The Psalms: "Who Is Speaking May Be *All* That Matters"

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Psalms are texts to be used. In their long history of reception that began already in the First Testament, they have been, and still are, spoken and sung by men and women in different sociocultural contexts. In the 150 psalms of the book of Psalms, people found, and still find, songs that mirror situations in their lives and with which they can enter into a conversation and sing or speak them as their own words. They are songs of hope and liberation, of lament and suffering, of joy and celebration, of looking at creation and of justice. These songs can be heard and spoken as voices of women. This article will present an exemplary reading in this way.

"Who Is Speaking May Be *All* That Matters"

In the interest of understanding the Psalms as affirmation, strengthening, and empowerment of women, Marchiene Vroon Rienstra presents her liturgically oriented book *Swallow's Nest: A Feminine Reading of the Psalms*. Readers are encouraged to understand the Psalms as prayers of individual women in various situations and conditions of life. Rienstra paraphrases psalms and imagines specific situations of women's experiences, which she then names in the new headings to the Psalms. For example, Psalm 6 has the caption: "This might be the prayer of a woman who was raped" (Rienstra 1992, 44). This creative feminist treatment of the Psalms points to the possibility of reading them from a woman's perspective.

In the Hebrew text of the Psalms are several reading instructions that open up a way for a feminist rereading. One of these ways is to look at their headings. These headings were secondary additions to the text, and many of them mentioned men as psalms' authors (David, Sons of Korah, Asaph, Solomon, Ethan, and Moses). These notes are not historical references; the authors in these headings are fictional and literary characters. They are meant to anchor the individual psalm in a particular biblical narrative. This is particularly true for the captions that name

David as the author: they connect specific psalms with David's biography. For example, Psalm 51 and the narrative of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 12 are brought together by the heading. As a result, Psalm 51 becomes the voice of David in a particular situation of his life.

One can also reread the Psalms by taking note of a psalm's context. For example, the psalm that Hannah prays in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 shows no particular "feminine language nor unequivocally female motifs" (Gerstenberger 1994, 352). Nonetheless, it gives voice to Hannah's experiences (Miller 1993, 237f.). By incorporating it into the Hannah narrative, the words of this psalm are spoken by Hannah's voice, giving a women-specific meaning. Hannah thanks God that he has delivered her from barrenness and acts in solidarity with all who are poor and humiliated (cf. Luke 2).

Psalms are also placed on the lips of other women, even though these are mostly shorter prayers (Hagar: Gen 16:13; Rebekah: Gen 25:22; Miriam: Exod 15:21; Deborah: Judg 5). "On the other hand, narratives of men are furnished more frequently with short, fervent prayers and detailed psalms" (Gerstenberger 1994, 352). In intertestamental literature many women speak psalms (Susannah: Dan 13:42-43; Jephthah's daughter: Liber antiquitatum biblicarum 40.5-8; Sarah: Tob 3:11-15; Judith: Jth 9:2-14; Esther: Rest of Esther C 12-30; Aseneth: Joseph and Aseneth 12).

In addition, there are references on the literary level of the Psalms to women singing psalms. Those instances have to be highlighted. For example, in Psalm 48:12(11) the daughters of Judah are encouraged to rejoice (cf. also 97:8), and in 148:12 virgins are to sing praises together with all humanity and the whole of creation (cf. also 45:16 [Eng. 15]).

The concept of the "voice in the text" enables the "gendering of texts" (Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes 1993). Biblical texts are exclusively — or almost exclusively — written by men for men. Texts of women are only found embedded in these male narratives, formed and framed by the editorial activities of men (Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes 1993, 2f.). Since the oral traditions of women are often written down by men due to their prominence and power in the literary terrain, the female voices are only hidden traces. Whether those traces are recovered depends on the interest of the readers and their willingness to search for those lost voices in biblical texts. Texts and readers are never gender-neutral, and often texts tell different stories if they are read as male voice or female voice. For example, one could think about which psalm could represent the voice of Bathsheba. Biblical texts should be understood as "dual gendered" (Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes 1993, 9), which means that two parallel readings are possible. Psalms are open to both genders. It depends on the voice that reads or speaks the text: "Who is speaking may be *all* that matters" (Higgins and Silver 1991, 1).

Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes's approach makes it possible to search for female voices in the Hebrew Bible without engaging the question of female authorship, which, at any rate, leads into the vexed terrain of speculative answers. Fur-

thermore, one needs to remember that women in an androcentric-dominant culture always have to speak in a double voice anyway. They have to speak with the voice of the dominant discourses that drown out and overwrite their voices and, at the same time, with the voice of the repressed, secret discourses. The main focus of the search for female voices ("F voices") lies in the search for muted voices.

Linking the poetic psalm-text to the narrative-biographical text by means of a psalm's caption or embedding the psalm into a narrative context provides possibilities to read the Psalms from a feminist perspective. In addition, from the perspective of women, the web of intrabiblical connections can be employed in terms of intertextual reading to focus on the voices of women in the Psalms (Bail 1994 and 1998). The meaning of a text emerges only in the process of reading, as the text is related to other texts. No text exists in isolation from others, whether this is an overt connection or by implication only. Meaning is constituted by the relations of texts to which the text itself can hint. Moreover, exegesis can influence the interaction of texts in that readers decide themselves which kind of texts and how many comparable texts and points of contacts to choose. The specific partiality of feminist epistemological interest can readily be incorporated into the method of intertextual interpretation. Feminist-oriented intertextuality creates different connections and weaves different webs of texts that speak to each other.

Traces of Women in the Psalms

"According to young women. A Song" — this is the title of Psalm 46. This extraordinary mention of young women (ʿălāmôt) in the heading to the psalm points to other passages where young women are connected to music. In Psalm 68:26(25) young girls are playing the tambourine (tôp). Other biblical passages narrate that women play drums and dance (Judg 11:34; 1 Sam 18:6; Jer 31:4; Exod 15:20; 1 Chron 25:21). Particularly noteworthy is the prophet Miriam, who, dancing together with all women, plays the tambourine and sings of the liberation from slavery in Egypt (Exod 15:20).

Behind these brief notes may be hidden a music tradition of women, perhaps even a genre of "drum-dance-song" (Meyers 1991). In any case, the tambourine was played as a solo instrument exclusively by women (Braun 1994, 1525f.). Whether these groups of women can be identified with the "female musicians of the court who, on special occasions, would perform in the procession of male musicians and singers" (Engelken 1990, 59) remains debatable. Similarly, whether the drum is to be seen as a gendered symbol because of its association with women is left open (Braun 1994, 1527).

Goitein regards women of First Testament times not as writers of particular texts but rather as "creators of biblical genres": "She sang in the days of love and during the days of mourning, expressed the joy of victory and the agony of defeat,

words of wisdom and whispers of prayer" (Goitein 1988, 29). Goitein sees especially lyrical genres as expressions of women's creativity and initiative. For women whose emotional lives he characterizes as strong and empathetic, it is natural to be sensitive to religious lyric. But with this argument he equates women with emotionality, sensitivity, femininity, nature, and the poetic. Goitein's argument does support women's self-determined creativity, but it keeps women in a dualistic understanding of gender where they are reduced to nature and emotion.

There is another, almost invisible trace in the heading to Psalm 56: "According to the Dove of the Far-away Gods." This musical instruction might derive from an understanding in the ancient Orient that doves are messenger birds for the ancient Orient's love goddesses (Schroer 1996, 146ff.). Perhaps the heading of Psalm 22, "According to the Deer of the Dawn," also expresses this tradition. Like the dove, the deer inhabits the sphere that is marked by the power of the love goddesses (Keel 1984, 100). Moreover, some Jewish rites depict Psalm 22 as the voice of a woman, as a psalm of Esther, to be performed liturgically during the feast of Purim (Elbogen 1995, 131).

Despite great effort, the musical instructions in the psalm headings remain difficult to understand. Unfortunately, the concrete meaning cannot be reconstructed today. The traces point to a musical tradition of women but remain obscure. Whether there was a separate song-tradition also remains conjecture. However, it can neither be contested nor proven that women were part of the "formulation and use of holy texts" (Gerstenberger 1994, 359). Furthermore, the Psalms are poetic texts, and one cannot directly deduce from such texts the reality in which they originated. Psalms narrate lived reality in a metaphorical way as one that can be relived. They offer possibilities for identification, allowing the expression of one's own lived experience (Bail 1994, 71). Psalms are difficult to date, and considering their anonymity, it is nearly impossible to identify historically an author regardless of gender. The literary hints suggest that women prayed these psalms. Therefore I will speak in the following only of the woman who prays.

Psalm 6 — God, Liberate My Voice!

Psalm 6 does not contain any personal pronouns that point to the gender of the person who is praying. This already makes the psalm grammatically dual-gendered. What kind of meaning could this psalm provide for women who speak it? What kind of connections does it offer to women?

In verse 2, the woman expresses her need with the words "I am languishing" (*'umĕlal*). This verb can have women-specific connotations. In 1 Samuel 2:5 and Jeremiah 15:9 (cf. also Isa 33:9) the verb is used for a woman with many children who has become infertile. Without limiting Psalm 6 to this particular distress, it can be read as an expression of this painful experience. But because of its meta-

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phorical language, the psalm is open for all experiences of violence and helplessness of those who pray it.

Psalm 6 shows that a seemingly inescapable situation of oppression can change: the perpetrators are recognized and named (v. 8). By facing the cause of her need directly, the woman who prays can give voice to it and thereby limit its influence (vv. 9-11[8-10]). At the same time, God is recognized as one who takes the side of the woman who prays and as one who hears her cry (vv. 8b, 9; Bail 1998, 114ff.).

Psalm 10 — to Speak in One's Own Voice

Language and power are closely connected; language represents power relations in that dominant societal discourses define what is significant, what meaning things have. That discourse regulates what is and what is not to be said, and who gets to speak and who is listened to — and ultimately it privileges a particular view of reality. In Psalm 10 the language of the powerful is rendered in four fictional quotations (vv. 4, 6, 11, 13). The woman who prays this psalm does not claim to render the voice of power accurately. Her intention is to expose the self-righteous intent of the powerful who hide their motivations behind their words. The fictional quotations allow a glimpse behind this deception in that she lets the powerful themselves tell the unvarnished truth. The fiction unmasks the ideology on which the construction of reality that legitimizes violence is based. The control of the powerful over language suffers a crack when the woman who prays claims her right to speak and puts the words of the powerful into her own words. In Psalm 10 the woman who prays is the one who determines who speaks and what they say and thus reverses power relations and defines them anew. She lifts up her own voice, thereby sketching on a literary level an alternative to the construction of reality of dominant discourse. The sociopolitical status quo, said to be unchangeable and natural, is found to be alterable. The oppressive reality loses its totalitarian character when the totalitarian domination of the here and now and of language is questioned and redefined (cf. Bail 1998, 33ff., 68ff.).

Psalm 12 — Opposition to the Violence of the Language of the Mighty

In Psalm 12 the dominance of certain social groups that threaten the praying woman is raised into language, for language seems to be the reason for their power. Language is "in the service of the ruling elite" (Butting 1996, 28). The asymmetrical and hierarchical structure of society is constructed by language. Power and powerlessness legitimate themselves through discourses; the group that has control over the dominant discourse also controls reality. Only its perception of things counts. It negates every other perception, renders it invisible and silences it.

This psalm is prayed in order to crack this particular construction of reality open. It does not end with praise but comes back to its opening (v. 1). The powerful "prowl" everywhere and oppress (v. 8). To translate the Hebrew verb in this instance *(sbb)* with "prowling about" is actually too mild if one takes into consideration its usage in militaristic contexts. The verb does not describe a leisurely strolling but more the action of encircling and cutting off with the goal to capture and secure the rule. Therefore the last verse of Psalm 12 realistically repeats the vicious circle of violence by referring back to and encouraging starting again at the beginning in verse 1. The text thus mirrors this circle of violence on the literary level. It seems impossible to imagine transformation on the level of the text. The woman praying remains enclosed within the discourse of power that is dominant and absolute. It encircles the woman who prays and besieges her destructively so that the psalm must begin again without offering words of liberation.

But God cuts off those self-appointed men who became powerful because of their control of language (v. 4) by having the poor and oppressed placed before them. The marginalized, imprisoned as they are by the violence of the language and violence of the powerful, are going to be liberated. They are placed at the heart of God's speech, and thus the wall of silence that surrounds them is broken down. The emphasis on *now* (v. 5) dissolves the totality of the present, because the present is positioned against the solidarity of God. The wish to "cut off all flattering lips" (v. 3) is related to the praying woman's liberation from the oppressors' hold over power of language and their violence. The psalm deals with liberation and solidarity that do not lose sight of the victim and push oppressors to the margin.

The psalms of lament spoken by individuals call for the disempowerment of the dominant social groups' control of language and violence. On the one hand, the victims are enabled — amidst the silence forced upon and suffered by them — to participate in a pattern of communication where they can speak, to pronounce words of opposition, to protest, and to accuse. On the other hand, God has the final word for speech, which becomes possible only in the communication with God. The discourse of liberation can emerge in the linguistic space of which it becomes possible for the praying woman truly to be a subject (cf. Bail 1998, 45ff., 72ff.).

Psalm 45 — between Reality and Utopia

Psalm 45 in its present version was probably written after the harrowing experience of the exile. It puts into words the yearning of Israel for a "renewed kingship as the 'divine' bearer of justice and righteousness" (Zenger 1993a, 279). Concretely, this is spelled out in the poetic imagery of the wedding between the "messianic" king and a princess. The imagery suggests the wedding between Zion/Jerusalem and the king as well as between Zion and God.

In her marriage to the king, the princess begins a completely new life. If we assume that this daughter is not a foreign princess but a daughter of Zion (cf. Ezek 16:3, 45; Gen 12:1), then "the Psalm in its final form celebrates the end of that catastrophe when the 'woman Zion' was despised, left behind and barren. Once despised and violated by the nations, now Zion even becomes the queen over those nations" (cf. Isa 49:21-23; 61:10-11; 62:3-5; Zeph 3:14-17) (Zenger 1993a, 279). However, the princess is commanded to obey the king completely:

> The king will desire your beauty.
> Since he is your lord, bow to him. (Ps 45:11)

This verse sketches a patriarchal marriage that is without doubt structured in a hierarchical way. The subordination of the princess ensures a new life to her, and she is instructed to leave her old life behind (45:10).

The "happy end" of a biography as celebrated in Psalm 45 is mentioned metaphorically in Ezekiel 16 (Maier 1994). The biography of the city-woman Jerusalem has the following stations: abandoned daughter, loved and cared-for wife, adulteress whose sexuality runs wild and who is raped as punishment. In Ezekiel 16:59-63, Jerusalem is addressed with words of deliverance reminiscent of the marriage covenant in Psalm 45:7 (Maier 1994, 91-101). Through this renewed, everlasting covenant the woman has regained a high status, but she is ashamed of her past deeds and thus remains silent (Ezek 16:62-63). Once again the husband is in control and determines what she does (Maier 1994, 101).

The vision of a new beginning is depicted in both Psalm 45 and Ezekiel 16 in terms of patriarchal marriage. This image can only be evaluated as androcentric and sexist. In the picture Psalm 45 paints, daughter Zion is rehabilitated and becomes the queen, but only by subordinating herself and wiping her past humiliations from memory (cf. Ezek 16). From a feminist perspective this image of womanhood has to be critiqued just as the vision that pictures the new beginning in an image of hierarchically structured marriage. The caption of Psalm 45 (cf. also Pss 60; 69; 80) provides a counterimage: "According to Lilies" (ʿal-šōšannîm). In the Song of Solomon lilies, or rather lotus flowers, are seen as "symbols and medium of the invigorating and intoxicating lust for life and life's abundance" (Zenger 1993a, 281; cf. Song 2:1, 16; 4:5; 5:13; 6:2; 7:3[2]). In the Song of Solomon, the female lover is not subordinate; instead an image of desire for a relationship of mutual love without hierarchies is developed. Even the name of the genre in Psalm 45, "a love song," provides an instruction of how to read and hear this psalm: a song of praise to the love that makes new beginnings possible (cf. Song 8:7; Isa 5:1). The caption stands in tension with the demand that the princess submit herself unreservedly. In patriarchal societies this tension is present in any love relationship. The psalm then reminds the reader of the utopian love that is equal and mutual while at the same time it speaks about the reality structured by a gender-specific hierarchy.

Psalm 46 — Peace Comes through God's Voice

Psalm 46, a hymn of trust, names God as one who protects his city (Jerusalem) in warring encounters and situations of siege. But he does not need arms to save his city; his voice alone suffices (v. 6). God takes away the power of the adversary with his loud voice and he creates worldwide peace by destroying all arms. Verses 5b and 9 are reminiscent of the exodus (Exod 14:27; 15:21). If one takes into account the caption, "According to [the manner] of (tambourine-playing) young women," then one can connect this to Miriam (Zenger 1993b, 287). After the liberation from Egypt, the prophetess Miriam takes the tambourine, dances and sings her song of God, who helps in hopeless situations, liberates, ends oppression, and destroys arms.

If psalms are sung by women's voices and if women can participate in the liberation tradition of these songs, then the God of Jacob (Ps 46:1, 7, 11) is also the refuge of Rachel and Leah (Farmer 1992, 138). Particularly in the face of the suffering wars bring to the lives of women (cf. Lam 5:11; 2 Chron 36:17; Jer 38:22-23; 6:11-12; 15:8-9; 22:26), women can lay hold of Psalm 46 and its God who is aligned with peace. God does not rejoice in the power and violence of warriors (Ps 147:10 and Jth 9:2-14). The longing that the sound of lament in the streets will cease is expressed in the language of the simile of young men as plants and young women as pillars (Ps 144:12).

Psalm 55 — the Lament of a Woman Raped

The woman who prays this psalm of lament expresses her experiences of terror and violence in the simile of a city under siege and where violence has advanced into the very core of the city, the marketplace (vv. 10-12). From the context of the whole psalm it becomes apparent that the city is not just the location but also the object of violence. There is a correlation between the persona of the psalm who verbalizes the experience of violence and the conquered and occupied city (cf. the connections in vv. 3 and 10 with the key word "trouble," and in vv. 5, 11, and 12 with "in its midst"). The city as well as the "I" of the psalm are objects of violence and powerless before it. If one links the verbs that describe the persona (vv. 3b-5) to the description of the city, it becomes apparent that violence totally dominates the whole space. While the threat of the city is expressed in terms of horizontal movements (encircle, not departing), the "trouble" visited upon the persona moves vertically (to bring upon, to fall on, to overwhelm). The topography of violence thus controls the space from which there is no escape.

In Hebrew, "city" has a feminine gender and is often personified as a woman. Daughter Zion, virgin Jerusalem, and whore Babylon are only some examples of this association. This linkage of the "I" with city, on the one hand, and city with

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woman, on the other, supports the supposition that the subject of Psalm 55 is a woman. The verb "to surround, to encircle" *(sbb)* also indicates this. In psalms of lament, the action of this word highlights the threat of violence, the terrible scale of violence, and the helplessness of the one who prays (cf., e.g., Ps 17:11). Often the verb implies immense terror (e.g., Jer 6:25; Ps 31:13). In the context of war and militarism, that is, in that of the siege and conquest of a city, the verb means "to be surrounded by enemies" (Jer 4:17; 50:14-15). The word used in the Hebrew Bible to describe the results of such a conquest of the city is *šmm,* "to be destroyed"; its purpose is to describe the strategy of war that leaves the enemy with nothing but scorched earth (Jer 51:43). Interestingly, this word can mean something else in connection to women (cf. Isa 54:1; 62:4; Jer 50:12-13; Ezek 23:33). It stands parallel to "being barren" and "abandoned"; its opposite is "being married." This word *šmm* expresses the condition of Tamar, the raped daughter of the king, in 2 Samuel 13:20: "So Tamar remained, a desolate *(šmm)* woman, in her brother Absalom's house." Given that this verb describes devastated land and destroyed cities, in relation to Tamar it means the destruction of integrity and identity through rape. The topography of violence creates an intertextual linkage between the narrative of the rape of Tamar and this psalm of lament. Furthermore, the perpetrator is described as someone known and trusted (Ps 55:14-15[13-14]). The violence takes place in a geographical and emotional space known to the victim. From a contemporary perspective, this also supports the reading of rape, because the topography of closeness can be found in most rape cases. In approximately half of all rape cases, the perpetrator is known to the woman before the deed. The greatest danger for women lies in known perpetrators and in familiar settings.

But the psalm does not only name the terror, it also portrays alternative spaces, spaces against violence. The very fact that the psalm allows the violent experience to be articulated and the perpetrator(s) to be identified removes the suffering from its subjective singularity and isolation. The lament allows the victims to name the terror and violence and thus breaks the wall of silence that the victors erect around their victims. The texts of lament are always on the side of the victims, also on the side of the victims of sexual violence. They reveal violence, name it, make it heard, unmask the perpetrators, and the structures of violence are laid bare.

Even the passages that call for the end of the perpetrator(s) (vv. 15, 19, and 23) mirror the attempt to end the violence. In a situation of absolute powerlessness, the death of the perpetrator(s) seems to be the only way to end violence. But the death of the perpetrator does not have the last word. Trust in God creates a counterdiscourse that allows the powerless object of violence to reclaim her position as a subject and her identity. This happens in the wilderness, which is contrasted with the space of the city (vv. 6-8). These verses portray liberation as an unrealizable reality, but they offer a strategy of survival, namely, that of disassociation. The image of the dove flying to the wilderness for refuge is not integrated through word association with the rest of the psalm; it stands isolated. The dove-

desert image is to some extent disassociated. Disassociation means that feelings and the body are split from the "I" so that in situations of physical and psychological distress that have no chance of escape, a boundary between the "I" and the unbearable pain may be drawn. The imaginary flight of the dove to the desert also functions to prevent the destruction of the "I" to its uttermost depth. The image helps the "I" to survive the annihilating experience of violence without losing itself. The energy to articulate new images and to sketch new spaces in a situation of complete powerlessness corresponds to the "But I will trust in you" at the end of the psalm. What was only hinted at in verses 6-8, namely, finding a place of shelter, becomes more sure in this "But I will trust in you": God is on the side of the woman who prays. By claiming God as her advocate, the praying woman weaves God into the daily and nightly experience of violence against women. To refrain from the lament would mean to identify God with terror and violence. The loud and public lament could provide the dove a real refuge, a place where not only survival but also life without threat, every day and every night, becomes possible. The lament in the name of the dove could be the beginning of liberation. The heading to Psalm 55 could thus be rephrased: the lament of a woman. To be spoken against silence (cf. Bail 1994; 1998, 160ff.).

Psalm 131 — Image(s) of Women

In an essay published in 1967, Gottfried Quell presented Psalm 131 as having been written by a woman: "It is a woman . . . who prays and thanks God in powerful simplicity for her good fortune" (Quell 1967, 184; cf. Seybold 1978, 37f.; Miller 1993, 244ff.; Farmer 1992, 142f.). For evidence he points to the imagery of verse 2b, which talks about a mother with a (her?) child. Quell's argument thus works with a biologically oriented image of womanhood, in which motherhood, womanhood, emotion, humility, and simplicity become interlinked (cf. Quell 1967, especially 178). His interpretive rendition of the sentence "I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me" (v. 1b) as "I am not drawn to theological and cultic reflection, I am completely uneducated" gives the psalm the air of a role model for women that seeks to keep them from intellectual reflection and sees their task in motherhood and child rearing (Quell 1967, 185).

Miller (1993, 244ff.) also thinks the author of Psalm 131 is a woman. The special experience of the relationship between mother and child can be seen as an image for the relationship between God and humans, a relationship characterized by security, dependence, and humility. At the same time, Miller explains that women at that time were forced by the sociopolitical circumstances to be subordinate and humble. In Psalm 131 the woman who prays speaks of having calmed and quieted the dynamics of her life and says that her heart is no longer haughty, her eyes are no longer raised up too high, and she no longer occupies herself with things too great

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and too marvelous for her. Behind this Miller sees a struggle against restrictive role models that want to keep women from engaging theological questions. But this expression of humility in the face of God's wonderful deeds comes from the same source that nourishes the intellectual traditions in the First Testament (cf. Prov 30:18; Job 42:1-6). It is a humble subordination before God and not before other people. Thus, Psalm 131 may be read as a prayer of hope and of trust in the God who accomplishes great and marvelous things (v. 1). Psalms are "songs of power and liberation but only as they praise the wonders of what God can do" (Miller 1993, 250).

But quite apart from the image of women reflected in this psalm — sketched as a mother with her child and as a potential pattern of behavior — one must ask: Can one take a literary piece of language and map it directly onto reality in order to deduce the gender of the author? Does it not rather depend precisely on what voice speaks the words of Psalm 131 and in what context?

In Genesis 18:14, what the messengers of God had to say to Sarah after she laughed in her tent about the promise of a son was: "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" God freed Sarah and Hannah (2 Sam 1–2) from their barrenness, which in the patriarchal family-oriented society implied that women were at the lowest end of the scale of values. In this context Psalm 131 could be read and interpreted analogously to Hannah's song of liberation and of a just social order. Another voice is suggested by Rienstra, who gives Psalm 131 a new heading: "This might be a prayer of a woman scholar and professor" (Rienstra 1992, 138). The image of women in this psalm changes according to the different ways of reading: it can be seen as limiting women or as liberation.

Images of the Womb and Birth

Noticeably often we find descriptions of women giving birth in the language of the Psalms in order to put into words experiences of pain, terror, and fear (e.g., Pss 48:6; 55:4; 77:16; 97:4). In Psalm 7:14 someone conceives evil and bears mischief; in Psalm 58:8 those who bring injustice into the country are compared to a miscarriage. At the same time, the metaphor of the mother's womb is used to express the wonder of human birth and of being human. God knits a human being in the womb (139:13), acts like a midwife (22:9 and perhaps 71:6). Human existence is considered "from the womb" onward (58:3; 71:6). Even creation is described as a birth (90:2), and with his voice God creates new life (29:7-8). God is responsible for conception, pregnancy, and birth; he opens and closes the womb (cf. 1 Sam 1:5-6; Gen 16:2; 29:31; 30:22; Isa 66:9).

Words like *raḥămîm* ("mercy"; plural of *reḥem*: "womb") and *raḥûm* (merciful) are derived from the word *reḥem*, "womb." Both words speak of the ability to empathize and show pity, and are used to express God's mercy. The pithy confessional assertion given in Exodus 34:6 as a self-proclamation of God: "The LORD,

the LORD, a God merciful *(raḥûm)* and gracious *(ḥannûn),*" is taken up in the Psalms (cf. Pss 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 145:8; Schüngel-Straumann 1996, 64-65). For those who are threatened and marginalized by society (Pss 116:5-8; 106:46), the God of Israel is one of mercy and grace (6:5[4]; 116:5). That the word "mercy" has an echo of a women-specific experience in Hebrew is suggested by Psalm 77:9 (cf. also Ps 40:11), where the question is raised whether God has shut up his compassion *(rāḥamîm)*. The phrase "to open/close the womb" *(reḥem)* describes birth and infertility (cf. 1 Sam 1:5-6; Gen 16:2; 29:31; 30:22; Isa 66:9). Similarly, Psalm 119:77, linking mercy and life, alludes to this.

Today, where pregnancy is available via technological means and a woman's womb is in a certain sense a public place, one has to ask critically whether the discourse of birth and the womb, including the discourse about God, does not offer a liberation perspective for women.

God's Solidarity with the Poor and Widows

In Psalm 68:5 God is called the protector of widows, and in Psalm 146:9 he takes care of them. In both instances they are mentioned in the same breath as orphans; in the latter they are mentioned at the same time as strangers. This actualizes the social law of Exodus 22:20-23. Widows, orphans, strangers, and the wretched/poor are under God's protection, and he extends his solidarity to them. Their cry for help in oppressive situations (see Ps 94:6) is heard and answered by God. In the Psalms, those marginalized by society and pushed to the margins of life, or those threatened by the powerful and violent, are called needy or wretched *(ʿānî)*. It is not probable that those would only be men. God's solidarity with the needy is expressed in multiple ways in the First Testament (e.g., Pss 10:17; 12:5; 14:6; 22:24; and elsewhere; Jer 22:16; Isa 41:17; Gen 16:11; 29:32; Exod 2:23f.; 3:17; Deut 26:7; etc.). It is one of the fundamental experiences of the First Testament that God hears the cry out of the depth of misery and that he reassures the destitute of his presence and helps them out of their misery. We find many passages in the First Testament that speak of the distress of women (poverty, sexual violence, life in a foreign country, widowhood, difficult births, barrenness, being captured in wartime, etc.): to all these the word *ʿānî* can be applied.

In this sense the Psalms can readily function as prayers of hope for women, perhaps in the way that Flora Wanders initiates a dialogue between her own words and those of the psalm (see Kix 1996, 77):

> Hoping?
> My soul
> an abyss,
> deeper than deep . . .

There is nothing any more.
Life frozen,
dried up
dead?

Nothing but
emptiness,
solitude
ruins.

Hoping —
for what?!

"God,
you are my God, I search for you.
My soul thirsts for you,
my whole being
yearns for you
in a dry and weary land, where
there is no water.

My soul
clings to you;
Your right hand
holds me."
(Psalm 63:1 and 8)

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