Pleading Poverty (or Identifying with the Poor for Selfish Reasons): On the Ideology of Psalm 109

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ABSTRACT

In this article the popular view that the "voice of the poor" is expressed in the Psalms (the so-called Armenfrömmigkeit) is challenged. Although the psalms contain many references in which a positive concern for the extremely poor are expressed, this is not always the case. Psalm 109 is discussed as an example in which the supplicant identifies with the poor for his own interest. It is argued that the reader of the psalms should not merely accept that all references to the poor in the psalms could (from a hermeneutical perspective) positively be appropriated. "Pleading poverty" to selfishly justify feelings of enmity should be exposed in the psalms—not only for honesty's sake, but also for the sake of the really poor.

A INTRODUCTION

In Psalm 109:31 it is stated that God "stands at the right hand of the poor" (בְּיִרְיָטֵמֹד לִימֵין אֶבְיִוֹן). Throughout the Tanach, in all the corpuses of literature, the view is found that God champions for the poor. In the Pentateuch there are specific context-related prescriptions on how human beings should comply with God's love for the poor (e.g. in the Covenant Code: Exod 21:1-11; 22:21-24; 22:25; 22:25-27; 23:2,6; 23:1; in the Holiness Code: Lev 19:10; 19:13,15; 25; in the Deuteronomic Code: Deut 15:1-18). In the prophetic literature (especially Amos and Micah) the rich and the political and religious leaders are chastised for not caring for the poor. Many proverbs also emphasise God's

¹ Cf. Ulrich Berges, "Armoede en haar bestrijding in de wetten van het Oude Testament," *Tijdschrift voor Theologie*, 40/3 (2000): 227-250; Eben H. Scheffler, "Pro the Poor in the Pentateuch," in *The Bible and the Eradication of Poverty. Tutorial Letter OTS2604/501/3/2010* (eds. Eben H. Scheffler & Schalk W. van Heerden, Pretoria: Unisa, 2010), 46-60 and Eben H. Scheffler, "Deuteronomy 15:1-18 and poverty in (South) Africa," in *A critical study of the Pentateuch* (eds. Eckart Otto

& Jurie H. Le Roux, Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005), 97-115.

² Schalk W. van Heerden, "Poverty and prophetic critique," in *The Bible and the Eradication of Poverty. Tutorial Letter OTS2604/501/3/2010* (eds. Eben H. Scheffler & Schalk W. van Heerden, Pretoria: Unisa, 2010), 73-90.

empathy with the poor.³ The story of Naboth's vineyard represents a well-known example from the Deuteronomistic history,⁴ whereas Nehemiah 5:14-19 is a classic text from the Chronicler.⁵

There is also reasonable consensus that the terms usually used for "poor" in the Hebrew Bible (*dal, ani, ebjon* and *dasj*)⁶ usually refer to "the poor" as those in society who are materially destitute, not having the basic means for survival.⁷

Coming to the Psalms the matter becomes more complex. Since 1892 when Rahlfs wrote his "Ani und 'Anaw in den Psalmen," there has been a debate on whether the poor in the psalms refer to a specific group or party in ancient Israel whose voice we hear in the psalms. In about 50 of the 150 psalms the poor are indeed referred to, a fact which seems to make such a view quite attractive.

Since Mowinckel's work, which refers to the poor in the psalms as the "Opfer ihrer Feinde," the view of the poor as a specific party is no longer tenable. Nevertheless the "romantic" idea of the Psalter as containing the voice of the poor (referred to in German as "Armenfrömmigkeit") is still with us, especially among those who take the plight of the poor in our contemporary world to heart. 10

³ Izak J. J. Spangenberg, "Poverty in Israel's wisdom literature," in *The Bible and the Eradication of Poverty. Tutorial Letter OTS2604/501/3/2010* (eds. Eben H. Scheffler & Schalk W. van Heerden, Pretoria: Unisa, 2010), 101-120.

⁴ Elelwani Farisani, "The Naboth's vineyard story (1 Kings 21) and poverty eradication," in *The Bible and the Eradication of Poverty. Tutorial Letter OTS2604/501/3/2010* (eds. Eben H. Scheffler & Schalk W. van Heerden, Pretoria: Unisa, 2010), 61-72.

Antonius H. Gunneweg, *Nehemia* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1987), 90-93.

These terms (and some others in the text) are transcribed here for the benefit of the reader not versed in Hebrew.

For a brief discussion of these terms and their "literal" and "metaphorical" usage in the Hebrew Bible with emphasis on the psalms, see Alphonso Groenewald, *Psalm 69: Its Structure, Redaction and Composition.* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2003), 147-153, and Eben H. Scheffler, "Defining Poverty," 7-8.

⁸ Alfred Rahlfs, 'Ani und 'Anaw in den Psalmen (Gütersloh: Dieterichsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1892); See also Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theologie der Psalmen* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979), 188-189.

Siegfried Mowinckel, *Psalmenstudien: Buch I-VI* (Amsterdam: Verlag P. Schippers, 1961 [1921-1924]), quoted in Kraus, *Theologie der Psalmen*, 189.

According to Groenewald, *Psalm 69*, 149 "Armenfrömmigkeit" (which he translates as "piety of the poor") manifests itself in the redaction of the Psalter, thereby becoming a "theology of the poor."

The purpose of this article is not to undermine the appropriation of the Bible which should serve the eradication of poverty. I count myself also as one who earnestly desires that the suffering of the poor should be ameliorated, and although the spirit is willing and the flesh weak, I think I have written enough in the past to make my sentiments clear. However, if one investigates the biblical material, especially the psalms, one should as a Bible scholar be honest and not make the text say what it does not say. I have therefore to state at the outset that to my mind the psalms, although positive views to the benefit of the poor may be expressed, *in no instance reflects the voice of really poor people who are materially destitute*.

There is a simple argument that justifies this statement. The psalms were written by people who could write, and really poor people (in ancient Israel even more than today) could not read or write. They were *analphabetic*. This basic insight is often lost sight of by well-meaning scholars or interested groups who want the poor to have a voice in the Bible, who want to hear them speaking in the psalms. These scholars are not confined to social minority circles but include those from a wealthy background who want to engage in the plight of the poor. Neither do the positive views expressed to the benefit of the poor in the psalms represent the "voice of the poor." They are elitist voices (of the writing class) that took the plight of the poor to heart.

Of course in the Psalter a concern for the fate of the poor is expressed, and there are indeed a variety of psalms in which supplicants refer to themselves as "poor and needy" (עָבִי וְאֶבְיוֹן). However, it is a question whether these supplicants are really poor, or are they not identifying themselves with the poor and the needy for other purposes? Before investigating this possibility by analysing Ps 109, for the sake of relief, brief attention should be paid to the variety of views on poverty that we encounter in the psalms.

B THE POOR IN THE PSALMS: A VARIETY OF VIEWS

To do justice to the concept of poverty in the psalms, it should be realised that the concept is varied. The attempt, amongst others by Kraus, to bring all these views and functions of the concept under one umbrella, seems to be uncalled

See Eben H. Scheffler, "The social ethics of the Lucan Baptist." *Neotestamentica*, 24 (1990), 21-23; *Suffering in Luke's Gospel*. (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1993), 60-69; "Deuteronomy 15:1-18 and poverty in (South) Africa" and various contributions of various other biblical scholars in *The Bible and the Eradication of Poverty*. The latter is a module specially developed at Unisa, emphasising the variety of perspectives on poverty in the Bible in an effort to empower students in their study of the Bible to adopt modes of thinking that will contribute to the eradication of poverty in their respective communities and the world at large. A practical opportunity, where students, whether they are affluent or poor, can become involved in concrete situations of poverty, is also envisaged.

for.¹² According to Kraus, the poor in the psalms are those who are *materially* poor on the one hand, but who are also in need of *justice* to be done to them by God on the other hand.¹³ Although these aspects this indeed covers a wide spectrum, to my mind Kraus's comments do not reflect the kaleidoscopic variety of the functions of the concept "poor" in the psalms. In what follows, I will provide a brief overview of this variety of perspectives, after which closer attention will be paid to Psalm 109 as a specific instance of how the poor often function in the psalms.¹⁴

1 The king caring for the poor

As in the wider ancient Near Eastern world, the motif that the *king should care* for the poor is poetically and with emphasis expressed in Psalm 72. The king had to judge the poor (שָנֵי) of the people fairly and had to save the *children* of the needy (72:2,4). The king should have pity on the poor who cry for help and rescue them from oppression and violence (72:12-14). Terms used for poverty are אֵין־עֹזֶר לְוֹ and אֵין־עֹזֶר לְוֹ (those with no helper). That justice should be done to the poor is prescribed in the Torah, ¹⁵ and in Psalm 72 the responsibility of the king (cf. also Psalm 45:5) in this regard is spelt out. ¹⁶

2 YHWH caring for the poor

In the psalms YHWH also assumes the role of the king in caring for the poor. That YHWH cares for the poor, in terms of justice being done to them, is already expressed in Psalm 9. He is a refuge (a stronghold, usually a high spot) for the oppressed (בְּשֵׁבֶּב לְבֶּרְ, 9:10) and makes inquisition for blood, remembering the cry of the poor (9:12). The same motif is repeated in verse 18 regarding the "poor" and the "needy." Numerous other psalms (e. g. 10:16-18; 12:6; 34:7; 68:6; 76:5-10; 103:6; 113:4-9; 132:13-17; 140:13; 145:14-16; 146:7-9) convey the similar idea of God as king doing justice to the poor.

3 God and the gods caring for the poor

A special and remarkable case is that of Psalm 82 where God's rule to the benefit of the poor is expressed in polytheistic terms. In the assembly of the

Kraus, *Theologie der Psalmen*, 188-193. Cf. also Groenewald, *Psalm* 69, 147-152.

¹³ Kraus, *Theologie der Psalmen*, 188-193.

¹⁴ See Nobert Lohfink, *Die Armen in den Psalmen. Teil I & II* (Vorlesungsmanuskript Wintersemester 1992-1994, Frankfurt am Main: Hochschule Sankt Georgen).

¹⁵ See footnote 1 above.

Nehemiah 5 (especially verses 14-19) portrays (in the post-exilic context of Yehud) how Nehemiah as governor acted in an unselfish way to the benefit of the poor amongst his people. See Gunneweg, *Nehemia*, 90-93; Wilhelm Rudolph, *Ezra und Nehemia samt 3. Ezra* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr), 131-133.

gods,¹⁷ God reprimands the "gods and sons of God" (אֱלֹהָים וּבְנֵי עֶּלְיוֹן), the latter having the responsibility for maintaining justice in the face of corruption and injustice that favours the godless. They are admonished to take up the cause of the poor and the fatherless (שְׁבִּי וְנָתְיֹם עָנִי וְנָשׁ הַצְּדִיקוֹ), and they should rescue the poor (dal we ebjon) from the hands of the godless (vv. 2-4). In the last verses of the psalm it is predicted that the gods will die like men, probably for not doing justice (v. 7). The polytheism is thereby terminated, leaving God to rule alone over the nations.¹⁸

4 A descendant of David caring for the poor (Zion theology)

In Psalm 132:15 the needs of the poor are addressed in terms of Zion theology. Yahweh will rule through a descendant of David (verses 11, 14) and that rule consists (amongst others) in the fact that he will abundantly bless her (the city Zion = Jerusalem's) provision (צֵּידָה) and will satisfy her poor with bread (צֵּידָה). In psychologist Maslow's theory, higher and lower order needs will therefore be satisfied. Here one sees clearly that although other needs (what can be regarded as "spiritual needs" are given due attention in Zion theology) the basic need for food (avoiding extreme or killing poverty) is still addressed.

5 God (YHWH) as unjust crusher of the poor

Interesting (and often avoided by pious Bible readers) is the idea also expressed in some psalms that God, who generally functions as the saviour of the poor, is also interpreted as the "unjust crusher" of the pious poor. In Psalm 88 there is no positive outcome, and the cause of the petitioner's suffering is not attributed to the enemy, but to God: the petitioner accuses YHWH of crushing him by his anger (88:14: "Why have you cast off my soul?") and destroying him by his terrible attacks (88:16-19, cf. also psalms 51:8; 22:1 [the famous "my God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?"]; 78:31-35, 61-64; 79:5; 89:38-45; 90:7-9; 102:3-11, 23).

6 Ordinary people caring for the poor

References where *ordinary people are encouraged to care for the poor* are not a characteristic feature of the psalms, though not totally absent. In Psalm 41:1-3

For a discussion of the "Rat der Götter," see Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen 64-150* (4. Aufl. Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972), 571.

For a discussion of the psalm as an answer to the question why the poor should suffer (the theodicy problem) see Artur Weiser, *Die Psalmen*. (7th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 379-382.

Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) distinguishes between (1) physiological, (2) safety, (3) love, (4) self-esteem and (5) self-fulfilment needs. The first two can be regarded as lower order needs and the last three as higher order needs. See also Eben H. Scheffler, "Defining poverty," 9-10.

those that are concerned for the poor are promised help when they themselves would require it. In Psalm 112 the pious person who gives generously to the needy is praised and pronounced blessed and in Psalm 74:19-21 the poor and needy people are prayed for.

7 The supplicant as the spiritually poor (Armenfrömmigkeit) or "pleading poverty"?

The notion of spiritualising or theologising the poor (Armenfrömmigkeit) seems to occur in the psalms (cf. the many cases where the petitioner refers to himself as "poor" and "needy," [בי־עני ואביון]), but this fact does not neutralise the basic economic meaning of the terms for poverty. It represents the metaphorical use of the terms in view of other possible needs that crave for fulfilment. The Armenfrömmigkeit that developed amongst relatively well-off people can perhaps be best understood in terms of the latter. But is this "piety of the poor" really so pious?

In the psalms the supplicant on numerous occasions designates himself or herself as poor in view of the dangerous threat of the enemy. ²⁰ In such cases the petitioner is not necessarily materially poor, but identifies with the poor to receive God's rescue and help which the latter usually gives to the poor. In Psalm 70 (repeated in Ps 40:13-17) the petitioner prays that God will disgrace his enemies; he himself being weak and helpless (בי־עני ואביוֹן), he should be helped by YHWH (cf. also Pss 9; 18; 22; 23; 25; 35; 41; 68; 70; 74; 86; 102; 109:16.

This motif of being at odds with the enemy is most acutely expressed in an individual lament, Psalm 109.²¹ The petitioner refers to himself as poor and needy, pleading extreme poverty (cf. 109:22 and 24: "I am poor and needy," "my knees are weak from lack of food, I am nothing but skin and bones.") His hatred for the enemy is vengefully expressed against the enemies whom God should crush: the enemy's children should become orphans and homeless beggars, the enemy must lose all his property, his offspring should die and, because of his persecution of the poor, he should perish without blessings and be cursed (109:6-19). God's championing for the needs of the poor in this psalm seems clearly to be expressed only in inclusive terms (self-interest). A closer look at this psalm follows below.

To summarise: In the psalms (1) the king should care for the poor, (2) God cares for the poor, (3) God and the gods care for the poor, (4) a descendant of David will care for the poor, (5) God crushes the poor, (6)

Kraus, Psalmen 64-150, 746

Due to the contemporary social stratification in ancient Israel the author was most probably male. Hence the use of male pronouns in the rest of this article.

ordinary people should care for the poor and (7) the concept of the poor is used in a *metaphoric* sense.

C PSALM 109: PLEADING POVERTY IN THE FACE OF THE ENEMY

1 Translation of Psalm 109²²

Ps 109

Ps 109

(a) The situation of the (a) The situation of the supplicant (1-5) supplicant (1-5)

For the director of music. Of David. A psalm.

י אַל־תַּחֵרָש: O God, whom I praise, do not remain silent,

בּי פָּי רָשָּׁע וְפִּי־מֻרְמָה עָלַי פָּתְחוּ 2 for wicked and deceitful men have opened their mouths against me;

:דְּבַּרְוּ אִׁתִּי לִשְׁוֹן שֵׁקֵר they have spoken against me with lying tongues.

With words of hatred they surround me; ³ With words of hatred they surround with words of hatred they surround me;

:וַיָּלְחַמְוּנִי חָנֵם they attack me without cause.

ות־אַהַבְתִי יִשְּׂטְנוּנִי 4 In return for my friendship they accuse me,

:וַאָנִי תְפִּלְה

אוֹבֶה טּוֹבְה טּוֹבְה זַיִּשְּׁימוּ עָלַי הְעָה הַּחַת טוֹבְה 5 They repay me evil for good,

מחת אַהַבְחֵי: and hatred for my friendship.

(b) Imprecation against the enemy (6-20) enemy (6-20)

הַפְּקֵד עָלְיו רְשֶׁע ⁶ Appoint an evil man to oppose him;

וְשְׁטְּוֹ יַעֲמְד עַל־יְמִיגְוֹ: let an accuser stand at his right hand.

אַ רְשֵׁע רְשֵׁא רְשֵׁע ⁷ When he is tried, let him be found guilty,

and may his prayers condemn him. וֹּתְפַּלְּתוֹ תִּהְיֶה לַחֲטָאֵהּ:

אַנְטָים מְעַטָּים ⁸ May his days be few;

:בְּקרׁנוֹ יֵקּח אַחָר may another take his place of leadership.

:יְהְיוּ־בָּגֵיו יְתוֹמֶים וְאִּשְׁתּוֹ אַּלְמְגֶה ⁹ May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow.

¹⁰ May his children be wandering beggars; וְּנִישִׁ יְנִוּעוּ בְּנֵיִי 10 may they be driven from their ruined homes.

²² The translation followed is mainly that of the NIV, with minor changes made by myself.

יְנַקָּשׁ וְוֹשֶׁה לְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־לְוֹ 11 May a creditor seize all he has; וְיָבְזוּ זְרֵים יְגִיעוֹ: may strangers plunder the fruits of his labour. אַל־יְהִי־לוֹ מֹשֵּׁדְּ חֱסֶד 12 May no-one extend kindness to him ָוְאַל־יְהָי חוֹנֵן לִיתוֹמֵיו: or take pity on his fatherless children. 13 לְהַכְּרֵיתִ לְּהַכְּרֵיתִ אַחֲרִיתִּוֹ לְהַכְּרֵית May his descendants be cut off, בָּדוֹר אֵׁהֶר יָמֵח שָׁמֵם: their names blotted out from the next generation. יוֹברן עוֹן אבתיו אל־יהוה ¹⁴ May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before Yahweh; וָחַטָּאת אָמוֹ אַל־תִּמָח: may the sin of his mother never be blotted out. יהיו נגד־יהוה תּמִיד 15 ¹⁵ May their sins always remain before Yahweh, וְיַכְרֵת מֵאֶבֶץ זְכְרֶם: that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth. רַכְּעָ אָשֵׁרן לְאׁ זָכַרְ עֲשָׂוֹת חֵסֶד וֹלָאַ זָכַרְ עָשָׂוֹת חֵסֶד ¹⁶ For he never thought of doing a kindness, וַיִּרְדִּׁף אִישׁ־עָנִי וֲאֶבְיוֹן וְנִכְאֵׂה לֵבַּב but hounded to death the poor and the needy and the broken-hearted. יוֹיֵאֵהַב קַלָּלָה וַתִּבוֹאֵהוּ ¹⁷ He loved to pronounce a curse - may it come on him: וְלֹאִ־חָפֵּץ בִּבְרָכָה וַתִּרְחַק מִמֶּנוּ: he found no pleasure in blessing - may it be far from him. וֹיִלְבֵּשׁ קַלָּלָה כְּמַׁדִּוֹ ¹⁸ He wore cursing as his garment; וַתָּבָא כַמַּיִם בִּקָרַבָּוֹ וְכַשֵּׁמֵן בִּעַצְמוֹתֵיו: it entered into his body like water, into his bones like oil. יעטה בּבֵגד יַעְטֵה 19 ¹⁹ May it be like a cloak wrapped about him, וֹּלְמֵׁזֵח תַּמֵיד יַחָגְרֵה: like a belt tied for ever round him. יהֹוָה פָּעַלֵּת שִׂטְנֵי מֵאֱת יִהֹוָה 200 ²⁰ May this be Yahweh's reward to my accusers, והדברים דע על־נפשי: to those who speak evil of me.

Prayer for deliverance of c the supplicant

Prayer for deliverance of the supplicant

יָהְוֶה אֲדֹנִי עֲשֶה־אֶתִי לְמֵעַן ²¹ וְאָתָה וְיִהֹוֶה אֲדֹנִי עֲשֶה־אֶתִי לְמֵעַן ²¹ You, Yahweh my Lord, deal well with me for שָׁמֶּדְּ your name's sake; בִּי־טְוֹב חַׁסְדְּדְּ הַצִּילֵנִי: out of the goodness of your love, deliver me.

בּי־עָנֵי וְאֶבְיִוֹן אָנָכִי מָנֵי וְאֶבְיִוֹן אָנָכִי ²² For I am poor and needy,

וְלִבִּי חַלֵל בִּקרבֵי: and my heart is wounded within me

23 בצל-בנטותו נהלכתי ²³ I fade away like an evening shadow:

:נְגַעַרְתִּי כֵּאַרְבֵּה I am shaken off like a locust. בְּרְבֵּי כָּשְׁלְוּ מִאַוֹם בִּיּ ²⁴ My knees give way from fasting; יוֹבְשָּׂרִי כְּחֲשׁ מִשְּׁמֶן: my body is thin and gaunt. רַפָּה לָהֶם הָיִיתִי הָרָפָּּה לָהֵם 2⁵ ²⁵ I am an object of scorn to my accusers; יָרְאוּנִי יִנִיעָוּן רֹאשָׁם: when they see me, they shake their heads. יהוה אלהי יבורני יהוה ²⁶ Help me, Yahweh my God; :קּוֹשִׁיעֲנִי כְחַסְדֵּךּ: save me in accordance with your love. יתוה עשיתה: זאת אַתָּה יְהוָה עַשִּיתָה: ²⁷ Let them know that it is your hand, that you, Yahweh, have done it. יַקַלְלוּ־הֶמֶה וְאַתֵּה תְבַּבֶּךְ 28 ²⁸ They may curse, but you will bless; קַמוּן וַיָּבשׁוּ וַעַבְדְּךְ יִשְּׁמֵח: they attack but will be put to shame, and your servant will rejoice. יִּלְבִּשְׁוּ שׁוֹטְנֵי כִּלְמֵּה 29 ²⁹ My accusers will be clothed with disgrace ּוְיַעֲטְוּ כַמְעֵיל בָּשְׁתְּם: and wrapped in shame as in a cloak. יֹהְוֶה מְאִׂד בְּפֵי אֹנֹדֶה יְהֹוֶה ³⁰ With my mouth I will greatly extol Yahweh; וּבְתָוֹדְ רַבִּים אֲהַלְלֵנוּ: in the great throng I will praise him. וֹיבֶעָמִד לִימֵין אֶבִיוֹן אָבִיוֹן אָבִיוֹן ³¹ For he stands at the right hand of the needy one, לָהוֹשִּׁיעַ מִשֹּׁפְטֵי נַפְש to save his life from those who condemn him.

2 Remarks on the structure of Psalm 109

There exists consensus that this psalm is an individual or personal lament,²³ but as for the rest, it is not without many problems of interpretation. The psalm can be divided into three sections:

- (a) The situation of the supplicant (1-5)
- (b) An imprecation against the enemy (6-20)
- (c) Prayer for deliverance of the supplicant (21-31)

2a The situation of the supplicant (1-5)

Verse 1a being the superscription, in the actual psalm (verses 1b-5) the supplicant states his case before God that he has been treated extremely unjustly: his enemy has returned his love with hatred.

On the basis of verse 1b and 30-31 Kraus, *Psalmen 64-150*, 746, nevertheless concludes: "Diese Klage tendiert jedoch hin zum Dank und Lob." See also Weiser, *Die Psalmen*, 474; Willem S. Prinsloo, "The Psalms," in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (eds. James D. G. Dunn & John W. Rogerson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 417 and Cyril S. Rodd, "Psalms," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (eds. John Barton & John Muddiman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 396.

2b Imprecation against the enemy (6-20)

In verses 6-20 the most severe imprecation against the enemy follows:

- i) It is wished that the enemy should lose his *court case*, no justice should be done to him (6-7)
- ii) The enemy should lose his *job* (8)
- iii) The enemy should *die*, vividly expressed indirectly by stating that his children should be orphans, his wife a widow (9)
- iv) His children should go *hungry* and become beggars, all his property should be lost (10-11)
- v) His children should not be pitied, they should die themselves in order that the enemy should have no offspring and *memory* (12-13)
- vi) Even the memory of his ancestors should be negative and ultimately be eradicated from the earth (14-15).

No justice, no job, ultimately death, poverty and no memory are wished for the enemy and his children. The reason is given for this wished-for disastrous fate of the enemy: (ironically) he did not care for the poor (16-19). He did not show kindness. Therefore he should be surrounded and filled with a curse like the clothes that he wears. Virtually, he should become a curse. This is his just reward for accusing the supplicant (verse 20).

c Prayer for deliverance of the supplicant (21-31)

In the last section the supplicant turns to God and pleads that he should act on his behalf. He refers to himself as poor and needy (עָנִי וְאֶּבְיוֹן) and describes his plight. He is not only accused by his enemy, but even experiences material need. Because of his fasting his knees are weak (24).

The supplicant once more pleads to God that his enemy who curses him should be cursed and put to shame (29), while he, being blessed by God, will rejoice (28) and praise amidst many people (probably the congregation; 30). He appeals to the fact that God usually helps the poor and saves those who are unjustly condemned to death (31).

3 In search of the speaker of the imprecation of Psalm 109:6-20

Following Schmidt, and clearly to euphemise the impact of the hatred expressed towards the enemy in this psalm, Weiser and Kraus²⁴ interpreted the imprecation of verses 6-20 as the words of the accusers against the supplicant and not as the words of the supplicant himself. The main reason given for this interpretation is the change from the plural to the singular in the imprecation. In

See Weiser, *Die Psalmen*, 474-475; Kraus, *Psalmen*, 64-150, 746-747. This view is questioned by Helmut Lamparter, *Das Buch der Psalmen II: Psalm 73-150* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1965), 218-224.

verses 1-5, as well as in 21-31, the enemy is referred to in the plural, whereas he is referred to in the imprecation (6-20) in the singular.

I do not subscribe to this view, not only because it seems to be informed by the embarrassment caused if the supplicant uttered such hate-speech, but simply on the basis of the length of the supposed quotation. The reader (or hearer) becomes carried away (as it were) by the rhetoric of the imprecation and would soon lose sight of the fact that he or she reads the words of the enemy. In order to avoid this, the author of the psalm should not only have rendered a much shorter imprecation, but should have made it explicit that the speaker of the imprecation is the enemy and not the supplicant.

Kraus²⁵ attempted to avoid this solution by interpreting the יוּפְּטָלֵת שְׁטְנֵי v. 20 ("payment of my adversaries") as a "deed" ("Tat," "Vorgehen"). For this to make sense he had to omit מַאַת יְהֹנֶה ("from Yahweh") as an "erklärende Hinzufügung." This pushes the text too far, but even if Kraus would be correct (which is very unlikely), he cannot avoid the fact than in the final prayer for help (especially verses 28-29) the supplicant prays that his assailants would be put to shame, that they would be clothed with dishonour, that they should be wrapped in their own shame as in a mantle.

An intriguing irony reveals itself in this psalm. The supplicant regards himself as *poor and needy* in order to lay claim to God's favour as the one caring for the poor, but then he immediately wishes that his enemy should be poor and that his enemy's innocent children should die of hunger. In the enemies's case God should not act according to his usual caring for the poor: to the contrary, he should make them poor.

One cannot but conclude, if the generally positive attitude towards the poor in the Tanach is taken into account, that the supplicant's identification

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²⁵ Kraus, *Psalmen 64-150*, 747.

with the poor in Psalm 109 is done for reasons of self-interest. It is to be understood within the context of the supplicant's conflict with his enemies. Even if the enemies have done him injustice, he does not care for the suffering of the enemies' innocent families. To the contrary: he prays for their destruction.

This dynamic can be explained by a modern example. Almost every-body today would agree that Hitler waged an unjust war in the previous century. However, the English, when they bombed the city of Dresden in February 1945 when the war was virtually over, did not mind the terrible deaths and innocent suffering of innocent women and children when they created the "hell fire" in the city (as explicitly stated by them). Mentioning this serves to illustrate that "collective" and "corporate" thinking was not only a feature of ancient Israelite thought. Today people think and do the same when hatred for the enemy breaks loose.

4 Pleading poverty in the rest of the Psalter

Psalm 109 seems not to be unique in its identifying with the poor in view of the enemy. In what follows some other examples in the psalms where the same motif occur will briefly be noted. This serves to corroborate the thesis regarding Psalm 109 and to probe provisionally to what extent the author(s) of these psalms reveal a unified ideology or pattern of thought.

In *Psalm 9* disaster will strike the enemy (they and their memory will perish, endless ruin will overtake them, they will fall in the pit they have dug and return to the grave, cf. 9:4-7 16, 18), whereas the supplicant (wishing that Yahweh will strike the enemy with terror, cf. v. 21) experiences Yahweh as a refuge for the oppressed, not ignoring the cry of the afflicted (13) and the needy verse 19). Although not as long and extensive, the association with the poor is just as strong and the cursing of the enemy just as vehement as in Psalm 109.

Psalms 18 and 22 do not so much concentrate on the curse of the enemy, but on deliverance from the enemy's persecution (cf. 18:4,17,44; 22:17-22). Again the supplicant motivates this deliverance by Yahweh's "saving of the humble," 18:28) and listening to the cry for help of the "afflicted" (יַּשָׁ, 22:25). Even the popular Psalm 23 is not devoid of this motif: Yahweh prepares a table for the supplicant "in the presence of [his] enemies" (v. 5). In Psalm 25:18-19 the supplicant asks Yahweh not only to be merciful regarding his affliction and distress, but also regarding his sin. This creates an aura of piety, but in the very next verse his motivation becomes clear: "See how my enemies have increased, and how fiercely they hate me" (25:20).

Without any subtleness the supplicant of *Psalm 35* commences his petition directly by invoking Yahweh to fight for him (verses 1-3). Yahweh should act as his "salvation" and put his adversaries to shame (3-4). Again the

destruction wished for the enemy is vehement: they should be like chaff before the wind (5), their path should be dark and slippery (6), ruin should overtake them (8), they should be entangled in a net and fatally fall into a pit (8). This will make the supplicant rejoice (9), for Yahweh "rescues the poor and the needy" (מַצִּיל עֲנִי וְּאֶבְיֹוֹן, 10). There is no introspection on the side of the supplicant: his will and Yahweh's will totally overlap.

This motif also recurs in Psalms 40:13-17; 41; 68; 70 (repetition of 13-17); 74; 86 and 102.

D CONCLUSION: TOWARDS THE RELEVANCE OF PSALM 109

We have noted the attempt by exegetes to interpret Psalm 109 in such a way as to save its "respectability." Having now rejected such an interpretation, the question remains: Is there some relevance that can be derived from Psalm 109 for modern readers in their present-day contexts?

I would answer in the affirmative, but then the relevance cannot consist in positively identifying with this particular text and similar psalms (cf. discussion in section C4 above). Recognising the ethically sound thinking about poverty elsewhere in the psalms (cf. section B above), in this and similar cases the psalms should be viewed with a hermeneutic of suspicion. A few remarks can be made in this regard.

1 Of human nature and loving the enemy

Before judging the author (or supplicant) of Psalm 109 too harshly from the Christian tenet that one should love one's enemy, the wishes expressed in the psalm should be understood psychologically. Human beings have the capacity to love and hate. Freud was correct in arguing that *eros* and *thanatos* form part of our basic nature. To repress the tendency to hate, especially when one is wronged, is also not only an ideal that only commenced with Jesus of Nazareth and became a hall-mark of Christianity. It already existed in ancient Israel (cf. Exod 23:4-5,9; Lev 19:18; 2 Chr 28:12-15; Ps 133; Prov 25:21-22). The human yearning to live in *shalom* existed together with the tendency to fight and hate (e g Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-4). What some psalms (expressing the hate for

See Eben H. Scheffler, "War and Violence in the Old Testament," in *Animosity the Bible, and Us: Some European, North American and South African Perspectives.* (eds. John T. Fitzgerald, Fika J. Van Rensburg, and Herrie F. Van Rooy, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 12-14.

In *Drei Abhandelungen zur Sexualtheorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1961), Sigmund Freud makes the well-known distinction between *eros* (the sexual instinct) and *thanatos* (the death instinct), pointing to the interconnection between them. Cf. also Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (London: Abacus, 1972) for a reflection on the interconnectedness of sexuality, politics and the economy.

the enemy) do is to provide a *mirror* for feelings we often have but would not express in words. The test for this is not when we live normally in relative harmony with our fellow humans, but when we arrive in situations when we feel that we are unjustly treated or accused. The history of Christianity and its participation in bloody wars (e. g. not only the crusades of the 12th century but even "Christian nations" waging war against one another) should remind one that paying lip service to Jesus' command to "love the enemy" does not necessarily or easily alter human nature. What at least should be done, is to read Psalm 109 for what it is: deep feelings of hate and revenge against the rival (for which divine sanction is sought), and not an ideal to be strived for. As such the psalm can have a positive function: it assists in the diagnosis of the most evil thoughts of human nature, a diagnosis which is necessary before any cure can occur.

2 Caring for the poor does not spell selfish manipulation by the poor

From the above exposition of Psalm 109, one can learn that if people claim to be poor, it should not automatically be believed, but tested. Humans can (and indeed often do) claim to be poor, but with the sole purpose of manipulating their fellow human beings and (in their minds) even God. It should also be emphasised that such a manipulation need not occur on a conscious level. It can happen unconsciously, in other words while people firmly and honestly believe that they are the underdog. When their way of thought is pointed out to them, they will in all probability be indignant and on the defensive.

In our contemporary world (and South Africa is no exception!), it often occurs that the elite (leaders and other prominent figures) of liberated peoples of the third world still regard themselves as poor or "from previously disadvantaged groups" in order to receive material benefits and special positions to enrich themselves. Often these already empowered people exhibit no desire to act on behalf of the really poor, those "untouchables" who experience hunger on a daily basis. A critical reading of Psalm 109 can assist in exposing their ideology.

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