

“Oh, that I Had Wings Like a Dove...” Psalm 55 and Breaking the Silence about Violence against Women

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author looks at suffering in Ps 55 from the perspective of women as victims of sexual violence. The research problem and gap addressed concern residual questions regarding the world of the text and the setting of the lament in earlier stages of its redaction and composition. The discussion takes its inspiration from a reading of Ulrike Bail wherein the speaker of Ps 55 appears to be resorting to forms and contents of expression associated with the trauma of rape. In supplementary relation to this, a reader response approach is adopted aiming to show how a female persona as the projected narrator and her language of distress relate to conceptions of sexual assault. The study thus offers confirmatory findings from Ps 55 of how women use words and ways of lamentation to break the silence and seek to cope with the devastating physical and psychological effects of rape.

KEYWORDS: Psalm 55, suffering, reader-response, women, rape, lament

A INTRODUCTION

Within the second book of the Psalter (42-72), we encounter a collection of eight individual laments, i.e. Ps 52–59. The links between them have been established with associated research based on both stylistic and thematic criteria. Some of the overlapping motifs include accounts of enemies and persecution and metaphors of hostility and war.¹ In the middle of this grouping, Ps 55 nevertheless is an individual lament with a unique and independent character and a reputation for being notoriously difficult to analyse. This much is evident from the substantial amount of disagreement among commentators regarding various aspects of its interpretation.²

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¹ Frank–Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* (vol. 2 of *Psalms*; trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 3, 85.

² Hossfeld and Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, 85.

In this article, a gap in the research is noted with reference to one of the many residual research problems. More specifically, the research question, for which an answer will be proposed, concerns the setting of Ps 55.³ It would seem that Ps 55 provides no obvious "hooks" on which to hang the words of lament, the feelings of despair and the petitions to God.⁴ Whereas there is a general consensus among Psalm scholars that the psalms of lament bewail every conceivable human need or affliction, from illness and poverty to sin and abandonment by God, the objective of this study with reference to Ps 55 is to offer confirmatory remarks in support of remarks of a reading from the early nineties by the German scholar, Ulrike Bail. The corresponding theoretical argument is that in Ps 55 the implied setting of the narrator's evaluative point of view can be constructed as that of a sexually abused woman.⁵

The contribution of this study and its relation to Bail's interpretation can be ascertained in the way the suggestion is revisited and reread in conversation with contemporary debates on rape to gain a deepened understanding of the experiences of raped women, then and now.⁶ This approach to the setting of the Psalm does not purport, however, to reconstruct a historically identifiable particular instance of distress in the life of the real author in the world behind the text as the context of the psalm. Instead, the language of lament and the imagery used in the psalm is seen as borrowed from descriptions of such circumstances by the writer as a projection of a story-world about a devastated woman who suffered emotional and sexual violence from a trusted friend.

Of course, Ps 55 begins with a heading identifying David as the author and which was added during the redaction and compilation stages of the Psalter. Therewith a male figure is presented as the lamenting subject.⁷ On the working assumption that in the fictional literary world of the text reflected in the psalm, the speaker of the earlier version of the poem is an unnamed woman, this study's references to the subject praying the psalm will accordingly be to the third-

³ Ibid., *A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, 85.

⁴ Dirk J. Human, "Psalms en hulle Sitz(e) im Leben: Analise aan die Hand van Psalm 55 en 74," *SK* 18/2 (1998): 242–260, points out the virtual impossibility of determining the setting of Ps 55 due to its vague poetic formulation and lack of identifiable historical pointers.

⁵ Ulrike Bail, "'Vernimm, Gott, mein Gebet': Psalm 55 und Gewalt gegen Frauen," in *Feministische Hermeneutik und Erstes Testament* (ed. Hedwig Jahnow, Elke Seifert and Ulrike Bail; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994), 67–84. Translation: Ulrike Bail, "'O God Hear My Prayer': Psalm 55 and Violence against Women," in *Wisdom and the Psalms: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine; 2nd Series; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 242–263. Ulrike Bail, "The Breath after the Comma, Psalm 55 and Violence against Women," *JRA* (1999): 5–18.

⁶ See Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 22–25, 32.

⁷ See Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 3–4, on the process of "Davidizing" the Davidic Psalter (Pss 51–72).

person feminine singular (collective or individual), that is, to a "she."⁸ In addition, a second-order of reflection on the event is introduced by the reading of Ps 55 from a woman's perspective through the eyes of a woman praying the psalm.⁹

The hermeneutical framework supervening on the exegesis is a form of reader-response criticism involving the axiom that the meta-language of the reader plays an active role in the construction of contexts (itself not given) and therewith meanings. From this, it follows that a text like Ps 55 has always and will always be "seen" according to different interpretations and that each interpretation is authentic to the extent that it emerged from the reader's frame of reference. Regarding that of the present reader, the corresponding concern lies with the rampantly growing rape culture of our time.¹⁰

In sum, the discussion to follow will be limited to correlating and contrasting the selected parts of Ps 55 with present day real life issues. In doing so, the entire Psalm will not be scrutinised and not all relevant exegetical matters can be commented on. Regarding outline, several key themes will be noted, suggested as they are by certain questions the reader can use as points of orientation: What does sexual violence with reference to the speaker-as-a-violated woman in Ps 55 and women in general involve? What is the physical and psychological impact of rape on the female victim in Ps 55 and today? What role does the lament play in Ps 55 and today, in breaking the silence that settles over rape incidents? What parts of the Psalm can be highlighted and read in solidarity with women who have experienced, and continue to experience, violence from a man they know and trust?

B READING PS 55 AS A SEXUALLY ABUSED WOMAN'S LAMENT

1 The text in translation

¹ For the music master. With stringed instruments. A maskil. Of David.

² O God, hear my prayer,
and do not hide from my plea.

³ Attend to me and answer me.

I wander about in my despair, and I am beside myself

⁴ because of the shouts of the enemy, because of the pressure of the wicked.
Indeed they roll trouble upon me, and snorting with rage, they accuse me.

⁵ My heart quakes within me,

⁸ See Grohmann's exposition of Psalm 131 about a mother and child in which the mother is assumed to be the supplicant; Mariann Grohmann, "The Imagery of the 'Weaned Child' in Psalm 131," in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms* (ed. Erich Zenger; Leuven: Peeters, 2010).

⁹ Bail, "Hear My Prayer," 261.

¹⁰ Eryl Davies, *The Dissenting Reader: Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 103.

and the terrors of death have fallen upon me.

⁶Fear and trembling come over me,
and terror overwhelms me.

⁷And I said: Oh, that I had wings like a dove,
I would fly away and lie down.

⁸See, I want to flee to a far-off place and settle in the wilderness.

⁹I would hasten to my place of refuge away from the raging wind and storm.

¹⁰ Confuse, my Lord, divide their tongues,
for I see violence and strife in the city.

¹¹Day and night they make their rounds upon her walls,
and trouble and misery dwell in the midst of her.

¹²Corruption dwells in her heart,
and oppression and deceit are in her marketplace.

¹³Indeed, if an enemy were to taunt me, I would bear it,
if the one who hates me had set himself over me, I would hide from him.

¹⁴But it is you, my equal,
my intimate, my familiar friend,

¹⁵we kept pleasant company together,
we walked together in the crowd in the house of God.

¹⁶Let death overcome them, let them go down alive into Sheol;
for wickedness is in the heart of where they live.

¹⁷But I – I will call upon God, and YHWH will rescue me.

¹⁸Evening and morning and at midday I lament and groan,
and he will hear my voice.

¹⁹He will rescue my life in peace from the quarrel against me,
for many have surrounded me.

²⁰God will hear, and humble them,
he, who has been enthroned from the beginning of time,
for as for them,
they do not keep their word, and they do not fear God.

²¹He has lifted up his hands against his intimates,
he has violated his trust.

²²The words of his mouth are smooth as butter, but strife is in his heart.
His words flow more softly than oil, but they are drawn swords:

²³“Cast the burden of your fate on JHWH, and he will sustain you,
he will not allow the righteous to stumble forever.”

²⁴But you, O God, let them go down into the deepest pit,
these men of blood and deception,
will not live out half their days.
But as for me, I trust in you.

2 “No one hears my cries.” Rape in the context of Ps 55

Psalm 55 opens with an urgent petition for hearing in 55:2–3a; for in the praying woman’s isolation and loneliness, even God seems to be hiding from her. With repetitive intensity, she calls on God: “hear my prayer,” “do not hide yourself,” “pay attention,” “answer.” In 55:18, she reminds God: “I call, evening, morning

and noon I complain, I moan."¹¹ The depth of a rape victim's anguish can be heard in the description of her state of mind; she is beside herself and wanders about confusedly (55:3b); her heart flutters and she suffers the pangs of death (55:5). Overwhelmed by speechless fear and terror, she trembles like a frightened bird (55:6) for she has fallen prey to personal threats and accusations from a wicked enemy (55:4).¹²

Though the connotation of the concept is culturally relative, rape as a traumatic event has long been part of human experience, confirmed by the numerous rape narratives and passages even in the HB. Although it takes place in epidemic proportions on a global scale, silence and silencing are characteristic of approaches to sexual violence against women. Ancient rape stories exclude the female characters' voices and interpreters of rape texts minimise the rape with interpretations that either avoid the act or blame the victim.¹³

In contemporary legal terms, rape is the term for any form of forced or coerced sex.¹⁴ Studies have shown that it is primarily an act of violence, the most radical form of violence against women. Libido, the sex drive, is not the main cause for rape, the primary aim of the perpetrator is to subdue the victim, to control her, to break her will and use her as an object to feed his desire for power and bolster his masculine pride. The effects of rape on the victim are devastating. During and after the rape, due to extreme sexual humiliation, shame and guilt, and often by actual death threats, the woman experiences an acute loss of control over her life, her body and her voice. Du Toit explains: "In losing control over one's body functions, one is reduced to infancy, and therefore also to a pre-linguistic state."¹⁵ The victim reaches a point of self-alienation, resulting in a rift being torn between her emotions and her body; between herself and the trauma she suffers. In the face of such deep losses, her deepest need is for someone to

¹¹ Brian Doyle, "Where Is God When You Need Him Most? The Divine Metaphor of Absence and Presence as a Binding Element in the Composition of the Book of Psalms," in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms* (ed. Erich Zenger; Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 386.

¹² Most interpreters prefer to refrain from identifying the enemy. Cf. Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 78; Dirk J. Human, "Die Begrip 'Berit' in 'n Aantal Klaagpsalms: 'n Perspektief" (DD diss, University of Pretoria, 1993), 123 n. 223.

¹³ Frances Klopper, "Rape and the Case of Dinah: Ethical Responsibilities for Reading Genesis 34," *OTE* 23/3 (2010): 652–665; Joy A. Schroeder, *Dinah's Lament: The Biblical Legacy of Sexual Violence in Christian Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 238.

¹⁴ Louise du Toit, "A Phenomenology of Rape: Forging a New Vocabulary for Action," in *(Un)thinking Citizenship: Feminist Debates in Contemporary South Africa* (ed. Amanda Gouws; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 253.

¹⁵ Du Toit, "A Phenomenology of Rape," 264.

mourn with her, and more especially, to be heard when she does speak. "No one hears my cries," is the experience of many a raped woman.¹⁶

3 "But it is you." Acquaintance rape

In Ps 55, the relationship between the I-speaker and her former friend was more than a casual acquaintanceship—it was a close companionship. Verse 14, in which the praying woman speaks directly to the perpetrator, is central to understanding the psalm: "But it is you, my equal, my intimate, my familiar friend." These poignant words evoke closeness, shared experience and trust, a trust that includes mutual understanding, compassion and personal commitment.¹⁷ Whereas trust and commitment do not allow for violence in a relationship, it seems that the friend, now turned enemy, exploited the trust to achieve his goal: "He has lifted up his hands against his intimates, he has broken his trust" (55:21).¹⁸ The praying woman's grief and shame must be seen against her deceitful friend's breach of confidence and abuse of shared closeness.¹⁹ Can the plight of a woman who was raped by an acquaintance be recognised in the I-person's confusion and disorientation described in 55:3b–4? Can the accusations from the "enemy" be a case of blaming the victim?

Directly pertaining to Ps 55 is the fact that sexual violence takes on different forms, of which acquaintance rape is universally the most common. A woman is more vulnerable in a one-to-one relationship, for the man is a great deal more certain about his victim's silence.²⁰ Seventy-six percent of victims know their attackers, who could be family members, husbands or casual acquaintances.²¹ This kind of rape is often not recognised as a sexually violent act. In fact, acquaintance rape is not perceived as "real" rape since the rapist and victim presumably had a trusting relationship. The woman herself is often confused about the nature of the sexual encounter: Was it rape if she liked the perpetrator and she was not physically harmed in the process? Victims therefore suppress the memory of the incident and remain silent for fear of being disbelieved, continuing their lives without support.²² These are the victims who are frequently blamed for their lack of resistance or provocative behaviour and

¹⁶ Bail, "Hear My Prayer," 244.

¹⁷ Othmar Keel, *Feinde und Gottesleugner: Studien zum Image der Widersager in den Individualpsalmen* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1969), 134; Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 79, notes that poignancy like this is unusual, for it is rare in the psalms for anyone but God to receive the supplicant's direct speech.

¹⁸ Bail, "Hear My Prayer," 247.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 253.

²⁰ Gerlinde Baumann, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books* (Minnesota: Liturgical Books, 2003),

x.

²¹ Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 29.

²² *Ibid.*, 30.

dress. With an attitude of "she was asking for it," the public seeks justification for acquaintance rape.²³

4 Words as weapons: The identity of the perpetrator

From 55:4b, 13, 22–23 it is clear that the relationship was not only sexually abusive, as we shall see, but that the I–person had to endure extreme emotional violence in the form of verbal abuse.

^{4b}and snorting with rage they accuse me.

¹³Indeed, if an enemy were to taunt me, I would bear it,

²²The words of his mouth are smooth as butter,
but strife is in his heart.

His words flow more softly than oil,
but they are drawn swords:

²³"Cast the burden of your fate on JHWH, and he will sustain you,
he will not allow the righteous to stumble forever."

The praying woman finds herself threatened by verbal assaults in the form of "accusations" (55:4b) and "taunting" (55:13). The power of verbal abuse lies in the point that the charges against her are conducted in the form of lies. In 55:22, the perpetrator's manner of speech is described. His smooth hypocritical speech is referred to in metaphorical terms as a sharp sword that strikes like a murder weapon.²⁴ What are the words that flow more gently than oil but are intended to be deadly? These words appear in the next verse, 55:23, as a quotation uttered by the perpetrator: "Cast the burden of your fate on JHWH, and he will uphold you, he will not allow the righteous to stumble forever."²⁵ This is mockery directed at the "I" and since she does not believe the content of his words, nor trust the speaker, the statement is experienced as violence, as a drawn sword. The absolute powerlessness experienced by the praying "I" erupts in 55:10: "Confuse, my Lord, divide their tongues," whereby God is required to destroy the destructive power of the perpetrator's words, signified by the tongue as its instrument.²⁶

Verbal abuse today refers to the application of words to harm, punish or humiliate. This subtle form of violence is normally not taken seriously, as there is no visible proof and the abuser may have a perfect persona around others. However, words make potent murder weapons and the emotional harm and mental anguish created in the victim by lashing words can be more detrimental

²³ Schroeder, *Dinah's Lament*, 238.

²⁴ Keel, *Feinde und Gottesleugner*, 166.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 143–144, remarks that the challenge to cast care over one's own fate on YHWH has its closest parallel in Pss 22:7–8; 37:5.

²⁶ Bail, "Hear My Prayer," 256.

than physical abuse.²⁷ Having ascertained that the I-speaker endured verbal abuse in the relationship, how does the psalm indicate that sexual violence took place?

5 Sexual violence: The city as a place of violence

In Ps 55, the fear and violence experienced by the speaking "I" are compared to a besieged and defeated city.²⁸

^{10b}I see violence and strife in the city.

¹¹They surround it day and night on the walls
and trouble and misery dwell in the midst of her.

¹²Corruption (dwells) in her heart,
and oppression and deceit are in her marketplace.

In 55:10b–12, a typical Israelite city is depicted, complete with surrounding city walls and a marketplace on the central square. All is not well in the city. It is shown as a *place* of violence although no concrete city or act of violence is named. Instead, the city is populated with concepts acting like people.²⁹ Violence and strife surround the city on its walls (55:11) while trouble, misery, corruption, oppression and deceit occupy the marketplace, the heart of the city (55:12).³⁰

This image of the city defies the true function of a city, that of protecting its inhabitants by means of its defences. Walls normally enclose living space (in antiquity regarded as holy space) and keep out chaos and forces of evil.³¹ Walls also function as division of space, namely space on the inside and on the outside of the wall. The distinction between within and without is attacked in Ps 55, for the city has been corrupted from a place of protection to a space of threatening danger. The safe space no longer offers refuge; indeed, it no longer exists, for violence dwells at its heart.³²

The city is not only a place of violence it is also the *object* of violence. From 5:11, it can be seen that the city is the object of those who dominate it. In

²⁷ Cheryl Exum, "Murder They Wrote: Ideology and the Manipulation of Female Presence in Biblical Narrative," in *The Pleasure of Her Text: Feminist Readings of Biblical and Historical Texts* (ed. Alice Bach; Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), 54.

²⁸ Keel, *Feinde und Gottesleugner*, 8, 72, explains that in the ancient Near East, there is a preference for concepts that are in themselves concrete but that signify a reality larger than their concrete meaning. See also Bail, "Hear My Prayer," 248–250, 259–261.

²⁹ Bail, "Breath after the Comma," 10.

³⁰ Bail, "Hear My Prayer," 249; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 54.

³¹ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1987), 371.

³² For the interpretation of these images, I am indebted to Bail, "Breath after the Comma," 10–11.

5:3–6, the "I" speaks of herself as the object of violence. There is thus a connection between the literary "I" of the psalm, who puts her experience of violence into words and the conquered and occupied city. Both are exposed to violence and, in the face of violence, both are mere objects.³³ While the oppressive movements in the image of the city run horizontally (movement in the round on the city walls), the trouble to which the I–speaker is exposed in 55:4b–6 move in vertical lines ("trouble rolls upon me," "fear and trembling come over me"; "terror overwhelms me"), resulting in a picture of a closed space from which there is no escape, like a besieged and defeated city.³⁴ Violence dominates this space. The praying woman of Ps 55 implies that, like the defeated city, her own inner space, her body, has been invaded and robbed of its integrity and security since the limits of her body, like the walls of the city, have been assaulted.³⁵ Like the city, her body was captured, defeated, and plundered.

The points of contact between the city and the "I" of Ps 55 pick up the portrayal of other cities as women in the HB. Of these, the parallel between rape and the military defeat of a city is vividly attested in the book of Nahum where woman–city Nineveh is described as a sexually abused woman. A brief overview, from the perspective of the city, will further enlighten our understanding of the psalm.

6 The besieged city as a raped woman

The image of a city as female makes good psychological sense, for the city contains the inhabitants within her walls whom she nurtures, provides for and defends.³⁶ The prophets often personified cities as women in the HB. For example, the fate of woman–city Nineveh in the book of Nahum closely resembles the fate of the "I" in Ps 55. In Nah 3:4–7 the prophet predicts the downfall of Nineveh, the capital of the hated Assyria, the *Hexenmeisterin* which prostituted with other nations and afterwards violated the treaties between them. Her punishment would fit the crime—since Nahum had depicted Nineveh's treachery in terms of female sexuality, he found it fitting to depict its punishment in terms of sexual violence.³⁷ In 2:7, "[t]he gates of the rivers are opened," referring to the wet gates of a female body being opened, presenting a woman who stands unprotected against the onslaught of violence. In 3:5–6, she is taunted

³³ Bail, "Breath after the Comma," 11.

³⁴ Bail, "Hear My Prayer," 250; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2,53.

³⁵ Bail, "Breath after the Comma," 12; Majella Franzmann, "The City as a Woman: The Case of Babylon in Isaiah 47," *ABR* 43 (1995): 1–19.

³⁶ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 172.

³⁷ Frances Klopper, "'Nineveh Is in Ruins – Who Will Grieve for Her?' The Case of a Ravished City in Nahum 3:4–7," *OTE* 16 (2003): 621.

by the people, pelted with filth or dung, and eventually raped by God.³⁸ In Nah 2:10 the prophet describes the condition of woman-city Nineveh after her defeat as "pillaged, plundered, stripped," or, in Baumann's words, "*Leere – Entleerung – Verheerung*" (evacuated – emptied – devastated).³⁹ A more true description of the fate that befell the I-speaker in Ps 55 is hard to find.

7 Flight from violence: The desert as counterspace

The situation in which the praying "I" in Ps 55 finds herself has become unbearable. We have seen that the trauma of physical and sexual abuse, rape, verbal lashing, belittling and ridicule, cause crises in the victim about how to stay connected to the self and others. The victim can become radically divorced from parts of her very self when disconnection is forced as a strategy for survival.⁴⁰

⁷ And I said: Oh, that I had wings like a dove,
I would fly away and lie down.

⁸ See, I want to flee to a far-off place,
And settle in the wilderness.

⁹ I would hasten to my place of refuge away from the raging wind and storm.

In the turmoil of assaults and accusations rolling upon her, the praying "I" in Ps 55 plays with the thought of fleeing from the enclosed space of violence (55:7–9).⁴¹ She wishes that she could fly away into the desert to escape from the violence.⁴² She knows that flight from her situation will remain a wish ("Oh that I had wings ...") and that her place of refuge is a fictional place, but as a way to survive, in her mind, she turns herself into a dove to become disconnected from her situation and to find a new identity.⁴³ Psychologically this is a classic case of dissociative behaviour. Dissociation allows emotions to be split off and the body to be separated from the "I" so that a boundary can be imposed between the "I"

³⁸ Kloppe, "Nineveh Is in Ruins," 620. Gerlinde Baumann, *Love and Violence*, 209–213.

³⁹ Gerlinde Baumann, "Das Buch Nahum: Der gerechte Gott als sexueller Gewalttäter," in *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung* (ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker; Gütersloh: Chr Kaiser, 1999), 348.

⁴⁰ Ann O'Hara Graff, "Strategies for Life: Learning from Feminist Psychology," in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology* (ed. Ann O'Hara Graff; New York: Orbis, 1995), 129.

⁴¹ See Keel, *Feinde und Gottesleugner*, 185.

⁴² Felix Mendelssohn's musical setting of 5:7, "Oh for the wings of a dove" ("O könnt' ich fliegen") expresses the plaintive mood of a desperate person who wishes to escape from his/her circumstances.

⁴³ Bail, "Hear My Prayer," 251.

and the unbearable pain she suffers. It is a defence mechanism for survival, a way to rescue the self from disintegration.⁴⁴

The desert has varied connotations in biblical texts. It may be a place of death and chaos or it may be an asylum for outcasts and refugees like Hagar, Moses and others. The picture of the desert here is of a place of refuge – a counter-space to the city. Whereas in normal times, the city is a place of refuge where one can live safely and the desert is the place of death and hopelessness, these conditions have been reversed; the city has become unliveable and the desert provides the only hope for survival.⁴⁵

The role of the dove image becomes clear from Keel's observation that this dove is not a turtle dove nor is it a symbolic messenger of love, but a rock dove that lives in the niches and clefts of the Judean hills where it is out of reach from natural enemies.⁴⁶ The woman wishes to be inaccessible and cut off from people and interpersonal relations.

C LAMENT AS A MEANS OF GIVING VOICE TO THE VOICELESS

The word "lament" in English does not capture the relationship in Afrikaans and German between lament (*klaag*, or *Klage*) and accusation (*aanklag*, or *Anklage*), for lamenting is not only about self-pitying complaints, it is also about protest addressed to God.⁴⁷ It refuses to settle for the status quo, reminding God that the human situation is unacceptable and that God must act.⁴⁸ In this way, Ps 55 offers to the raped woman a place where her fear can find expression and where she can deal with her experience in order to become whole again.

The kind of lament spoken in Ps 55 is indeed a form of mourning, not about death, but an existential wail from a woman who suffers from the inability to speak as a consequence of rape. Lament is the language of suffering and the function of the psalms of lament is to provide the means for its authors to bear

⁴⁴ James C. Coleman, James N. Butcher and Robert C. Carson, *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life* (London: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1980), 236–267.

⁴⁵ See Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 53.

⁴⁶ Keel points out that the motif of flight to the wilderness, like the sweep of a bird, has its closest parallel in Ps 11:1–3. See Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* (trans. Frederick J. Gaiser; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 103–106. The cooing of a dove often represents lament: "Its slave girls moan like doves and beat upon their breasts" (Nah 2:6).

⁴⁷ Denise M. Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 110.

⁴⁸ Frances Klopper, "Lamenting the Loss of Lament, the Language of Our Times," in *Exile and Suffering* (ed. Bob Becking and Dirk J. Human; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 236.

the unbearable and cope with suffering and injustice.⁴⁹ Laments make it possible for victims to name the fear and violence and to break the silence which victors have erected around them.⁵⁰ It is not merely a vehicle for emotional release – it is a multifaceted human emotion that speaks with political, social and religious voices; it calls God to account and at the same time it calls upon God for aid and relief; it accuses and it praises; it is deeply spiritual as well as subversive and political.⁵¹ The psalms of lament are also about trust that God is willing and able to come to the supplicant's assistance. Psalm 55 concludes with a bold statement of confidence in God's presence in spite of the praying woman's experience to the contrary: "But as for me, I trust in you" (55:24). These words are at the same time a challenge to God to act.

The praying woman of Ps 55 refuses to accept guilt and blame for the threatening situation in which she finds herself and in 5:2–3, she demands that God pay attention to her plight. The enemy is to blame and because God is supposedly the only one capable of defeating them, he too holds some responsibility.⁵² In fact, she displays enormous *chutzpah* by rebelling against her circumstances in a male-dominated culture where female sexuality belonged to men and rape was seen as a property violation.⁵³ Through the language of lament, she articulates her suffering in 55:3b–6 and in 55:14, she mercilessly unmasks the friend-turned-traitor by confronting him with his atrocious conduct.⁵⁴

Modern psychotherapy has long recognised the healing power of lament and mourning and that openly naming the horror of one's circumstances, expressing the pain of suffering and insisting that it be transformed can alleviate its impact on the sufferer. We need to cry, tears to flow, bodies to rock and to express our anger.⁵⁵ If anger is not verbalised, it is denied or becomes repressed. The psalms of lament provide an outlet for expressing anger at God and the perpetrator. This is an essential ingredient for moving forward in the grieving

⁴⁹ Claus Westermann, *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 89.

⁵⁰ Bail, "Breath after the Comma," 14.

⁵¹ Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 100. Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," *CBQ* 47 (1995): 401–402.

⁵² Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 80.

⁵³ Susan A. Ross, "Extravagant Affections," in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology* (ed. Ann O'Hara Graff; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 107.

⁵⁴ Bail, "Hear My Prayer," 253.

⁵⁵ Patricia L. Wismer, "For Women in Pain: A Feminist Theology of Suffering," in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology* (ed. Ann O'Hara Graff; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995) 154.

process, for the human psyche, unable to handle an overload of pain, eventually shuts down. Then one stops feeling and without feeling no healing is possible.⁵⁶

D CONCLUSION

In this article, it was argued that in Ps 55 we hear the lament of a woman who plaintively brings before God the experience of being sexually assaulted by a man close to her, in contemporary terminology, the voice of a woman who was acquaintance raped. Within this understanding, Ps 55 becomes one of the most heartfelt laments in the Psalter as it guides the reader through the experiences and emotions of sexually abused women. Moreover, when reading Ps 55 in its entirety from the perspective of the experience of women who have been raped, astonishing parallels appear. The psychological and emotional consequences of rape – such as depression, hopelessness, lack of self-esteem and damage to one's identity – closely resemble the feelings of the "I" person described in Ps 55. The features of closeness, the description of someone having been betrayed by a trusted friend, illustrated in 5:14, are also to be found in acquaintance rape instances. Against this background and by taking the *Klagen* and *Anklagen* nature of lament into account, it is quite possible to read Ps 55 as a lament about rape and an accusation against the perpetrator.

This psalm therefore, has the potential to demonstrate that liberation for rape victims can come from within. Raped women who may be sitting silently on the sideline of life, crushed, passive, submissive and marked for the rest of their lives, can refuse to remain silent, for silence, according to interpreters of rape texts, implies resignation and denial; it implies complicity. However, God is challengeable and so are the perpetrators of violence against women.

It is the hope of this article that the naming of biblical rape texts and the expression of discontentment with the violent status quo will inspire women to break the silence about rape. The alternative possibility is that "it will remain in the shadows and dark places where those who perpetuate sexual violence want it to remain."⁵⁷

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⁵⁶ Wismer, "Women in Pain," 156.

⁵⁷ Scholz, *Secret Witness*, 132.

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