterjesaja* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972), p. 36 n. 84; Hans Seidel, *Das Erlebnis der Einsamkeit im Alten Testament: Eine Untersuchung zum Menschenbild des Alten Testaments* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1969), p. 39; Hans-Jürgen Hermisson and Eduard Lohse, *Glauben* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1978), p. 39.

article will be concerned. The intention is not to offer a reconstruction of a historically identifiable distress or of a so-called real problem as the background to a specifically female experience of violence;³ instead, the question is whether the structure of the language used in the Psalms can give space to the specific experience of violence suffered by women.

One of the most radical and painful forms of specifically female experiences of violence is rape.⁴ Rape is primarily an act of violence, albeit an act of violence which takes a sexual form. According to Feldmann, the primary aim of the perpetrator is

to subdue his victim, to control her, to break the woman's will, and to force her to obey his will, to use the victim as an object to release anger and resentment, to put her down, to humiliate her. Sexual satisfaction is secondary to the perpetrator (...). The perpetrator's sexuality is not central here; it is an instrument for the practice of violence and power in the form of sexualised

3. Seybold and Ruppert have demonstrated the questionable nature of such monolinear reconstructions. With the help of four viewpoints (language elements, imaginative forms, social implications and religious practices), Seybold attempts to identify psalms which refer to sickness and healing (Klaus Seybold, *Das Gebet des Kranken im Alten Testament. Untersuchungen zur Bestimmung und Zuordnung der Krankheits- und Heilungspsalmen* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1973]). Ruppert searches for prayers which reflect the situation of those who are accused (Lothar Ruppert, 'Klagelieder in Israel und Babylon: Verschiedene Deutungen der Gewalt', in Norbert Lohfink [ed.], *Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit im Alten Testament* [Freiburg: Herder, 1983], pp. 111-58). See also the summary of recent research in Joachim Becker, *Wege der Psalmexegese* (SBS, 78; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1975), esp. pp. 24-33. The situations of distress implied in the Psalms are always 'a multi-factorial network of cause and effect', not a monocausal portrayal of distress, according to Frank Crüsemann, 'Im Netz: Zur Frage nach der "eigentlichen Not" in den Klagen der Einzelnen', in Rainer Albertz et al. (eds.), *Schöpfung und Befreiung: Festschrift für Claus Westermann* (Stuttgart: Calwer-Verlag, 1989), pp. 139-48.

4. On rape see Karin Flohmann and Jochen Dilling, *Vergewaltigung: Erfahrungen danach* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1987); Susan Brownmiller, *Gegen unseren Willen: Vergewaltigung und Männerherrschaft* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1980); R. Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash, *Violence Against Wives: A Case Against the Patriarchy* (New York: The Free Press, 1979); Beatrix Schiele, 'Die Gewalt gegen Frauen als Herausforderung einer feministischen Ethik', *Schlängelnbrut* 25 (1991), pp. 6-12; Sylvia Tomasselli and Poy Porter (eds.), *Rape* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

aggression. On the other hand, a sexual attack on a woman is particularly effective in attacking the core of her self-determination, her self-respect, her personal being.⁵

Women are degraded to objects and feel their identity to have been destroyed.

Although acts of sexual violence against women are repeated day after day, night after night, this theme remains taboo. 'No one hears my cries' is the experience of many raped women. Women's extreme experience of violence is scarcely noticed by the church or considered in academic exegesis.

Taking Psalm 55 as an example, I will consider the extent to which a conscious acknowledgment of violence against women can influence and change the interpretation of lament psalms. What possibilities of interpretation offer themselves if the psalms of lament are open to women's experience of violence, and when an awareness of this distress is attributed to the language of the Psalms?

As the psalm stands, its first verse—added during the process of its transmission and assimilation within the First Testament—names David as the speaking subject of the prayer. In this way Psalm 55 is not only drawn into the network of texts dealing with David's biography but also, at the same time, becomes restricted to this particularly 'male' context. This article will ask whether it is also possible to draw other connections. Since I assume that the speaking subject of Psalm 55 *could have been* a woman, I shall speak of the speaker, the person praying this psalm as a 'she' rather than 'he'. I assume that in Old Testament times a woman's experience could have shaped a psalm. It is not necessary, although it is certainly possible, to assume that the woman who prayed this psalm also composed it. Its title could, therefore, read: 'A Woman's Lament: Speaking against Silence.'

5. Harald Feldmann, *Vergewaltigung und ihre psychischen Folgen* (Forum der Psychiatrie, Neue Folge, 33; Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke Verlag, 1992), p. 27; and cf. Ruth Seifert, 'Krieg und Vergewaltigung: Ansätze zu einer Analyse', in Friedel Schreyögg (ed.), *Nirgends erwählt—doch überall geschlehen... Vergewaltigung im Krieg* (Munich: Gleichstellungsstelle für Frauen, 1992), pp. 1-19.

The Text of Psalm 55

2. O God, hear my prayer,
and do not hide from my plea.
3. Attend to me and answer me.
I am restless in my despair,
and am confused
4. by the cries of the enemy
by the onslaught of the wicked.
They bring down trials upon me
and with anger they persecute me.
5. My heart quakes within me,
and the terrors of death fall upon me.
6. Fear and trembling come upon me,
and terror overwhelms me.
7. So I said,
Had I the wings of a dove,
I wanted to fly away and have rest.
8. See,
I wanted to flee far off,
and settle in the wilderness,
to hurry to my refuge,
away from the blast of the wind, from the storm.
10. Confuse, my Lord,
split their tongues.
Yes, I see violence and strife in the city.
They surround it day and night on its walls,
and trials and tribulations dwell at its heart.
12. Ruin dwells at its heart,
oppression and deceit do not retreat from its market.
13. Yes, if an enemy had abused me,
I would have borne it.
If a foe had set himself over me,
I would have hidden myself from him.
14. But you: one of my own,
my companion, my friend,
with whom I enjoyed sweet fellowship,
walked in the crowd in the house of our God.
16. Let death fall upon them,
let them go down alive to Sheol,
for evil is in the heart of where they live.
17. For I, I call to God,
and GOD will rescue me.
18. At evening, at morning, at midday I lament and moan,

- and he will hear my voice.
 19. He will rescue my life for salvation
 from the quarrel against me,
 for they are too many about me.
 20. God will hear and will humble them,
 he, who has been enthroned from the beginning of time,
 for they do not keep their word,
 and neither do they fear God.
 21. He lays hands upon those who are at peace with him,
 he breaks his trust;
 22. His mouth flatters more smoothly than butter,
 but strife is in his heart;
 his words flow more gently than oil,
 but they are daggers [drawn swords].
 23. Cast your desire upon GOD,
 and he, he will sustain you,
 he will not allow the righteous to stumble forever.
 24. But you, God,
 you will bring them down into the deepest pit,
 the men of blood and deceit
 will not achieve even half of their days.
 But I, I trust in you.

From both text-critical and source-critical perspectives, the text of Psalm 55 is viewed in exegetical literature as extremely difficult.⁶ Innumerable suggestions for 'repairs' have been and

6. Comments to the translation, which change the Masoretic Text as little as possible.

v. 3: 'restless' comes from רָרַר ; 'to be confused' is derived from רָרַר (a form of רָרַר).

v. 4: רָרַר is a hapax legemnon. Following Kraus (Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen* [BKAT, 15; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 5th edn, 1978),

p. 598, I translate 'onslaught'—but against Kraus, in the singular.

v. 9: רָרַר is a hapax legemnon. However, in my opinion the fact that this word only appears here and that its meaning must be understood from the context, is not a sufficient reason for interfering with the Masoretic Text. The context of v. 9 suggests 'blasting' as a convincing translation.

v. 10: In the light of the psalm as a whole, a translation of the unaltered Masoretic Text with the words 'Confuse, my Lord, split their tongues' is reasonable. Why should the wish of destruction, spoken out in vv. 16 and 24, not erupt here and disturb the syntax? Psalms are poetic texts that do not develop their meaning in the order of the words and phrases but in 'simultaneous' reading which consciously registers links to what has been

continue to be made; some of the reasons given for such conjectural emendations involve the assessment of specific parts of the text as 'senseless and distorted',⁷ 'mutilated'⁸ or 'unbearable'.⁹ Against these I would agree with Mitchell Dahood's opinion that the consonantal text is generally sound and that its verses are logically ordered.¹⁰ A division of the psalm into two hymns should be rejected on the ground that relationships between keywords hold it together.¹¹ The decision for making as few as possible text- and source-critical 'repairs' is based first and foremost upon a consideration of the available Hebrew text.¹² However, this decision is also based upon a fundamental principle which should shape the approach to the text. This principle

read and what is to come. The disempowering of the enemies' language and its violence is a central theme of this psalm.

v. 15: The meaning of the hapax legemnon רָרַר is unclear. Krieg suggests a change to רָרַר ('a while'; Mathias Krieg, *Todesbilder im Alten Testament oder 'Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet'* [ATANT, 73; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1988], p. 286 n. 117). Although this seems illuminating, I have chosen to remain with the Masoretic Text and to translate 'in the crowd', following Dahood (Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms* [AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968], p. 34). The precise meaning must remain open.

v. 16: I follow the *qere* and divide רָרַר into two words: 'Let death fall upon them'; cf. Ps. 89.23, and see Kraus, *Psalmen*, p. 560.

v. 18: The words of escape in vv. 18b, 19a and 20a are parallel and I have, therefore, translated them similarly. These are expressions of escape which include all times. As the expression of hope they shape and change the view of both present and past.

v. 21: Literally, 'upon the state of peace'; רָרַר , 'upon those who are at peace with him', makes more sense.

v. 23: The meaning of רָרַר is unclear. In the context of the lament psalms the verb takes a range of meanings, from 'burden' to 'hope'. I have translated it with 'desire' to include both aspects.

7. Kraus, *Psalmen*, p. 560.

8. Hermann Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 5th edn, 1968), p. 236.

9. Bernhard Duhm, *Die Psalmen* (KAT, 14; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 2nd edn, 1922), p. 153.

10. Dahood, *Psalms*, p. 30.

11. Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, p. 238; Kraus, *Psalmen*, p. 561. Relationships between keywords hold a psalm together and are unlikely to be coincidental. See Krieg, *Todesbilder im Alten Testament*, p. 287.

12. That is, the Masoretic Text as it is found in the BHS (4th edn, 1990).

concerns the question, Whose interests are served by the production of a new text through conjectural emendations, textual alterations and omissions? The intention is to explore the different strata and possibilities of interpretation that exist in a biblical text, rather than seek to dominate the material by identifying it as 'in need of repair'. As Jürgen Ebach has put it, 'We need to learn to understand the biblical text as "satisfactory"'.¹³ We cannot, however, accept the text uncritically and without considering the context in which it is read. The questions and answers of the past must be brought into a conversation with the questions and answers of the present. In this process it must be remembered that, in general, the Psalms cannot be dated with precision. Despite the efforts of historical criticism, it is only rarely that a psalm can be assigned to a particular date. Psalms are poetic texts, and it is impossible to make linear connections from such texts back to the situation that gave rise to them.

The Topography of Violence

Reality as it is experienced is described by the Psalms metaphorically, as a reality which *can be* experienced. The Psalms offer the reader the possibility of identification and connection with a reality that the reader has experienced. They open up an imaginative space in which experiences can be located. Within this imaginative space the Psalms express in words the experience of violence. In Psalm 55 this constructed imaginative space, created by language, may serve to locate a particular experience of violence. In this way it is possible to speak of a topography of violence. This topography of (the experience of) violence is particularly and clearly placed in the city and in the desert.

The City as a Place of Violence

- 10b. I see violence and strife in the city.
- 11. They surround it day and night on its walls, and trials and tribulations dwell at its heart.
- 12. Ruin dwells at its heart, oppression and deceit do not retreat from its market.

13. Jürgen Ebach, 'Interesse und Treue: Anmerkungen zu Exegese und Hermeneutik', in Jürgen Ebach (ed.), *Biblische Erinnerungen: Theologische Reden zur Zeit* (Bochum: SWI-Verlag, 1993), p. 42.

Verses 10b-12 portray a picture of a city, a city with walls and a market place. It is shown as a place of violence, although no concrete act of violence is named. Instead the city is populated with concepts which show a generally dreadful state of affairs: violence, strife, trials, tribulations, ruin, oppression and deceit. These concepts/words, which are the incorporation of violence, are personified as and act like people. Violence and strife surround the city on its walls; oppression and deceit do not retreat from its market place. Violence has entered the furthest corner of the city and is occupying it. Violence dominates both the walls and the central square. Together the verbs which express this domination, 'surround', 'not retreat', 'make up a circle and a point, movement and persistence. Violence is present not only in the spatial expanse but also in the movement within this space. It dominates time as well (v. 11). Time and space are subject to the effects of violence.

This portrayal of the city contradicts its true function, that of protection by means of its defences.¹⁴ Because the city's wall distinguishes it clearly from what is outside, what lies within is supposedly protected. This distinction between within and without is attacked in Psalm 55: the wall no longer has a protective function. What lies within the city is, however, also wounded, as indicated by the double emphasis on 'at its heart'. It is apparent that the city, to which the connotation 'protection and safety' should be attributed, no longer offers a place of refuge; instead, it has become profoundly unsafe.

The city is not only a *place* of violence; it is also the *object* of violence. This can be seen from v. 11. Here the city is the object of those who dominate it. In those passages in the psalm where the 'I' speaks of itself (vv. 3-6), it speaks of itself as the object of violence. Associations of keywords produce a relationship between the 'I' and the city ('trials' in vv. 4 and 11, and 'at its heart' in vv. 5 and 11-12). There is, therefore, a relationship between the 'I' of the psalm, which expresses its own experiences of violence in words, and the defeated and occupied city. The humiliation of the individual can be seen to be internally related to the humiliation of the city.¹⁵ Both the city and the 'I' are objects of

14. E. Otto, 'I', *ThWAT*, VI, p. 61.

15. Krieg, *Todesbilder im Alten Testament*, p. 290.

violence. The city and the 'I' coincide in the extent of the violence to which they are exposed. Like the city, the 'I' is both the place and object of violence. If the verbs the 'I' uses to express its experience in vv. 4b-6 are applied to the picture of the city, the total domination of the city by violence becomes even clearer. While the threatening movements in the image of the city are horizontal, the trials which beset the 'I' move in vertical lines ('rain down upon', 'fall upon', 'overwhelm'). The resulting picture is that of a closed space from which it is impossible to escape. The topography of violence dominates this space. In this way the experience of violence is present on the surface level of the text.

The Desert as Counter-space

7. So I said,
Had I the wings of a dove,
I wanted to fly away and have rest.
8. See.
I wanted to flee far off,
and settle in the wilderness,
9. to hurry to my refuge,
away from the blast of the wind, from the storm.

In vv. 7-9 the praying woman wishes that she could fly into the desert, that she could escape from the enclosed space of violence. The picture of the desert here offered is of a place of refuge; the desert becomes a counter-space to the city. This is clear from the verbs used. Here we find no verbs which 'encircle' and define a space; instead, a cluster of verbs of movement ('fly', 'leave', 'retreat') and of stillness ('rest', 'settle') are related to the counter-space of the desert.

The 'desert' has many and varied connotations in biblical texts. It may be the place of death and chaos, frightening and full of danger. 'Biblical people, used to village and city life, see the desert as a yawning emptiness; no one lives there.'¹⁶ Inasmuch as the desert in Psalm 55 is conceived of as a counter-space to the city's space of violence, the connotations here are reversed. The city, generally representative of safe, habitable and cultivated

land, has been transformed into a place of hopelessness, normally associated with the desert. The dangerous boundary between cultivated land and the desert has, in a sense, shrunk to the heart of the city. At the same time, the desert loses the connotation of death and becomes a place of refuge where violence no longer threatens. In this way another connotation of the desert is incorporated into the image. The desert offers 'asylum to outcasts and refugees.'¹⁷ Hagar, Moses, David, Elijah and others fled into the desert. Here they were met by God or by God's messenger who gave them nourishment, strengthened and protected them. In contrast to them, the woman praying the psalm finds no shelter and meets no angel. The desert cannot offer even a transitional stage. The praying woman knows that flight is impossible. Her hope of rescue is, therefore, merely a wish; her place of refuge is a fictional place; it is a counter-space, but trapped—within the construction of the sentence—by the subjunctive of desire: 'Had I...'. This is strengthened by the fact that there are no keyword connections between vv. 7-9 and the rest of the psalm. The flight remains text: it remains on the level of the 'I say' (v. 7)¹⁸ which introduces the desert passage.

The praying woman's own strength is not enough to allow her to escape. In speech the 'I' turns itself into a dove and allows the bird to act as a kind of substitute and to do what the 'I' in this situation of violence is unable to do, namely, to find a means of escape and flight. This is equivalent to the dove's role in the flood story (Gen. 8). There the use of the dove represents an attempt to allow a bird in an emergency situation to bring about something that the people cannot do.¹⁹ The dove is often found in such desperate situations. Thus the cooing of a dove is also seen as representing lament (Isa. 38.14, 59.11; Nah. 2.8).

17. Talmun, 'נודד', p. 678. See Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: I. With an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (FOTL, 14; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 224.

18. Against Kraus (*Psalmen*, p. 562) who views the 'So I said' simply as an easy transition that is metrically irrelevant.

19. Claus Westermann, 'Mensch, Tier und Pflanze in der Bibel', in Bernd Janowski, Ute Neumann-Gorsolke and Uwe Glesner (eds.), *Gefährten und Feinde des Menschen: Das Tier in der Lebenswelt des Alten Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 1993), p. 93.

16. S. Talmun, 'נודד', *ThWAT*, IV, p. 675.

At the same time, the picture of the dove works on many levels. In the metaphor of the Song of Songs the dove functions as love's messenger.²⁰ It is possible that this area of meaning might also be evoked in Ps. 55.7. If that were so, the dove as the bearer of hope would stand in sharp contrast to the experience of violence. A topography of love would be projected against the topography of violence. And yet, this counter-projection would remain fictitious, incapable of realization in the all-dominating violence. The flight of the 'I' remains utopian and imaginary.

The Act and its Perpetrator

The perpetrator(s)²¹ of this violence can be seen at various points in the psalm. It contains general statements which give no concrete indication of the nature of the act (v. 4: 'by the cries of the enemy, by the onslaughts of the wicked. They bring down trials upon me, and with anger they persecute me'; and v. 20b: 'they do not keep their word, and neither do they fear God'). It offers descriptions of violence personified in the image of the city (vv. 10b-11: 'I see violence and strife in the city. They surround it day and night on its walls, and trials and tribulations dwell at its heart'). It presents statements in the subjunctive which exclude certain types of perpetrator (v. 13: 'If an enemy had abused me I would have borne it. If a foe had set himself over me, I would have hidden myself from him'). It portrays the perpetrator's words and the way he says them (v. 22: 'His mouth flatters more smoothly than butter, but strife is in his heart; his words flow more gently than oil but they are daggers [drawn swords]'). It describes the perpetrator as known and trusted (vv. 14-15: 'But you: one of my own, my companion, my friend, with whom I

20. See Othmar Keel, 'Allgegenwärtige Tiere: Einige Weisen ihrer Wahrnehmung in der hebräischen Bibel', in Bernd Janowski, Ute Neumann-Gorsolke and Uwe Glesner (eds.), *Gefährten und Feinde des Menschen: Das Tier in der Lebenswelt des Alten Israels* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 1993), pp. 156-93, esp. pp. 168-69; also his *Deine Blicke sind Tauben: Zur Metaphorik des Hohen Liedes* (SBS, 114, 115; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholischer Bibelwerk, 1984), pp. 53-62.

21. The change between singular and plural is problematic. Perhaps it indicates the inseparable nature of structural violence and individual acts of violence.

enjoyed sweet fellowship, walked in the crowd in the house of our God'; and v. 21: 'He lays hands upon those who are at peace with him, he breaks his trust').

In my opinion v. 14, in which the perpetrator is addressed directly, is central to understanding the psalm. While in previous verses the praying woman seems to approach the act, speaking more of the structure of violence than of the violent act itself, here she breaks out of the former sentence structure and speaks directly to the perpetrator: 'But you: one of my own, my companion, my friend.' This evokes closeness, trust and shared experience. The naming of the perpetrator as someone who stood in a close relationship of trust to the praying woman encourages one to think of an abuse of this closeness. Verse 21 also suggests this, in as far as it speaks of breaking the trust, a trust which seems to have shaped a mutual relationship, something that is 'integrated, wholly human, encompassing mutual understanding and personal commitment'.²² Against this background the designations of friendship become the designations of enmity;²³ the sudden change to the second person singular is thus a direct and merciless condemnation. The perpetrator is confronted with his action; in a way, he is openly named and unmasked. If one follows Sheppard in assuming that psalms were spoken aloud and intended to be overheard by both friends and enemies, then this observation can be formulated even more clearly. In Psalm 55 the man of trust is publicly declared to be a man who has in fact acted as an enemy.²⁴

Both the perpetrator's words and the manner of his speech are unmasked too. Although it is not characterized as such, v. 23 offers a direct report of his speech. A comparison with Pss. 22:8-9 and 2:2-3 shows that a direct reporting verb need not be

22. Othmar Keel, *Feinde und Gottesläugner: Studien zum Image der Wiltarscher in den Individualpsalmen* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1969), p. 134.

23. See Kraus, *Psalmen*, p. 563.

24. Gerald T. Sheppard, "'Enemies'" and the Politics of Prayer in the Book of the Psalms', in David Jobling, Peggy L. Day and Gerald T. Sheppard (eds.), *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1991), p. 77.

present.²⁵ Statements by perpetrators are often cited in the Psalms (Pss. 3.3; 10.4.6; 12.5; 22.8-9; 35.21,25; 41.6; 42.11; 59.8; 64.6-7; 70.4; 71.11). With the help of v. 22, 'His mouth flatters more smoothly than butter, but strife is in his heart; his words flow more gently than oil but they are drawn swords', the perpetrator's statement in v. 23, 'Cast your desire upon Yahweh, and he will sustain you, he will not allow the righteous to stumble forever', can be viewed as mockery. These are the words which flow more gently than oil, but are intended to be deadly. The contrast between the words' content and their effect turns the comfort into mockery and lies. The praying woman experiences the perpetrator's words as violence, as weapon. Language is inseparably related to its effect; it has a performative character: it is 'a primary happening'.²⁶

Language has extraordinary power; a power which can bring death in the same way as weapons and the tools of war, for 'the power to speak is directly related to the power to act'.²⁷ However, it would be too narrow to understand the psalm as the expression of violence in single words and phrases only. The point at issue is the connection between the structure of language and violence; that is, language as 'the place of conflict and of misrepresentation, as place of oppression and liberation'.²⁸ Ultimately, discourse and the establishment of reality are made

25. Against Kraus (*Psalmen*, p. 564), who sees v. 23 as encouragement and an oracle of salvation. I assume, with Keel (*Feinde und Gottesläugner*, pp. 143-44), that this verse is a quotation, although the reporting verb is missing.

26. Claus Westermann, 'Das gute Wort in den Sprüchen: Ein Beitrag zum Menschenverständnis der Spruchweisheit', in Frank Crüsemann, Christof Hardmeier and Rainer Kessler (eds.), *Was ist der Mensch...? Beiträge zur Anthropologie des Alten Testaments: Hans Walter Wolf zum 80. Geburtstag* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1992), pp. 243-55. Cf. also Pss. 12.4-5; 52.6, 59.8, 64.4, 109.2-3, 140-144; Jer. 54.17; Prov. 18.21; and the identification of the 'man of violence' with the 'man of lies' in Ps. 140.12.

27. Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988) p. 245.

28. Gudrun-Axeli Knapp, 'Macht und Geschlecht: Neuere Entwicklungslinien in der feministischen Macht- und Herrschaftsdiskussion', in Gudrun-Axeli Knapp and Angelika Wetterer (eds.), *Traditionen Brüche: Entwicklungslinien feministischer Theorie* (Freiburg: Kore, 1992), pp. 287-325.

in and by language. Discourses are shaped by those things 'which are discussed in a society, which are dealt with as problems and as issues, and which contribute to the collective production of meaning'.²⁹ A distinction, though, must be made between dominant and marginal discourses. In the Hebrew Bible the discourse which defines the facts of rape as part of its meaning is the perpetrators' discourse. The victims' perspective is excluded and remains unspoken. This praxis of discourse is criticised in Psalm 55, in that the act and its perpetrator are named and the perpetrator's use of language is unmasked. In the perpetrator's discourse, rape has a particular meaning. It is labelled as a property crime. The violence which is done to a woman is thus denied and remains unspoken. To interpret the reality of a rape in terms different from these, and to express the experience of rape, is to interrupt the discourse of violence against women at one, albeit a minor, point. The naming of the act and of the perpetrator, and the unmasking of his language, allow Psalm 55 to offer an alternative to the discourse of violence. The psalm offers a discourse which is not a continuation of the denial and the violence, but which interrupts them.

The passages of the psalm in which the praying woman wishes death upon the perpetrators—'Let death fall upon them, let them go down alive to Sheol' (v. 16); 'God will hear and will humble them' (v. 20); 'But you, God, you will bring them down into the deepest pit, the men of blood and deceit will not achieve even half of their days' (v. 24)—reflect an attempt to break the perpetrators' power too. They express 'the wish that God would remove this injustice'.³⁰ Only death seems appropriate for bringing an end to violence, for only through death is reality reversed. Wishing evil for the enemy is an expression of the depth of the victim's despair, but it is also a means by which a promise is recalled to memory, the promise of help perverted in the perpetrator's mouth. Only the perpetrator's death makes it possible for the praying woman to speak the words in v. 23 as an expression

29. Ruth Seifert, 'Entwicklungslinien und Probleme der feministischen Theoriebildung: Warum an der Rationalität kein Weg vorbeiführt', in Knapp and Wetterer (eds.), *Traditionen Brüche*, pp. 255-85.

30. Jürgen Ebach, 'Der Gott des Alten Testaments—ein Gott der Rache?', in Jürgen Ebach (ed.), *Biblische Erinnerungen*, p. 89.

of the hope for help: 'Cast your desire upon GOD and he, he will sustain you, he will not allow the righteous to stumble forever.'

Like the violence itself, the end of violence is expressed in terms of a spatial metaphor: 'let them go down alive to Sheol' (v. 16) and 'into the deepest pit' (v. 24). Both these spaces border on and reach into death. The experience of violence to which the praying woman has been exposed is an experience of absolute powerlessness. It seems that from this perspective of powerlessness only the perpetrator's death can bring an end to the violence. The wish that God might make the perpetrators into objects in their turn is, in other words, a request to God that the dominant discourse of violence be perverted and thus made powerless. This request erupts into words in v. 10: 'Confuse, my Lord, split their tongues.' These words stand exactly between the pictures of city and the desert, thus preventing the collision of these two, diametrically opposed, conceptual spaces. The tongue symbolizes the human capability of speech, human language and thus human power. God is now required to confuse and split the tongues of those who threaten the woman by violence: it is necessary that God should destroy, thus disempower, the discourse of violence which silences the praying woman by ignoring her pain. This is a concrete expression of the praying woman's hope, a hope which she expresses when she articulates her pain in and through the words of the psalm. Her hope is that the discourse of violence will be interrupted, indeed demolished, and that another discourse will become possible—a discourse which will express her experience of violence verbally and will bring back her subjecthood, integrity and identity.

'But I': Trusting in God

2. O God, hear my prayer,
and do not hide from my plea.
3. Attend to me and answer me.
17. For I, I call to God,
and GOD will rescue me.
18. At evening, at morning, at midday I lament and moan,
and he will hear my voice.
19. He will rescue my life for salvation
from the quarrel against me

24. for they are too many about me.
But I, I trust in you.

In Psalm 55 a movement can be seen, from the despairing cry in v. 2, via the speech in v. 17, to the end in v. 24: 'But I, I trust in you.' This trust in God makes it possible to name the action, to accuse the perpetrators and to hope for an end to the violence. At the same time—and this is the psalm's true achievement—the praying woman is able to turn her gaze away from the violence and discover herself as subject, able to define herself and to formulate a perspective on the future. What stands at the end of this psalm is not a humiliating shrinking of the self into the *status quo*, but an 'I' well on its way to rediscovering its identity. This identity is defined in relation to God, who is on the side of those suffering violence. In this way, the 'But I, I trust in God' is a call to God as the advocate of the dispossessed, as their deliverer and their refuge. 'And in as far as they trust themselves to this advocate, the dispossessed gain strength to resist. They repossess the identity which has been stolen from them.'³¹ The ability to locate oneself in language, despite absolute powerlessness, can have a liberating effect, for it allows the silence about violence to be brought to an end so that the end of violence can begin. In Psalm 55 the bringing about of the end of violence through the perpetrator's death is not the last word. Through trust in God, a counter-discourse is brought into being. This counter-discourse enables the powerless object of violence to rediscover herself as a subject possessing her own identity.

A Hermeneutic Interlude

In Psalm 55 violence is articulated as a particular topography of violence. What kind of reading is necessary to locate women's specific experiences of violence in this 'landscape' and to see Psalm 55 as a text expressing women's particular experience of violence?³² Which 'map' makes it possible to include violence

31. Raiser, 'Klage als Befreiung', p. 27.

32. Sheppard, "'Enemies'" and the Politics of Prayer', p. 81. See also Marie M. Fortune, "'My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?'" in Marie M. Fortune (ed.), *Spinning a Sacred Yarn: Women from the Pulpit* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1982), pp. 65-71.

against women when reading Psalm 55?

An intertextual reading seems to me to be a promising model.³³ An exegetical method which uses intertextuality has the reading of the text as an 'act of creativity',³⁴ because the meaning comes into being only in the course of the reading process. In the process of reading any text is related to other texts for, intentionally or unintentionally, no text exists independently of its situation in a universe of other texts. It is only in the coming together of different texts, texts which respond to one another through time and space, that a text acquires meaning. Meaning can shift and is not trapped in the text itself. It takes its shape not only in relation to the texts which a particular text itself gives as references, but also in the connections brought by the 'simple coincidence of previous reading'.³⁵ Interpretation can also affect the synchronic weight of this text, in that the exegete decides for her- or himself to which, and to what type of, intertexts it is to be compared and which points (markings) are to be used for comparison. This is not an allowance for giving full rein to arbitrariness, but recognition that every interpretation (including traditional ones) reflects a particular interest. Each interpretation should make this interest clear as well as offer a reasonable account of the text. The specific allegiance of feminist interests which, in the present case, is concerned with the possibility of locating a particularly female experience of violence in the topography of violence found in Psalm 55 can thus be placed in the context of intertextual interpretation. A feminist-oriented intertextuality will make new connections between texts and will interweave the text with different texts. It will take seriously, and in a new way, the possibilities offered by textual breaks and

tensions, themselves often intertextual markings.

The City as a Woman's Body

The violence to which the psalm's speaking 'I' is exposed is shown in the picture of the city which has been taken over. This is not a historically identifiable occupation of a historically identifiable city; rather, the image of the city is the part of the topography of violence, metaphorically expressed by means of the psalm's spatial structure.

In Hebrew, 'city' is a feminine noun and cities are often personified as women; here the grammatical feminine gender has a particular significance.³⁶ The city's feminine gender is explained through the function of the city as mother and feeder of its inhabitants.³⁷ However, although this association with 'the mother who protects and sustains life'³⁸ may play a role in the Hebrew Bible as a whole, in the case of Psalm 55 it does not, in my opinion, function as an intertextual marker. Here the linking of the 'city' with the verb 'surround' suggests a different connection. The verb 'surround' often appears in warlike, military contexts with the meaning 'surrounded by an enemy',³⁹ that is, it is often associated with the conquering of a city. In the psalms of lament this verb has negative connotations and is an expression of threat.⁴⁰ In Psalm 55 the action of the verb 'surround' is carried out in the city, or on its walls. The inner space of the city is thus affected. Violence has settled in the heart of the city and does not retreat from the market place (v. 12).

This marking can be linked to two Hebrew Bible stories, Judges 19 and Genesis 19. In each of these stories the location of violence is the heart of a city, the market place. Violence finds its beginning in a situation characterized by the verb 'surrounded':

36. John J. Schmitt, 'Israel and Zion—Two Gendered Images: Biblical Speech Traditions and Their Contemporary Neglect', *Horizons* 81.1 (1991), pp. 18-32, esp. p. 19 and pp. 27-29.

37. According to E. Otto, 'ארץ', p. 61.

38. Odil Hannes Steck, 'Zion als Gelände und Gestalt: Überlegungen zur Wahrnehmung Jerusalems als Stadt und als Frau im Alten Testament', *ZTK* 86 (1989), p. 272.

39. García López, 'ארץ', *THWAT V*, pp. 735-36.

40. Cf. Pss. 18.6; 17.11; 22.13, 17; 49.6; 109.3; 118.10-11.

33. On intertextuality see Sípke Draisma, 'Introduction', in Sípke Draisma (ed.), *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings: Essays in Honour of Bas van Iersel* (Kampen: Kok, 1989), pp. 1-14; Karlheinz Stierle, 'Werk und Intertextualität', in Wolf Schmid and Wolf-Dieter Stempel (eds.), *Dialog der Texte: Hamburger Kolloquium zur Intertextualität* (Vienna: Wiener Slavistischer Almanach, 1983), pp. 7-26; Ulrich Broich and Manfred Pfister (eds.), *Intertextualität: Formen, Funktionen, anglistische Fallstudien* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1985).

34. Draisma, 'Introduction', p. 7.

35. Stierle, 'Werk und Intertextualität', p. 10.

a situation which results in rape or the threat of a rape. In Judges 19 a woman is raped all night long by men who surround the house. She dies early the next morning. If we relate Judges 19 and Psalm 55 to one another intertextually, reading them alongside one another, a parallel between the city and the woman's body presents itself. The violence to which the city is subjected in Psalm 55 represents the violence which destroys the woman in Judges 19. The conquering of the city represents the rape of the woman. As has already been shown, the 'I' in Psalm 55 locates herself in the image of the city, thus expressing her own experience of violence. Read as intertext, Judges 19 makes it clear that the praying woman in Psalm 55 is speaking out, she is making it clear that her own inner space, her own body, has been robbed of its integrity and security, just like the conquered city. This place, the city, is as accessible and vulnerable as a woman's body is. The limits of the city, like the limits of the body, have not been respected. Like the city, the body of a woman can be conquered, taken over, plundered and destroyed. There is a parallel between the military defeat of a city, and rape.

Psalm 55 portrays the closeness of the perpetrator to the victim, expressed in the words 'But you: one of my own, my companion, my friend.' This allows a further insight into the topography of the violence committed. This violence takes place in a space that is geographically and emotionally familiar. Emotional closeness should, however, exclude violence. The destruction of the psychological, emotional and physical integrity of the 'I' is even greater when such closeness is abused. The theory of intertextuality allows a person's experiences to be understood and read as text. The reader's 'experience text' is brought into relationship with the text under consideration and the two become connected.⁴¹ If we read Psalm 55 from the perspective of the experiences of women who have been raped, a surprising parallel results. The psychological and emotional consequences of rape—such as depressive hopelessness, lack of self-confidence and damage to the identity, to name but a few⁴²—closely match

the feelings depicted in Psalm 55. Moreover, the topography of closeness is also to be found in most instances of rape. About half of all rapes are committed by men already known to the women attacked. Two-thirds of all rapes take place not outside but *in* the home. Indeed, 'the greatest threat is posed by a known perpetrator in a familiar environment'⁴³

Against this background, it is quite possible to read Psalm 55 as a lament over a rape and an accusation of the perpetrator. As has already been noted, this does not imply a reading which seeks to locate the psalm historically. Rather, it requires us to read Psalm 55 and the topography of violence it describes through the eyes of a praying woman. From a woman's perspective the structure of Psalm 55, and particularly its spatial structure, might reflect female experience of violence. The psalm allows an expression of this violence and the naming of its perpetrator; this brings about a rupture in the ruling discourse of violence. Thus the psalm offers to the raped woman a possibility of dealing with her experience.

From Speechless Powerlessness to the Finding of a New Identity

The praying woman turns to the collectively shaped linguistic form of the lament psalms in order to articulate her experience of violence. In a situation when her language has been silenced or when no one hears her crying, the Psalms offer her a chance to speak. The 'I' who has experienced herself as the object of sexual violence, whose identity and integrity have been destroyed, can find a new place for herself in the language space of the psalm. In this way she can become subject once more. If we assume that subjectivity is shaped by language, this is of the utmost importance.

However, Psalm 55 poses a problem here. The image which the praying woman uses to formulate her need, the analogy

41. James W. Volz, 'Multiple Signs and Double Texts: Elements of Intertextuality', in Draisma (ed.), *Intertextuality*, pp. 27-34.

42. Flothmann and Dilling, *Vergewaltigung*, pp. 69-72; Feldmann, *Vergewaltigung und ihre psychischen Folgen*, pp. 30-32 and 50-53.

43. Feldmann, *Vergewaltigung und ihre psychischen Folgen*, p. 17. See also M.C. Baurmann, *Sexualität, Gewalt und die Folgen für das Opfer: Zusammenfassende Ergebnisse aus einer Längsschnittuntersuchung bei Opfern von angezeigten Sexualkontakten* (Wiesbaden: Kriminalistisches Institut, 3rd edn, 1984), pp. 13-16. Feldmann speaks of 71 per cent (*Vergewaltigung und ihre psychischen Folgen*, p. 9).

between the conquered city and the raped body, is borrowed from a discourse which is structured by military categories. In this discourse of violence, cities are sexualized and the body of the woman is seen as equivalent to the city. Both are available; each can be occupied and owned by men. Within this discourse it seems that an end to violence is only possible through counter-violence. Only the death of the perpetrator brings his violence to an end. Only with his death do his victim's absolute powerlessness and closeness to death seem to be over. This should not be criticized; indeed, such an expression of anger can have a therapeutic effect for women who suffer from an inability to speak as a consequence of rape. Speaking with the help of this kind of discourse has an important liberating function in the process of coping with and working through such experiences.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the praying woman speaks here in terms of a discourse which can turn itself against her and within which she will tend to remain an object. This is a discourse which is focused more on the perpetrator than on the victim. Within it, it seems impossible for a woman to become an independent subject in her own right and by her own initiative. Violence is indeed radically named but, in the analogy between conquered city and raped woman's body, the woman tends to remain on the side of the victim. And within this discourse the end of violence is really and truly possible only through the death of the perpetrator.

But Psalm 55 does offer another way, a different sort of speaking. The image of the dove, although it allows the utopian dream of an escape which does not actually take place, indicates a different sort of speech. Verses 7-9 portray escape as an unrealizable possibility; the 'I' remains exposed as a victim. Nevertheless, this passage also reflects a survival strategy, namely, dissociation. The image of the dove which flies away into the desert in search of refuge stands isolated in the psalm. Terminologically it is not bound to the rest of the psalm in any way. The dove/desert image is in some way dissociated. Dissociation allows emotions to be split off and the body to be separated from the 'I' so that in situations of physical, emotional or psychological threat from which there is no escape a boundary can be imposed between the 'I' and the unbearable pain. This is an

attempt to survive, 'the despairing attempt to rescue the "I" from disintegration and re-establish it'.⁴⁴ The imaginary flight of the dove into the desert also fulfils the function of preserving the 'I' from destruction at the deepest level of its being. In this sense it is irrelevant whether or not the dove's flight takes the grammatical form of the subjunctive of desire. By creating this image of the dove, the 'I' tries to achieve something which is not possible for the woman's body; it tries to bring the violence to an end by limiting its intrusion into her own inner space. With the help of this image, the 'I' seeks to set limits and to survive the overwhelming experiences of violence without losing herself.

The power to express new images and create new spaces in a situation of absolute powerlessness corresponds to the 'But I' at the end of Psalm 55. The possibility of finding a place of sanctuary, hinted at in vv. 7-9, here becomes a certainty. God is on the side of the praying woman who uses this psalm to articulate her experience of rape.

It can thus be seen that Psalm 55 is open to the particular experiences of violence suffered by women. The imaginative spaces of the 'desert' and 'city' offer the possibility of locating the pain and articulating the violence. When the psalms of lament are read in this way, the strategies by which violence against women is legitimated begin to crumble and a small space is opened up—a space called into being by the vocal, public lament of women. This can be the beginning of liberation.

44. Ursula Wirtz, *Seelennord: Inzest und Therapie* (Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1992), p. 147; Feldmann, *Vergewaltigung und ihre psychischen Folgen*, pp. 52-53.