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CONCORDIA SEMINARY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

THE FUNCTION OF THE QUESTIONS “HOW LONG?” AND “WHY?”
ADDRESSED TO GOD IN THE LAMENT PSALMS

A SEMINAR PAPER SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF SACRED THEOLOGY

BY

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ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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INTRODUCTION

“O God, how long will you be angry with me? My God, why are you so far from me?” Does a question always ask a question? Are there cases in which a question makes a statement, or expresses a state of mind or emotion, or seeks to persuade another? These questions help to highlight the interpretive issues related to certain types of questions in the lament psalms.

The issue under consideration in this paper is the meaning and purpose of the questions *How long?* and *Why?* addressed directly to God in the lament psalms. The psalms which contain these questions are a subset of the larger body of psalms classified as laments or prayers for help. These particular question-psalms are comprised of nine individual laments, five community laments, one each of a kingly lament and an individual lament in behalf of the community.¹ Of over one hundred and fifty questions in the entire Psalter, these psalms contain the majority of the questions addressed directly to God. The remaining questions are primarily leading questions or rhetorical questions not addressed to God but to the reader.

In this paper I will consider Psalm 80 as a good example of the way in which these questions are used within a lament. Psalm 80 is a community lament. This psalm was chosen on the basis of several reasons. First, Psalm 80 contains both of the most common questions in a single psalm (עַד־מַתַּי and לְמַה).² This facilitates evaluating the purpose of these questions in a lament setting. Second, this psalm contains refrains which

¹ Psalms 6, 10, 13, 22, 35, 42, 43, 44, 74, 79, 80, 88, 89, 90, 119:81-88. See Table #2.

² Other words noted in this study include why- עַל־מַה, how long- עַד־אֵנָה, how long- כַּמֶּה, how long- עַד־מַה, when- מַתַּי, and where- אֵיפֶה. Only the questions “why” and “how long” will be analyzed in

clearly indicate the stanzaic structure. This makes the logical sequence within the psalm easier to follow. The refrain serves as the climax for each stanza.³ Each refrain marks a new thought or turning point in the psalm.⁴ This is important because following the logical structure of the appeal clarifies the function of the questions. Third, this psalm is considered to be a good example of the lament form.⁵ Fourth, although Psalm 80 is a community lament, the general structure and elements of the lament form are fairly consistent throughout these psalms. The community aspect does not detract from the task of understanding the role of the questions.

I will first consider briefly the grammatical classification of questions and Speech Act Theory. Following this I will note some other preliminary observations, the general character of the laments and the theology of prayer in the laments, observations concerning the appeal to God in the various elements of the laments, and data collected from this group of psalms. Finally, I will look at Psalm 80 and draw some conclusions concerning the role of these two questions directed to God.

GRAMMATICAL CLASSIFICATION OF QUESTIONS AND SPEECH ACT THEORY

According to Porter Perrin there are four kinds of questions. 1) Direct Questions requiring a response. For example, "What is that called?" When one person addresses another with such a question, normally a verbal response is expected. This kind of

detail. The other questions are plotted in the data tables but are not considered exegetically or theologically because they occur infrequently.

³ Paul R. Raabe, *Psalm Structures: A Study of Psalms with Refrains*, JSOT Supplement Series 104, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 66.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 183-191.

⁵ Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 53.

question seeks information. 2) Indirect Questions are sentences which contain a question not quoted but as a subordinate part of the sentence. For example, “He asked what that was called.” This kind of question relates information concerning a situation being described in the course of a narration. It is a descriptive sentence. 3) Leading Questions are questions phrased to suggest the answer which is often expected in response. For example, “Certainly, you wouldn’t call it that, would you?” The answer is already implied in the question. 4) Rhetorical Questions are statements in the form of a question in which no direct answer is expected. For example, “Couldn’t you have done better?” This is equivalent to saying, “You could do better.” It urges the person to do better. It might also carry the force of a complaint or accusation.⁶ Leading and rhetorical questions might be considered to be somewhat overlapping categories. For the purpose of this paper, leading questions expect a response which may be given by the writer, whereas rhetorical questions expect no direct response in the text.

The questions addressed to God in the lament psalms are not indirect questions nor leading questions (question types 2 & 3). They do not occur in narrative nor do they relate events indirectly. Rather they are found in prayers addressed directly to God. They also do not have the form of leading questions which occur in the psalms. For example, “Who is like YHWH?” Of course the answer expected in response is that no one is like YHWH. Leading questions in the psalms often have the particles of comparison כּ or כּמוֹ and occur in contexts which express YHWH’s incomparable qualities.⁷

As I will demonstrate in an evaluation of Psalm 80, the questions addressed to God are not asking for a direct verbal or written response. They are questions seeking to

⁶ Porter G. Perrin, *Writer’s Guide and Index to English*, 4th ed., revised by Karl W. Dykema and Wilma R. Ebbitt (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1965), 771-72, 796.

⁷ See Psalms 35:10, 71:19, 89:9, and 113:5 for examples. The particle כּמוֹ is used in the Psalms much more than any other single book in the Old Testament, usually in expressions of comparison or similes.

elicit from God something other than an explanation or answer to an inquiry. The questions in the laments addressed directly to God best fit the category of rhetorical questions. They are statements to God which have another purpose. I intend to illustrate the force and purpose of these questions later in this paper. Before proceeding to this analysis and in order to more fully understand the significance of classifying these questions as rhetorical, the theory of speech acts must be considered.

Speech Act Theory, first proposed by John L. Austin, indicates that an act of speaking (or writing such as in the Scriptures) which carries meaning (locutionary act) may also have the force of doing something (illocutionary act) and intend a consequence or result (perlocutionary act). “Thus we distinguish the locutionary act . . . which has a *meaning*; the illocutionary act which has a certain *force* in saying something; the perlocutionary act which is the *achieving of certain effects* by saying something.”⁸ This theory helps to explain how a question might have a force and purpose beyond a request for information. Austin describes a classification of illocutionary acts, called exercitives, that urge, pray, entreat, plead, and beg.⁹ This offers a possible explanation of the manner in which the questions under consideration might function.

James Voelz notes that often an “unsaid said” or an unspoken purpose lies behind the locutionary act.¹⁰ A speech act has significance on more than one level. The writer seeks to accomplish something with the words. The writer’s words not only convey ideas, but also express feelings, and seek to impose his will. An act of speech may convey meaning which is much more than the locutionary act considered apart from the “unsaid.”

⁸ John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Martha Sbisà (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 121; James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995) 364-66.

⁹ Austin, 155-56.

¹⁰ Voelz, 276-80.

Nevertheless, the locutionary function of a speech act forms the basis of the illocutionary and perlocutionary force. In Psalm 80 I intend to examine these “unsaid” levels of meaning concerning the question *Why?* and *How long?*

OTHER PRELIMINARY ISSUES

In addition to this broadened understanding of questions, there are other preliminary issues to be noted. The laments may serve a function similar to narratives. They invite readers to join the psalmist in contemplating, evaluating, and responding to a displayed state of affairs. The aim is to elicit an interpretation of the events displayed that is supported by the community consensus within which the event is considered.¹¹

Readers do not approach the text without presuppositions. Rather they bring much to the text from their experience within a community of faith that helps them understand it.¹² This is the community consensus of understanding concerning God, the Scriptures, and the way in which language functions within which the exercitive–rhetorical questions have meaning.

The original settings of the laments were real situations of trouble for the psalmists out of which came these prayers for help to God.¹³ Moreover, after having been generalized, committed to writing and incorporated into the Psalter, the language of the laments opens them to many applications. The situations and the enemies are generalized and stereotyped. They are, therefore, appropriate for persons in all kinds of

¹¹ Hugh C. White, “Introduction: Speech Act Theory and Literary Criticism,” *Semeia* 41 (1988): 3, 6; John R. Searle, “Meaning,” in *Protocol of the Forty Fourth Colloquy of the Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture*, ed. Julian Boyd (Berkeley: The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1983), 23-25.

¹² Voelz, 342-61.

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, “From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life,” *Interpretation* 28, no. 1 (January 1974): 3.; Leander E. Keck, et al., eds., *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4, *The Book of Psalms*, by J. Clinton McCann (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 644, 647.

situations facing all kinds of enemies. This language allows for interpretation and application that is not tied to the specific situation that prompted the psalm in the first place.¹⁴ The original situations are not recoverable with any indisputable certainty. However, any details revealed in the text do help in understanding the meaning.

By their inclusion in the prayer book of Israel it is evident that these psalms are intended for continued use in the community of faith as prayers. They show a legitimate way to respond to trouble or misfortune. As part of the Christian Scriptures they are also prayers of the Church. They are paradigms of how a believer might face trouble and appeal to God for help. They reflect the adaptation of concrete experiences as a liturgical paradigmatic form.¹⁵

The lament texts present us with a dialog between the psalmist and God.¹⁶ These psalms seek God's action to change the situation. They are expressions of dialogical faith which call upon God and expect him to act. These psalms draw the reader into the dialog which is displayed in the text.¹⁷ Through this interaction with the text the reader is moved to evaluate the situation, the cry of the psalmist, and the response sought by the psalmist from God which are mediated to us by the text. The psalms engage the reader on many levels: instructionally, emotionally, and spiritually (that is, they engage the reader's faith). They engage the reader by identification with common human situations that challenge the reader on these different levels and evoke the reader's own dialog with God.

¹⁴ Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "Current Issues in Psalms Studies," *Word & World* 5, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 136; and "Trouble and Woe: Interpreting the Biblical Laments," *Interpretation* 37 (January 1983): 34-35; McCann, 646.

¹⁵ Christoph Markshies, "'Ich aber vertraue auf dich, Herr!' - Vertrauensäußerungen als Grundmotiv in den Klageliedern des Einzelnen," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 103 (1991): 391.

¹⁶ Brueggemann, 3-4, 6-8; Claus Westermann, "The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," *Interpretation* 28, no. 1 (January 1974): 20-22.

¹⁷ Craig C. Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms*, JSOT Supplement Series 52, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 17.

I am now going to apply what has been considered thus far to the matter of the questions addressed to God in the lament psalms in a preliminary way. A question may convey ideas which could also be conveyed in a direct statement. A question may be used in order to persuade or make an appeal. A question may express an emotion or display an inner state of mind. A question may also elicit an action or seek to facilitate the questioner's desire with another. The questions in these psalms function within a community consensus of understanding concerning the nature of God and his relationship to his people. The reader is called upon by the text to interact, evaluate, and respond to the situation displayed in the questions from this shared understanding of the Scriptures. The reader's response may include identification with the psalmist and the reader's own dialog with God in prayer.

CHARACTERISTICS AND THEOLOGY OF THE LAMENTS IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE QUESTIONS

The lament psalms have been widely studied. They are called lament psalms due to the predominance of the lament element within them. However, they are not properly laments in the sense of a dirge, such as David's lament for Saul and Jonathan. The character of the laments as appeals to God for help is generally recognized.¹⁸ The basic structure of these psalms, as outlined by Westermann is: 1) Address (and introductory petition), 2) Lament or Complaint, 3) Turning to God (confession of trust), 4) Petition, and 5) Vow of praise.¹⁹ In any particular lament not all of these elements are necessarily present, yet usually most are found. They also do not occur in any specific order, although these psalms usually end with a trust statement or vow of praise. Miller notes

¹⁸ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 170-71.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

these elements of structure within the petitionary prayer form (his italics): “It consists of *address to the deity, petition, and motivational clauses*. Elements of *lament about one’s situation and expressions of confidence and trust* are regularly present.”²⁰ I will consider the elements of structure in more detail later in this paper.

The questions addressed to God are considered part of the lament element by Westermann.²¹ Yet the questions do not always occur in the lament element of these psalms. They may also occur in the petition element.²² In the petition they may function as a motivational statement. In both cases they are an appeal statement about the situation concerning which the psalmist is praying.

The questions occur within the dialogical, covenantal relationship. They do not indicate unfaithfulness to God, rather they appeal to God to act in keeping with his character as he has revealed it to be. They are expressions of faith in the revealed God. According to Balentine the questions are typical elements of the laments expressing the struggle of the psalmist to understand the situation in light of his relationship to God and God’s uncharacteristic behavior.²³ The questions assume 1) that YHWH is the only God, 2) that he has revealed himself to be a certain kind of God, 3) but that he is acting in a contradictory way. Balentine’s observation is helpful in that it recognizes that the questions are not simply complaining. Still, this does not go far enough. The questions are in fact part of a logical appeal to God. Balentine also notes that they are an expression of

²⁰ Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *They Cried to the Lord, The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 57.

²¹ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 176.

²² Occasions in which the questions occur in the lament are: Psalms 10:1, 13:2-3, 22:2, 35:17, 42:10, 43:2, 44:24-25, 74:10-11, 79:5, 80:5, 80:13, 88:15, 89:47, 94:3, 119:82, 119:84. Occasions in which the questions occur in the petition are: Psalms 6:4, 10:13, 74:1, (?74:10), 79:10, 90:13.

²³ Samuel E. Balentine, *The Hidden God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 117.

an urgent need for divine intervention.²⁴ This implies a motivational aspect in the questions. Motivations are used in the process of persuasion. As I will note in more detail later, this is key to understanding the meaning, force, and purpose of these questions addressed to God. They are motivational appeals that seek to persuade God.

The laments usually contain some aspect of a threefold dimension of relationships concerning God, enemies, and the psalmist.²⁵ The questions addressed to God in the laments regularly incorporate one or more of these three relational dimensions. The basis of the appeal connected with the questions includes some aspect of these relational dimensions.

The lament psalms rest on the Exodus from Egypt as their historical, paradigmatic, and theological foundation. Historically, much of Israel's self understanding is grounded in the Exodus. They are a people who were delivered from bondage by YHWH, with whom they are in a covenant relationship. The laments reflect this history in their structure and content. Appeals to God on the basis of his covenant with Israel are common.²⁶ The structure of the laments itself reflects the paradigm of the Exodus.²⁷ The laments pattern Israel's understanding of the relationship between Israel and God. As his people they cry out, God saves, they give thanks. The lament psalms are a liturgical adaptation of this Exodus paradigm.

Might not the questions addressed to God in the laments reflect an aspect of the Israelite slaves' cry to God? In the story of the Exodus their cry to God was an appeal

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 169; Balentine, 120.

²⁶ Usually the appeal is on the basis of the Covenant of Sinai by frequent reference to the covenant name יהוה or by reference to God's deliverance of the fathers as in Psa. 22:4-5, 44:1-4, 72:2 and 72:12-15. Psalm 89 appeals on the basis of the Davidic Covenant.

²⁷ Brueggemann, 13-18. Brueggemann considers the lament form to be based on the Exodus history.

for help to which God responded (Exodus 2:23-25, 3:7). YHWH remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Although no direct textual evidence is evident, the cry may very well have been in the form of a question, such as, “How long until you fulfill your covenant with our fathers?” The questions addressed to God in the laments could very well draw upon this understanding of their cry for deliverance in the Exodus.

The deliverance from Egypt is a fundamental aspect of Old Testament theology. Miller notes that these psalms emphasize the covenantal relationship between the petitioner and God.²⁸ The petitioner’s distress and cry evoke the memory of God’s response to the cry of Israel in Egypt and the revelation of his character as the compassionate God who saves at Sinai. Their cry and God’s saving act are evidence of such a dialogical-covenantal relationship.²⁹

Brueggemann notes that the address portion in the psalms establishes the dialogical-covenantal nature of the appeal.³⁰ Then the lament and petition express the pain and desire for release. There are often various motivational factors mentioned. The sequence (address, complaint, petition, motivation) is an expression of faithfulness within the dialogical covenant. Brueggemann’s observations are useful. Notwithstanding, he misses the appeal character of the questions by considering them as an expression of pain. There is a cathartic effect in expressing pain to God. However, this is a corollary aspect of the complaint to God. The real importance is not venting emotions at God but seeking and finding the help he graciously offers and gives.

²⁸ Miller, “Current Issues,” 138; Patrick D. Miller, Jr., “Prayer as Persuasion: The Rhetoric and Intention of Prayer,” *Word & World* 13, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 359.

²⁹ Westermann, “The Role of the Lament,” 20-22.

³⁰ Brueggemann, 6-8.

This dialogical and covenantal character of these psalms is reflected by the questions addressed to God. These questions appeal to God on the basis of his covenant as reflected in the affirmations of relationship. In dialog with his God, the petitioner expects an answer from him, though not necessarily verbally. As we shall show later, the answer expected is action by God in behalf of the petitioner.

Fløysvik considers the complaint psalms to be an expression of the desire for renewed fellowship between God and the psalmist (or community) and an expression of faith reaching out for a gracious God.³¹ Often the request is expressed as the desire for restoration of the covenant relationship. The desire for such renewed fellowship is further evidence that the questions are not a reflection of unfaithfulness to God. Rather they are evidence of faith and hope rising from the depths. The complaint aspect which is a component of the questioning does not negate the faith and faithfulness of the one who cries to God. This faith arises from and is fixed on God's revealed character and his covenant with his people. It is objectively located in God's self revelation.

THE APPEAL TO GOD IN THE LAMENTS IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE QUESTIONS

As I have noted, the laments are characteristically prayers or appeals to God which have the primary function of persuading God to act in behalf of the petitioner.³² Cartledge maintains that all the elements of the lament form (entreaty, complaint, expression of trust, vow, and expression of confidence) function as motivational factors to move God to action.³³ The various elements of the lament psalms are part of a logical

³¹ Ingvar Fløysvik, "When God Behaves Strangely: A Study in the Complaint Psalms," *Concordia Theological Journal* 21 (July 1995): 301.

³² Miller, "Prayer as Persuasion," 356.

³³ Tony W. Cartledge, "Conditional Vows in the Psalms of Lament: A New Approach to an Old

sequence of appeal to God for help. I will consider briefly how the various elements make an appeal to God. I will follow Westermann's categories of elements in these psalms.

The address to God contains a claim to a covenantal relationship with God.³⁴ The address is not necessarily in the first verse of a psalm but may follow other elements in the structure. When addressing God directly pronominal suffixes, "my" or "our," connected with words such as God, Savior, Rock, or Lord are often used. Other forms of relational affirmation are also found within the laments.³⁵ Included in the address to God is the use of his covenant name, YHWH. These statements establish a covenantal basis for the psalmist's appeal to God. God has established his covenant with Israel. His promise, his character, his purposes in the world are impacted by the distress or deliverance of his people.

The petition is the most obvious part of the lament psalm that can be characterized as an appeal. It is normally a request in the imperative for some action by God in behalf of the petitioner or nation. The petition often corresponds with the substance of the lament element, suggesting a connection in the logic of these two elements. What the psalmist mentions in the lament would be reversed or answered by the action requested in the petition. Note the following pairings of the complaint in the questions connected with the requested action by God on behalf of the petitioner as examples of this relationship:³⁶

Problem," in *The Listening Heart, Essays in the Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm.*, JSOT Supplement Series 58, eds. Kenneth G. Hoglund et al. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 90-91. Note that his categories differ slightly from Westermann's. Trust and confidence might be considered to be the same thing or closely related.

³⁴ Miller, "Current Issues," 138.

³⁵ Images or motifs connected to Israel's historic understanding of God as her redeemer are an example of such affirmations.

³⁶ See Table #3 at the end of this paper for a list of the major terms within the question laments concerning the disposition or action desired from God by the psalmist.

Psalm 10	far off, hide	arise, do not forget
Psalm 13	forget, hide have sorrow	look on me, answer me give light
Psalm 22	far off	be not far off
Psalm 43	forgotten, oppressed	vindicate, plead
Psalm 44	sleep hide, forget	rouse self rise, help, redeem
Psalm 74	reject, anger smolders enemy mocks, foe reviles	remember, turn destroy, rise up, defend
Psalm 80	anger smolders break down walls	restore tend this vine
Psalm 89	hide, wrath burns	remember
Psalm 94	wicked jubilant	rise up, pay back

This reversal of the situation includes one or both of two aspects. The first is a reversal of the present, distress causing actions of God to a restored state of God's favor. The second is reversing the present tyranny of the psalmist's enemies to a state of God's just condemnation for their actions against God's people.

The trust statement appeals to God on the basis of an affirmation of God's character in which the psalmist has confidence. This confidence is an indirect appeal to God which urges God to be consistent with his revealed nature. Markshies notes that "trust statements emerge in almost all examples of the IL, invariably in the same stereotypical way, which permits one to speak of a customary trust motive."³⁷ He notes further that these serve as a goal directed trust paradigm to be used by the individual which supports the assurance of an answer and helps the petitioner to face and manage affliction.³⁸ The trust statement affirms God's character as Savior and confesses the petitioner's faith in God. The appeal is that God will certainly help for the sake of his own reputation by showing himself to be gracious to those who love and trust him.

The vow of praise is similar to the trust statement in the indirect way in which it makes an appeal to God. The vow of praise is a powerful motivation based on a dual

³⁷ Markshies, 386. IL is the Individual Lament.

³⁸ Ibid., 391, 397-98.

obligation.³⁹ It must be noted that in speaking of the term obligation, God is, strictly speaking, not obligated to do anything for us. He chooses to oblige himself to us on the basis of his own graciousness and mercy in his covenant in Christ. He promises that he will be gracious to those in covenant with him. Neither does God need our praises. Yet in his graciousness he does take pleasure in the praises of his people. The vow serves to motivate God to act on the basis that he values the praise of the worshiper.⁴⁰ The appeal is that unless God restores and delivers his people from their distress, often from approaching death or destruction, they will not be able to praise his name. No praise, no remembrance of him occurs in the grave.

Finally, the lament element is most directly connected with the matter of the questions directed to God since most questions occur in this part of the lament psalms. The lament element is also an appeal. Westermann observes that the lament element is a part of a logical structure of an appeal seeking removal of distress.⁴¹ The lament has no function by itself outside of this structure. The lament section often describes the distress of the petitioner, the evil of his foes, or God's anger, distance, or indifference. The lament section of these psalms appeals to God on the basis of his compassion toward the helpless who suffer distress, his sense of justice and righteousness in relationship to the evils perpetrated by the petitioner's or Israel's enemies, and his own character or reputation of love, faithfulness, or mercy.⁴²

As noted before, the questions are alternate ways of expressing complaints which are usually expressed by direct statements. The questions express the psalmist's protest

³⁹ Cartledge, 81. This is a mutual covenant obligation between God and the psalmist.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 86.

⁴¹ Westermann, "The Role of the Lament," 26-27.

⁴² Miller, "Prayer as Persuasion," 357; Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*, 79, 116, 120, 123.

against God's uncharacteristic behavior. God has promised his favor to those who trust him, why then does he not show his favor? These questions have the effect or force of statements designed to persuade God. Yet how do the questions appeal to God? Before commenting more specifically, it must be noted that the address to God is often conveyed in close relational terms. This relational aspect is a significant basis of appeal to God and also forms the basis of the questions of *Why?* and *How long?*⁴³ God identifies with his people.⁴⁴ The underlying relational aspect brings the meaning of the questions into focus.

The questions arise out of a covenant relationship. Only one who is in a covenant relationship with God and knows something of God's revealed character could ask why YHWH is so far away, or why he is so angry, or how long it would be until he would deliver his people. A person outside of the covenant could not ask these questions with meaning. Furthermore the questions are more persuasive because they arise within the covenant. The one who is suffering and making an appeal to God is one with whom God has made a covenant of salvation and mercy.

Relational knowledge of God informs the petitioner's hope which is based on God's revealed character and acts. Miller notes this hope is based on an understanding of,

- (1) God's power and willingness to help and save me out of the trouble; (2) God's inclination to always vindicate and support the righteous or innocent; (3) God's protecting and guarding me in the midst of trouble, so that I am not undone by it; and (4) God's faithfulness that will not leave me abandoned in my distress.⁴⁵

The force and purpose of the questions correspond with the relational knowledge of the petitioner. The psalmist understands God's character and seeks to persuade him on

⁴³ Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*, 58-59.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴⁵ Miller, "Prayer as Persuasion," 361.

that basis. Fløysvik observes that the question *Why?* reflects an underlying understanding of God's character.⁴⁶ The psalmist asks it because God seems to be acting out of character. *Why?* has the exercitive-rhetorical effect of appealing for help on the basis of his character. "God, this is not the way you should act toward us. Help us by acting the way you have revealed yourself to be." The inexplicable behavior of God which gives rise to the question does not correspond with his revealed character of being just, faithful and loving, nor does it correspond to his previous saving actions toward Israel.

The question *How long?* reflects an understanding that God's wrath does not continue unabated and so the psalmist expects deliverance to come.⁴⁷ God's disposition is to be merciful and to save. The question *How long?* also appeals to God's compassion and disposition to save in that the psalmist's suffering is presented as going on too long, that the situation is urgent. "Certainly your wrath cannot last. The situation is urgent. If you do not help us, YHWH, we will perish." The conditions are presented as being intolerable. The underlying assumptions are that the situation should be different within the covenant, that God's wrath will cease, that his disposition toward his people is to save. The psalmist's appeal to God in either of these questions is to "act in the way He has revealed himself and as He acted in the past."⁴⁸ The appeal is for God to act in a way which is consistent with the way he has shown himself to be in his Word.⁴⁹ The psalmist is asking that God's alien work might stop and that his proper work might resume. The questions *Why?* and *How long?* are more emotionally and motivationally powerful ways of stating the psalmist's appeal.

⁴⁶ Fløysvik, 302.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*, 126.

These aspects of the appeal to God found in the laments speak clearly to us of the possibility of persuading God in prayer. God is in a dialogical and covenantal relationship with believers. He calls us, by these examples of faith struggling within the depths of pain, to approach him and make our appeal. Miller observes,

There is, therefore, in the character of scriptural prayer a powerful suggestion that the one who prays can truly engage the deity, can urge reasons upon God for acting in behalf of the one in need. . . . It is important, however, to keep in mind the nature of the arguments. They appeal to God to be and to act as God would be and act.⁵⁰

The appeal to God, as evidenced in the laments, is appropriate on the basis of God's self revelation and in light of the relationship between God and his covenant people.

Having put forth a theoretical and theological basis for interpreting the questions directed to God in the lament psalms, I will now comment on the data which has been extracted from these psalms.

DATA EXTRACTED FROM THE QUESTION PSALMS

In the following section I will analyze data plotted in the tables located at the end of this paper. I begin with Table #1. In this table I plotted selected terms with translations which occur in or in near proximity to the questions. These terms are organized by frequency of occurrence. They indicate the psalmist's perception of God's displeasure. They might be categorized as: 1) AW, God's Anger or Wrath, 2) AD, God's Abandonment or Distance, and 3) IS, God's Indifference or Silence. Under each category are several terms representing conceptual fields of meaning.

In Table #1, Category #1, God's Anger or Wrath, there are 12 occurrences. The terms are: anger, wrath, be angry, chasten, rebuke, jealousy, and break down (wall of

⁵⁰ Miller, "Prayer as Persuasion," 361.

protection). These terms have a field of meaning relating to God's disposition to be angry or wrathful toward the psalmist or community. The terms occur 4 times concerning the individual and 8 times concerning the community.⁵¹ God is presented as facing the community in anger.

In Category #2, God's Abandonment or Distance, there are 14 occurrences. The terms are: cast off, forsake, hide, forget, and be far off. These terms have a field of meaning indicating God's abandonment and distance. God has turned from his people. This set of terms indicates that the psalmist expresses a missing sense closeness between himself or the community and God. These terms occur 9 times concerning the individual and 5 times concerning the community. God is presented as turning and walking away.

In Category #3, God's Indifference or Silence, there are 18 occurrences. All of the terms in Table # 1 are fairly evenly distributed between the categories, with Category 3 having a slight edge. In my analysis of Category #3 the terms have been further divided into four sub-groups. These terms all relate to God's seeming indifference or silence at the state of affairs. This set of terms indicates that God ignores or lets the distress experienced by the psalmist to continue without remedy. This indicates a more passive action than Category #1 or 2. God does nothing to help so the distress continues.

The first sub-group includes the terms oppression, affliction, persecution, and pluck (fruit). These are terms indicating that God is allowing the enemies to harm the psalmist or community. They are evenly distributed between individual and community laments (3,3). The second sub-group includes the terms say (mockingly), scoff, revile, and exult. These are terms concerning things that the enemies say which are unanswered by

⁵¹ Using Table #2 this data can be further plotted into two groupings according to the individual or the community laments on the basis that the kingly lament and the lament of the individual for the community more appropriately belong under a community heading.

God. There are twice the number of occurrences in the community laments as in the individual (4, 2). The third sub-group concerns the feelings of the psalmist emotionally and physically due to the situation which God has not caused to cease. The terms are sorrow and fail. The individual laments predominate in this sub-group (3, 0). The fourth sub-group contains the terms look on (and not act), hold back, and sleep. These terms indicate God's inactivity or failure to come to the aid of the individual or more frequently the community (2, 1). The total of all sub-groups for Category #3 is evenly divided between the two kinds of laments (9,9).

This analysis indicates that the anger group predominates in the community laments. The abandonment group predominates in the individual laments. The indifference group is equally distributed. However, in the indifference group, what the enemies say predominates in the community laments and how the psalmist feels predominates in the individual.

The collation of terms in Table #2 is an attempt to integrate the data from Table #1 with an analysis of the perlocutionary force of the questions in each psalm, the basis of the appeal, and the location of the questions. Moreover, rather than count the occurrences of terms as I have in Table #1, I have abstracted God's perceived attitude from Table #1 and associated it with the questions in Table #2. This was done to simplify a rather complicated cross indexing of data. The table is arranged in order of occurrence according the type of lament. Tables #4 and 5 provide further analysis of items from Table #2.

The categories under the column headings, God's Attitude or Behavior, the Force of the Question, and the Basis of the Appeal, were chosen after a consideration of the psalms individually and collectively. The second group presented the greatest problem.

The perlocutionary force of the question had to be considered in context, after which I attempted to group and characterize the predominate perlocutionary forces occurring in relationship to these questions. At this point the most difficult element of analysis occurs.

Three other preliminary comments must be noted. First, concerning the question *How long?*, in every case this question might be considered to have the force of asking God to help immediately. It expresses urgency, that God would stop his alien work *now*. The other two categories are noted when they are a significant force. In addition, a particular question may exhibit all three aspects of force in certain circumstances. Second, the category of God's Name or Reputation under the heading Basis of Appeal is noted specifically when it is a prominent motivational factor. Still, this motivation might be considered as part of the appeal at any time that the psalmist petitions God by his covenant name, YHWH. Third, in Tables #4-5 the most notable results occur either in a symmetrical distribution within the table or at the extremes of distribution. Because the data sample is so small, fine nuances had to be avoided.

Note that Table #4 indicates that the questions *How long?* and *Why?* are equally distributed when considered by Group Totals. There are 14 questions from each group.⁵² These questions are also distributed evenly under lament Type Totals. However, some of the exact terms do occur solely under either the individual or the community type of laments (individual- *עַל־אָנָה*, *עַל־מָוָה*, and *כְּמָוָה*; community- *עַד־מָוָה*).

The next stage of analysis uses Table #5. Concerning God's attitude under the question *How long?* the categories anger and indifference predominate (5 & 5). Anger is primarily used within the community laments. Indifference is equally distributed between

⁵² I am not including "When" or "Where" in this analysis.

the individual and community laments. Under the question *Why?* the situation is different. Here abandonment and indifference predominate (7 & 8). Both community and individual laments are similarly represented.

Concerning the force of the question, the data is evenly distributed between the community and the individual. The interesting results occur under the totals for the three categories of perlocutionary force. Under the question *How long?* the urgent request for action by God is predominant (11). Under the question *Why?* the desire for a change of behavior toward the petitioner is most significant (9). Urgency is not a sense of the *Why?* question in these psalms (0). The question also expresses a protest.⁵³

Concerning the basis of the appeal, the data is once again rather evenly distributed between the individual and the community. The predominant appeal is on the basis of justice for the petitioner under the *Why?* question (7). Under the question *How long?* the predominant basis of the appeal is compassion for the sufferer (7).

A further collation of data from the three headings just considered indicates that the items IS, CE, and JP are closely related (IS & CE- 11, IS & JP- 11, CE & JP- 9). That is, an association occurs between the perception of God's indifference or silence, a desire for a change in the situation concerning the enemy, and a motivational appeal based on justice for the petitioner.

At this time I will synthesize the results of this analysis. The question *How long?* often arises out of a sense of God's anger or indifference. The community perceives God's anger toward them most particularly. Perhaps this is because God expressed his

⁵³ In the desire for a change in behavior, a sense of protest, complaint, or accusation also occurs (note Rhetorical Question, page 3). The use of this question in the narrative sections of the Old Testament supports this view. The following are examples of the numerous texts which include conversation between two humans and between man and God in which the question is expressed: 1) Human-human, Gen. 12:18-19, Num. 20:3-5; 2) Man-God, Ex. 5:22-23, Josh. 7:7-9. The sense of protest, accusation, complaint, or consternation predominates between two humans. This sense is often carried over into the man-God dialogues but with the addition of a cry for help as a significant sense.

anger through the prophets frequently toward the community or the titular head of the community. The psalmist urgently seeks a cessation of God's anger and renewed sense of his concern about and help with the existing state of affairs. The question *Why?* most often arises out of a sense of God's abandonment and indifference. The sense of anger is not associated with this question very often. Perhaps this indicates a consciousness on the part of the psalmist that God's anger may be justified.⁵⁴ The question *Why?* would not make sense in the case of anger which had resulted from sin. Often the sense of God's indifference is associated with the psalmist seeking a change in the situation concerning the enemies and appeals based on justice. Finally, I must also note that in the instances of either question most of the items in my analysis might find an association with any other items in different situations. The analysis of this data serves the purpose of outlining some general characteristics of the patterns one might encounter, not providing a strict rule of occurrence.

I will now proceed with an analysis of Psalm 80 in order to illustrate the way in which this understanding of the questions provides a key to interpreting this type of psalm. A translation of Psalm 80 is included with the Tables at the end of the paper.

STRUCTURAL SEQUENCING

The first two stanzas of Psalm 80 have a symmetric structure. Stanza #1 & Refrain is 71 syllables long (53+18). Stanza #2 & Refrain is 76 syllables long (55+21). However, Stanza #3 & Refrain is much longer, being 198 syllables long (176 + 22; more than 53-55 tripled plus a longer refrain). Each refrain has an increasing length: 18, 21, 22 syllables. This is the result of the names by which God is called in each refrain which also

⁵⁴ It must be noted that an overt recognition of sin is found in only two of these psalms (Psalms 79 & 90). On the other hand, in some cases a bold claim of innocence occurs.

increases in number: God, God of Hosts, YHWH God of Hosts (צבאות, אלהים) (יהוה אלהים צבאות, אלהים). This increasing intensity of address to God is also reflected in the intensifying logical structure of the psalm described below.

I do not believe that verse fifteen is a refrain. Although it has twenty three syllables, which is similar in length to the refrains in verses four, eight, and twenty, it is significantly different than the other refrains which are basically identical. Verse fifteen continues and carries forward the metaphor of a vine which the other refrains do not contain. In my opinion the verse partially picks up the theme of the refrain as a device to move readers forward in this longer stanza toward the climax at the end of the psalm. For another view of the stanzaic structure of this psalm see Raabe.⁵⁵

Note that the use of increasingly diverse verb forms as the prayer progresses.⁵⁶ In my opinion, this “stacking” or “piling on” effect has the force of making the appeal more climactic at the end.

LOGICAL SEQUENCING OF THE APPEAL FOR HELP

In this section I will discuss the logical sequence of the appeal to God contained in Psalm 80 as an illustration of the way in which the questions function in context. I begin with Stanza #1 (vss. 2-4). This stanza presents a motivational appeal based on the covenant by referring to imagery connected to Israel’s historic consciousness of their relationship with God.⁵⁷ God is the one who led Israel out of Egypt as a shepherd leads

⁵⁵ Raabe, 200-02; N. J. Tromp, “Psalm LXX: Form of Expression and Form of Content,” in *New Avenues in the Study of the Old Testament*, ed. A. S. Van Der Woude (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 147-48. See footnotes #62 on page 25 and #66 on page 28 for other evidence to support my view.

⁵⁶ See Table #6 at the end of the paper.

⁵⁷ Concerning God as the Shepherd of Israel see Gen. 49:24, Ex. 15:13, Psa. 78:52, and Psa. 77:20. Concerning God enthroned above the cherubim see Ex. 25:19-22, Num. 7:89, 1 Sam. 4:4, 2 Sam. 6:2, 2 Ki. 19:15.

a flock. He is the one who sits enthroned over the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple.⁵⁸ This stanza contains a more general appeal with no specific situational details other than the names of the tribes involved. These are Israel and the two sons of Rachel, Joseph (father of Ephraim and Manasseh) and Benjamin.⁵⁹ The imperatives appeal to God that he would be who he has shown himself to be, Israel's Savior ("as salvation for us"). The imagery and the appeal are based on Israel's covenantal relationship to God.⁶⁰

Stanza #2 (vss. 5-8): This stanza presents a motivational appeal based upon God's compassion concerning the pitiable condition of his people. It opens with a relational address (O YHWH, God of Hosts) which affirms that God is in a covenantal relationship with his people (YHWH) and is mighty to save (God of Hosts), previewing the last refrain. The question *How long?* highlights the critical nature of the situation. This is the primary force of the question. God cannot ignore their prayers much longer. They are his covenant people ("your people"). Internally they are full of grief. Their only food and drink are tears of mourning. Externally they have strife with those around them who mock their plight ("you bring us strife," "our neighbors, our enemies").⁶¹

⁵⁸ The imagery of God enthroned above the cherubim was associated with the Ark, Ex. 25:18-22; later at Shiloh, 1 Sam. 4:4; and finally with Jerusalem, 2 Sam. 6:2, Psa. 18:10, and Psa. 99:1. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150, A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 141.

⁵⁹ The appeal to God in this psalm probably arises from the invasions of the Northern Kingdom prior to the crisis in the south. One of the refugees who came to the south after things began to disintegrate in the north may have been the originator of this psalm. Another option is that the psalm was composed by a resident of the south in response to the tragedy of the north. Perhaps, using tribal names from both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms (that also had a common mother Rachel) emphasizes their familial relationship. The psalmist therefore indicates his full identification with these trials and his hope for a reuniting of the kingdoms. Note this relational language in verses 6-7 ("them" and "us") and in the collective terms of verse eighteen (see below).

⁶⁰ In addition to the imagery of the stanza, note the use of terminology which brings to mind the Aaronic blessing in Num. 6:25. The terms **פָּנֶה** and **אָרַר** occur in both places. See, Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 142. Note also that the word **שָׁמַר** is used with reference to blessing in Num. 6:27-27 and with reference to strife in Psa. 80:7. See, McCann, 1000.

⁶¹ The shift from second and third person, (your, them), to first person, (us, our), referring to the suffering may represent 1) the difference between those already taken captive and those being threatened, or 2) the brotherly identification of the psalmist with his afflicted brothers from the north.

The question has the same force as a direct appeal based on compassion, “Do not be angry with us any more because we have been praying for so long, our sorrow, and our distress with our enemies is too much to bear.” However, the urgency of the situation is much more succinctly highlighted and the appeal much more urgently pressed by the question than by a direct statement. The nature of the question is to seek an answer. It cries out requiring a response. The answer sought is not for a timetable or explanation concerning God’s purposes, but for immediate action by God in their behalf.

Implied in the question are aspects of the psalmist’s understanding of God as reflected in the refrains. God’s nature is to restore and save; he will respond to those who cry to him for help. God’s anger is not persistent with his people. He will relent from the suffering he brings upon them. Instead of an angry face, his face will shine with approval and pleasure again. His turning from anger toward them with favor will cause them to be saved. He will restore their previous blessings. The psalmist bases his hope on God’s disposition to restore and save. Therefore, he hopes that this time of trial cannot last much longer.

Stanza #3 (vss. 9-20): This stanza reiterates and expands the appeals of the first two stanzas. This stanza is also longer than the previous two stanzas combined. This increase of length and detail brings the appeal to a climactic ending. The “stacking” of verb forms also indicates the climactic nature of Stanza #3.

The psalmist utilizes the metaphor of a transplanted vine from Egypt to describe Israel. This metaphor is carried forward through verse seventeen.⁶² The metaphor uses this imagery to describe and emphasize the covenant blessings only alluded to in Stanza

⁶² Verses nine and sixteen have the word pair **נָטַע**- “to plant.” The repetition of this word along with other imagery clearly associated with the vine metaphor points to the consideration of verses nine through seventeen as belonging to the same stanza.

#1. Later in the stanza the metaphor also serves to emphasize the helplessness of Israel in the face of enemies when God does not defend her. A vine must be tended carefully if it is to grow and prosper.

The next stage of the appeal in Stanza #3 begins with the question, *Why?* This question is based on an understanding of God's nature. The question has the force of saying, "Be who you have promised to show yourself to be, not as you are acting now." It protests the situation and appeals for help. It does not ask for reasons from God for his uncharacteristic behavior but for God's favorable action in their behalf. In contrast to the distress of the present described here are the covenant blessings of the past described in the first section of the stanza. Not only does this highlight the state to which Israel has fallen, but the rehearsal of Israel's previous condition reminds God of the blessings promised in the covenant. Note that the question *Why?* occurs in the middle of the two contrasting descriptions of Israel, her former state of blessing (vss. 9-12, vs. 16) and her present state of distress (vss. 13-14, vs. 17). In addition, the question in verse thirteen serves as the turning point between the first description of blessing and the first description of distress in this stanza. This indicates that the question functions as an appeal for God to turn from his anger which caused their distress and to restore their former blessings according to his covenant with them. This former state is what the psalmist perceives should be God's action toward them.

The present state of Israel's plight: God's anger, their inner distress and grief, external strife and mockery from their enemies (Stanza #2) is restated here in more descriptive terms. God has torn down the wall of his protection. His anger is not only demonstrated by his turning a deaf ear to their prayers (vs. 5), but he has actively taken

away his blessing and protection.⁶³ Those around Israel attack her. The strife is more intensely described in this stanza as being plucked, ravaged, and eaten.⁶⁴ The vine cries for relief. The sense of this appeal is, “Turn, look down from heaven at our plight, take care of this suffering vine.” God who is present in the Temple (v.2) is also in heaven (v.15) as sovereign Lord over the earth.⁶⁵ The appeal is based on both God’s particular covenant relationship with his people as Savior and his relationship with humanity as Creator. Those who ravage the vine, his people, are also his creatures over whom he has absolute authority.

This state of affairs does not fit with God’s covenant promises described in the previous historical recollection of blessings. This recollection is briefly stated again (vs. 16). God had planted the vine and prospered it (“your right hand” and “you strengthened for yourself”). The fact that it was God’s doing for his own purposes carries an intrinsic appeal to God on the basis of his self interest in the best sense of that idea. God is concerned about his honor and his will on the earth. Surely he will arise to defend these interests which are at stake in his own people.

Again the present distress is described by the more intense terms of being burned and cut down (vs. 17). After being stripped bare, dug up, and eaten, the vine is now chopped down and burned, a picture of total devastation. The psalmist wishes that those who do such things to God’s people would perish from God’s presence. The appeal is that God arise and come to Israel’s defense and give retribution to her enemies.

⁶³ The picture here is of a vineyard whose wall has been torn down allowing any passer-by to take the fruit, boars to tear up the vines, and small animals to eat up what remains.

⁶⁴ Contrast the use of **אכל** in the sense of being eaten with the sense of God as their Shepherd (vs. 2).

⁶⁵ The use of the word **אֱלֹהִים** in the Psalter often occurs with the concepts of YHWH as Creator, Ruler, and Savior. See Psalms 8:2, 4, 9; 11:4; 14:2; 18:10, 14; 19:2, 7; 20:7; 33:6, 13; 50:4, 6; 53:3; 68:34; 76:9; 89:6, 12; 96:5, 11; 102:20, 26; 103:19; 104:2; 115:3, 15-16; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; 135:6; 136:5; 144:5; and 146:6.

Just so there will be no doubt about the vine's relationship and identity, the psalmist shifts his imagery to that of a family. The vine imagery ends at verse seventeen. However, the connection of verses sixteen and eighteen keep the stanzaic imagery moving forward while at the same time redirecting readers to the real meaning of the metaphor. Verses sixteen and eighteen have three sets of pairs that make this connection clear.⁶⁶ Both verses use the words **יְמִינֶךָ**- "your right hand," **בֵּן**- "fruit, son," and **אֲמִץ**- "to make strong or strengthen." Israel is the man of God's right hand and the son of man which God strengthened for himself (for his purposes). The terms are collective for the nation rather than Messianic terms in light of the connection with the vine metaphor. This points to the unique relationship which the nation has with God. Israel is seen as the son, blessed by God, his chosen one.⁶⁷ However, if the "man of your right hand" is the king, then the collective hopes of Israel might be focusing on the full restoration of both king and united kingdom with the restoration of all the blessings of God's favor.

The appeal is that once again God's hand of blessing will rest on them as promised in his covenant. If God will do this they will not be disloyal, that is they will not turn back or turn aside from the covenant. Perhaps this vow is also an indirect recognition of the reason the hand of blessing was withdrawn in the first place. A second appeal asking for life is followed by another vow to call upon God's name, that is, they will continue to pray to God and serve him. Vows are a powerful motivational element within the laments. The fact that both vows are saved for the last part of the psalm is fitting in light of the building intensity throughout this prayer.

⁶⁶ These pairings provide further evidence of the stanzaic structure which I have proposed. The bridging of the imagery in verses nine through seventeen and the word pairs in verses sixteen and eighteen connect this structure together into a unit.

⁶⁷ Perhaps recalling Jacob and Ephraim (Gen. 27:27-29, 48:13-20) or Joseph (49:22-26).

The final refrain repeats the appeal to God. It assumes that God is amenable to their pleas. It recognizes who YHWH is in relation to and in behalf of Israel. He is YHWH, the covenant-keeping God of Israel. He is God of Hosts, the mighty warrior and leader of the hosts of heaven.⁶⁸ He is fully able to restore. He will turn from his anger and turn with favor toward his people, and they will be saved. The psalmist's cry to God recognizes this and hopes in it.

In this psalm the sequence of the appeal intensifies. It appeals for God to turn from his uncharacteristic activity against Israel to his promised blessings in the covenant. It appeals for God to stop the ravages of Israel's enemies and give them their due retribution. It appeals for God to restore Israel to the place of blessing and service to God that YHWH intended. The question *How long?* highlights the urgency of the appeal. The question *Why?* reaches out from grief with hope to the God of mercy and grace. Together they provide a powerful appeal and consolation on the basis that God cares about his people and will not leave them in their distress indefinitely.

CONCLUSION

The questions *Why?* and *How long?* which have been considered in this paper are exercitive-rhetorical appeals to God. They function with the illocutionary force of an appeal or plea within the lament psalm structure. They intend to persuade God to act as he has revealed himself to be through his words and deeds. They arise from the relational knowledge of one who is in covenant with YHWH.

The two questions each have a somewhat different nuance of perlocutionary force within this basic understanding. *How long?* functions as an appeal that seeks immediate help from God. It cries out for God to act without delay. This is often based on the

⁶⁸ Note this address, "YHWH, God of Hosts" first occurs in verse 5.

compassion of God toward the helpless. *Why?* functions as appeal to God to be and act as he has revealed himself to be. Often this includes the desire for renewed fellowship with God and swift justice against ungodly enemies. In either question the appeal seeks the answer which God would give by his action in behalf of the psalmist and community.

These questions which the psalmists uttered in their prayers to God arise from the depths of pain and reflect the spontaneous and emotional attempt by the psalmists to persuade God to act in their behalf. Out of this pain, both individual and corporate, the psalmists express a protest. These questions are a complaint against actions that do not coincide with God's revealed character. However, these psalms also affirm the psalmists' trust in God. Even in pain and protest the psalmists look to God in faith and hope, trusting that God will ultimately act according to his own revealed character.

As they stand in the Psalter, these appeals now serve as a paradigm for prayer in times of trouble. The individual and community come to know through these psalms who they are in relationship to God, what is needed (that is what kind of things are important), and the language to speak to God about it.⁶⁹ They bear witness to and encourage the reader to engage in the dynamic, relational, dialogue which is prayer.

These psalms show any believer or community in any period of trouble that God is willing to hear one's cry. There is a place in the prayers of God's people to express the depths of pain and to appeal for his help within the covenant of grace. The questions do not reflect a lack of faith but a knowledge of God's expressed character. No believer need fear that to express questions is necessarily sinful when prompted by the knowledge of God's revealed love for his people. Furthermore, recognizing that suffering may be a part of life does not diminish the importance of understanding that God is willing to hear and

⁶⁹James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, ed. James L. Mays (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 23-24.

to help one who asks. Fatalism is not the attitude taught in these psalms. Rather confidence in God's promise of his love and favor.

The significance of this understanding of these psalms in pastoral care is that a believer can express his questions to God. God has revealed himself as Savior. When he appears to be acting in a manner contrary to his character it is not a sin to ask *Why?* or *How long?* The sense of guilt which arises out of one's own reticence and reluctance to question God's actions only adds to the sufferings of one in the depths of pain. By using the example of these psalms a believer is encouraged to approach God with his questions and urge God to act in his behalf. Furthermore, these psalms might serve as a vehicle for the congregation to express and bear one another's burdens in corporate prayer.

God has spoken to the church through his Word, "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says YHWH, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you hope in your latter end."⁷⁰ As Christians we are in a covenant of grace with God through Christ. Through our identification with the psalmists, the didactic force of these psalms encourages us to pray, to come to God in Christ's name with our concerns.

Even in times of calamity, God's purpose for those in Christ is forgiveness, blessing, and eternal life. Though God may do an alien work, his purpose for us is his proper work. "For his anger is but for a moment; His favor is for a life-time; Weeping may last for the night, But joy comes in the morning."⁷¹ The Confessions teach us that God does his alien work in order to do his proper work.⁷² The alien work of God is not his ultimate purpose for his people.

⁷⁰ Jeremiah 29:11. See also Romans 5:1-5 and Ephesians 2:13-18.

⁷¹ Psalm 30:5.

⁷² *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article XII, *De Confessione et Satisfactione*, 61. This is indicated by an "ut" clause, that is, God's purposeful intention is to do his own proper work.

The God who works in us through tribulation of any kind is also the only God who can help us in any tribulation. These prayers are the voice of the community of God which knows its only hope is in God.⁷³ They appeal to God that he would turn from wrath, silence, and inaction, and that he would return to his proper work of forgiveness, blessing, and life. God does this because of his own gracious choice in Christ. Mays notes,

The trust that God will in the end do so is based on nothing in the congregation. It is based on the self understanding that the congregation is the work of God, there in existence, wholly and only as the act of God. Believing that, the congregation can hope that God will not abandon what he has begun.⁷⁴

Those who have been given forgiveness and life through Holy Baptism have this confidence and hope in God's grace demonstrated to us in Christ.

⁷³ Mays, *Psalms*, 25.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 265.

TRANSLATION OF PSALM 80

1] To the Choirmaster, according to the Lilies, A Testimony for Asaph, A Psalm

1st Stanza:

- 2] Shepherd of Israel, give ear,
O you who leads Joseph as a flock,
O you who is enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth!
3] Before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh
stir up your might and come as salvation¹ for us.
4] *O God restore us*
*and cause your face to shine so that we may be saved.*²

2nd Stanza:

- 5] O YHWH, God of Hosts,
How long will you be angry with the prayers of your people?
6] You have fed them the bread of tears
and have given them to drink tears in full measure.³
7] You bring us strife with⁴ our neighbors
and our enemies laugh among themselves.
8] *O God of Hosts restore us*
*and cause your face to shine so that we may be saved.*²

3rd Stanza:

- 9] You brought out a Vine from Egypt,
you drove out the nations and planted it.
10] You cleared the way before it,
you caused it roots to take hold,⁵
and caused it to fill the land.
11] The mountains were covered with its shade
and the mighty cedars⁶ with its branches.
12] It extended its branches to the Sea
and its shoots to the River.
13] Why have you torn down its wall
so that all who pass along the way pluck it?
14] The wild boar from the forest ravages⁷ it,
and the creature of the fields feeds on it.

- 15] God of Hosts turn,
look down from heaven and see,
and take care of this vine.
- 16] The stock which your right hand has planted
and the fruit⁸ which you strengthened for yourself,
- 17] It was burned with fire; it was cut down!
May they perish⁹ from the rebuke of your presence.
- 18] Let¹⁰ your hand be upon the man of your right hand,
upon the son of man you made strong for yourself.
- 19] Then we will not be disloyal to you.
Give us life and we will call upon your name.
- 20] *O YHWH, God of Hosts restore us,
cause your face to shine so that we may be saved.*²

Translation Notes:

1 Vs. 3, imperative followed by ל with the sense of reference to, “with reference to salvation for us.”

2 Vs. 4, vs. 8, vs. 20- נושעה, jussive of purpose, voluntative ה.

3 Vs. 6, the term שליש indicates a measure of unknown quantity relating to a third. It is translated as “full measure.”

4 Vs. 7, I am translating ל with the sense of reference to, “with reference to our neighbors.”

5 Vs. 10, literally “you caused its roots to root.”

6 Vs. 11, literally “the cedars of God.”

7 Vs. 14, an unusual quadratical verb form.

8 Vs. 16, פרי is translated as “fruit.”

9 Vs. 17, jussive, imprecatory wish.

10 Vs. 18, jussive.

TABLE 1

AW, Category 1, God's Anger or Wrath: anger, wrath, jealousy, and other terms indicating God active participation in causing the distress of the psalmist or community.

AD, Category 2, God's Abandonment or Distance: forget, hide, reject, cast off, being far off, and other terms of God's thrusting away or leaving the psalmist or community.

IS, Category 3, God's Indifference or Silence: sleep, terms indicating that God allows the enemy to mock, revile or otherwise persecute the psalmist or community without answering or stopping their evil.

Term	Part of Speech, Meaning	References BHS	Category	Frequency
אַנְף אָף	n., anger; v., angry	6:2; 74:1; 79:5; 90:11	AW	4
סתר	v., hide	13:2; 44:25; 88:15; 89:47	AD	4
זנה	v., cast off, reject	43:2, 44:24; 74:1; 88:15	AD	4
שכח	v., forget	13:2; 42:10; 44:25	AD	3
לחץ	n., oppression	42:10; 43:2; 44:25	IS	3
חמה	n., wrath	6:2, 89:47	AW	2
עשן	n., anger; v., angry	74:1; 80:5	AW	2
רחוק	adj., far off	10:1; 22:2	AD	2
נאץ	v., revile	10:13; 74:10	IS	2
חרף	v., scoff	42:11; 74:10	IS	2
פלה	v., fail	119:81, 82	IS	2
יסר	v., chasten	6:2	AW	1
יכח	v., rebuke	6:2	AW	1
קנא	n., jealousy	79:5	AW	1
פרץ	v., break down	80:13	AW	1
עזב	v., forsake	22:2	AD	1
ינון	n., sorrow	13:3	IS	1
ראה	v., look on (not act)	35:17	IS	1
ישן	v., sleep	44:24	IS	1
עני	n., affliction	44:25	IS	1
שוב	v., hold back	74:11	IS	1
אמר	v., say (mockingly)	79:10	IS	1
ארה	v., pluck	80:13	IS	1
עלז	v., exult	94:3	IS	1
רדף	v., persecute	119:84	IS	1

TABLE 2

God's Attitude or Behavior: AW- Anger or Wrath; AD- Abandonment or Distance; S- Indifference or Silence.

Force of the Question: U- Urgency, God Act Now; CP- Change of Action toward Petitioner; CE- Change Situation with respect to Enemies.

Basis of Appeal: CS- Compassion for Sufferer; JP- Justice for Persecuted; NR- God's Reputation, Name.

Type of Lament	Ref. BHS	Question	Term	God's Attitude	Force of ?	Basis of Appeal	Question Occurs	
Individual	6:4	How long?	עַד־מַתִּי	AW	U	CS, NR	Petition	
	10:1	Why?	לְמָה	AD	CP	JP	Lament	
	10:13	Why?	עַל־מָה	IS	CE	JP	Petition	
	13:2	2-How long?	עַד־אֵנָה	AD	CP, U	CS	Lament	
	13:3	2-How long?	עַד־אֵנָה	IS	CP CE U	CS	Lament	
	22:2	Why?	לְמָה	AD	CP	CS	Lament	
	35:17	How long?	כַּמָּה	IS	CE, U	JP	Lament	
	42:10	2-Why?	לְמָה	IS	CP, CE	JP	Lament	
	43:2	2-Why?	לְמָה	AD, IS	CP, CE	JP	Lament	
	88:15	Why?	לְמָה	AD	CP	CS	Lament	
	119:82	When?	מַתִּי	IS	CP, U	CS	Lament	
	119:84	How long?	כַּמָּה	IS	U	CS	Lament	
	119:84	When?	מַתִּי	IS	CE, U	JP	Lament	
	King	89:47	How long?	עַד־מָה	AW, AD	CP, U	CS	Lament
		89:50	Where?	אֵיךָ	IS	CP CE	JP, NR	Petition
Ind. for Comm.	94:3	2-How long?	עַד־מַתִּי	IS	CE, U	JP	Lament	
Community	44:24	Why?	לְמָה	AD, IS	CP	JP, NR	Lament	
	44:25	Why?	לְמָה	AD, IS	CP	JP, NR	Lament	
	74:1	Why?	לְמָה	AW, AD	CP	NR	Petition	
	74:10	How long?	עַד־מַתִּי	IS	CE, U	JP	Lament	
	74:11	Why?	לְמָה	IS	CE	JP	Lament	
	79:5	How long?	עַד־מָה	AW	CP, U	JP, NR	Lament	
	79:10	Why?	לְמָה	IS	CE	NR	Petition	
	80:5	How long?	עַד־מַתִּי	AW	CP, U	CS	Lament	
	80:13	Why?	לְמָה	AW, IS	CP	CS	Lament	
	90: 13	How long?	עַד־מַתִּי	AW	U	CS	Petition	

TABLE 3

Hebrew Term	Part/Speech, Meaning	References	Frequency
חסד	n., mercy	6:5; 13:6; 44:27; 88:12; 89:3, 15, 25, 29, 34, 50; 90:14; 94:18; 119:88	13
אמונה	n., faithfulness	88:12, 89:2, 3, 6, 9, 25, 34, 50	8
שוב	v., turn, return, restore	6:5; 35:17; 79:12; 80:4, 8, 15, 20; 90:13	8
זכר	v., remember	74:2, 18, 22; 89:48, 51	5
קום	v., arise	10:12; 35:2; 44:27; 74:22	4
אל-שכח	v., do not forget	10:12; 74:19, 23	3
נבט	v., consider	13:4; 74:20; 80:15	3
ישע	v., save	6:5, 79:9	2
נצל	v., deliver	22:21; 79:9	2
ריב	v., contend	35:1; 74:22	2
שפט	v., judge	35:24; 43:1	2
עזר	v., help	79:9; 119:86	2

TABLE 4

Term	Individual, 13 vss.	Community, 13 vss.	Term Total	Group Total
עד־מותי	1	5	6	
עד־אנה	4		4	
עד־מה		2	2	
פמה	2		2	
Type Total	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>How long? 14</u>
למה	7	6	13	
על־מה	1		1	
Type Total	<u>8</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>Why? 14</u>
מתי	2		2	When? 2
איפה		1	1	Where? 1

TABLE 5

Term	God's Attitude	Force of Question	Basis of Appeal
How long?			
עַד־מַתִּי	AW-3; AD-0; IS-2	U-5; CP-1; CE-2	CS-3; JP-2; NR-1
עַד־אֵנָה	AW-0; AD-1; IS-1	U-2; CP-2; CE-1	CS-2; JP-0; NR-0
עַד־מָה	AW-2; AD-1; IS-0	U-2; CP-2; CE-0	CS-1; JP-1; NR-1
כַּמֶּה	AW-0; AD-0; IS-2	U-2; CP-0; CE-1	CS-1; JP-1; NR-0
Individual	AW-1; AD-1; IS-3	U-5; CP-2; CE-2	CS-4; JP-1; NR-1
Community	AW-4; AD-1; IS-2	U-6; CP-3; CE-2	CS-3; JP-3; NR-1
Group Total	AW-5; AD-2; IS-5	U-11; CP-5; CE-4	CS-7; JP-4; NR-2
Why?			
לְמַה	AW-2; AD-7; IS-7	U-0; CP-9; CE-4	CS-3; JP-6; NR-4
עַל־מַה	AW-0; AD-0; IS-1	U-0; CP-0; CE-1	CS-0; JP-1; NR-0
Individual	AW-2; AD-5; IS-3	U-0; CP-5; CE-3	CS-2; JP-4; NR-0
Community	AW-0; AD-2; IS-5	U-0; CP-4; CE-2	CS-1; JP-3; NR-4
Group Total	AW-2; AD-7; IS-8	U-0; CP-9; CE-5	CS-3; JP-7; NR-4
When?			
מַתִּי	AW-0; AD-0; IS-2	U-2; CP-1; CE-1	CS-1; JP-1; NR-0
Where?			
אֵיךְ	AW-0; AD-0; IS-1	U-0; CP-1; CE-1	CS-0; JP-1; NR-1

TABLE 6

Sequencing of Verb Forms in Psalm 80

Stanza #1	Imperatives.
	Refrain using imperatives with a jussive of purpose.
Stanza #2	Question with perfect, followed by perfects and waw-consecutive imperfections describing the situation.
	Refrain using imperatives with a jussive of purpose.
Stanza #3	Imperfections and perfects describing past blessings.
	Question followed by descriptive perfects and imperfections, appeal using imperatives, more descriptive perfects and participles, followed by imprecatory jussive.
	Jussive of appeal and participle, followed by vow using imperfect, further request in imperfect, followed by second vow in imperfect.
	Refrain using imperatives with a jussive of purpose.

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THE FUNCTION OF THE QUESTIONS “HOW LONG?” AND “WHY?”
ADDRESSED TO GOD IN THE LAMENT PSALMS

By Robert Shreckhise
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