

## Voice as Counter to Violence<sup>1</sup>

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Professor Bosma suggested in our correspondence that what I should do this afternoon is to try to take up a particular psalm and then talk about some of the practical, pastoral implications. That is what I will try to do. Before I do that, I want to make some comments about why I deal with this psalm under the rubric of voice as an alternative to violence, and I think you will see the direction of my thinking.

I tried to argue this morning that the lament psalms insist upon Israel's finding voice, a voice that tends to be abrasive and insistent. The lament psalm is a Jewish refusal of silence before God. This Jewish refusal of silence is not cultural, sociological, or psychological, but it is in the end, theological. It is a Jewish understanding that an adequate relationship with God permits and requires a human voice that will speak out against every wrong perpetrated either on earth or by heaven. That is where I left it in our earlier reflection together. This afternoon I want to talk about imposed coercive silence. I assume that the verse in Habakkuk 2:20b, "Let all the earth be silent" (NIV), was written by a librarian. Coercive silence is always a transaction between a powerful agent and a weaker subordinate. That is, it is an unequal transaction between the powerful and the powerless, and such silence (this is my thesis sentence) generates and legitimates violence on the part of both. The silencer thinks he (I use that pronoun advisedly; it is generic) is free to do whatever he wants; the silenced who is reduced to docility by the silencer eventually will break out in violence either against self or against the silencer. I do not need to cite examples. I consider this matter of voice and violence not to be a theoretical issue but a concrete, practical, pastoral issue because we live in a violent, abusive society in which there is a terrible conspiracy in violence that can only be broken when the silence is broken by the lesser party.

The lament psalms, I propose, constitute either the breaking of silence against the enemy by summoning God or the breaking of silence against God when God is perceived to be unjust or fickle. It is clear in these psalms, moreover, that finding voice from underneath to speak against the hegemony of

<sup>1</sup> A lecture delivered at Calvin Theological Seminary on April 22, 1993.

God or the hegemony of the enemy does indeed cause things to change. It is simply astonishing that when the powerless find voice, done at great risk, things must happen differently among the powerful, including God. I do not know, as Claus Westermann does not know,<sup>2</sup> how one characteristically moves from plea to praise in the Psalms. But I have no doubt that the plea with all of its component parts is a necessary prologue and preamble to praise, and that the situation would never have gotten to be one of praise had there not been this protest and petition/complaint at the outset.

Before I consider the Psalm that I have selected, I want simply to catalog for you a number of studies about silence and speech. I will do this rather quickly. First, I want to mention Job. Job's friends encourage submissiveness but Job refuses; the entire drama of the book, including the whirlwind speeches, depends upon Job's refusal.

Second, in 1985, Elaine Scarry wrote a book entitled *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*.<sup>3</sup> The book is in two parts. The first long part is a description of torture. Her thesis is that when governments or movements torture people they never do it in order to obtain information. They do it to unmake persons so that they cease to exist as identifiable agents. The most remarkable thing about Scarry's book is that the second half, partly informed by the Bible and partly informed by Marx, claims that the only counter to torture is speech. As torture unmakes persons, so speech makes persons.

Third, Judith Lewis Hermann has recently written a book titled *Trauma and Recovery*<sup>4</sup> that is enormously important. She studies a number of cases of people who have suffered the violence of war (including soldiers), and she studies violated women. The title of the book, *Trauma and Recovery*, is a statement that all of these people have experienced trauma; recovery from trauma has to do, in case after case, with speech in a safe context, which is the only way to get past brutality.

Fourth, Carol Gilligan, in a series of studies beginning, as you know, with *In a Different Voice*,<sup>5</sup> has now documented the way in which twelve-year-old, thirteen-year-old, and fourteen-year-old girls grow silent because they have figured out that in a male world the only safe role is to cover over your competence and withdraw and be silent. Her study recognizes that such imposed silence is dev-

<sup>2</sup> Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). More recently see William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), who develops Scarry's general thesis in quite concrete ways.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Lewis Hermann, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theology and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

astating, She considers how older women can find the voice that at twelve years of age they surrendered to survive. It is an astonishing study!

Fifth, Alice Miller, in a series of books of which I mention the one titled *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child*,<sup>6</sup> has studied the way in which powerful institutions, by which she particularly means the church and the psychotherapeutic community, have crushed children to insensitivity and have taught them not to notice or to value self. Thus, her title, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*. It is clear in Alice Miller that one antidote for the recovery of a sense of self is the speech that is necessary to selfing.

Sixth, I simply mention and will not comment on a book by Rebecca S. Chopp titled *The Power to Speak*.<sup>7</sup> This book is a study of biblical texts in which women gain speech.

And finally, I dare to mention alongside these important studies my own little piece in my book *Praying the Psalms*.<sup>8</sup> It is an attempt to study the lament psalms, in which I have asked the question: What do you think we ought to do with the anger and the yearning for vengeance that is so powerful among us? I proposed in that study that what the lament psalms do is show Israel doing three things. First, you must voice the rage. Everybody knows that. Everybody in the therapeutic society knows that you must voice it, but therapeutic society stops there. Second, you must submit it to another, meaning God in this context. Third, you then must relinquish it and say, "I entrust my rage to you."

I do not want to make too much of my own little scheme except to say to you that all of these books, one way or another, propose the same grid of speech. Observe about these studies that I have named, first of all, that they all have to do with the brutalized powerless gaining enough speech to make a claim for themselves against a power that is seen to be ruthless and indifferent. And notice second (I only noticed this after I had written all of this down, but you noticed it) that the great preponderance of authors are women who are speaking out of a world that is silenced by the hegemony of male power. This fact is immensely important because you know that there are now feminist interpreters who say that in much prophetic metaphor Yahweh is portrayed as a sex abuser. I mention particularly that odd text in Jeremiah 20:7 where Jeremiah says, "O LORD, you have seduced me," and, as you know, פָּתָה (*patah*) is capable of being translated "to rape" (Ex. 22:15).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Alice Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child*, new ed., trans. Hildegard Hannum and Hunter Hannum (London: Pluto, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Saint Mary's Press, 1982), 67-80.

<sup>9</sup> See Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), and Carol J. Dempsey, *The Prophets: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

I once put that comment about Jeremiah 20:7 into a little exegetical study, and I had a wonderful Roman Catholic secretary who cared about things. When I did not give her enough to do, she helped me do my work. She was a very pious lady, and she typed in the margin of that manuscript, "God may deceive and God may seduce but God does not rape." Well, it is a hard question. I do not want to pursue that, except to say that, as these studies are about a voice of self against hegemony, they suggest that pastoral work must be enormously attentive to power relations and the ways in which hegemony is imposed and what it costs to break out of that hegemony.<sup>10</sup>

In this regard, I should insist that the theological breaking of God's hegemony, that the sociological breaking of the hegemony of the power class, and the psychological breaking of deformed ego structure are all of a piece. All require the daring assertion of the lesser party, which is done at great risk. I simply mean to suggest that in these lament psalms we have a script for how the community has practiced that subversive activity of finding voice. I suggest, moreover, that in a society that is increasingly shut down in terms of public speech, the church in all of its pastoral practices may be the community where the silenced are authorized to voice.

The Psalm that I want to talk about is Psalm 39. I have no shrewd suggestion to make about this psalm, except to walk you through it.

I have selected this psalm because it is generically a lament psalm, but this classification is not easy or obvious. It is one of the few psalms—Westermann says that there are none but that is not quite right—along with Psalm 88 that seems to have no positive resolution and that seems to leave things dangling. This psalm is in a general way always listed as a lament psalm, except that it does not follow the usual grid that you will find in every introductory book on the Psalms.<sup>11</sup> Psalm 39 seems to be more reflective and perhaps reflects some sapiential influence. It is close enough to the general genre of lament psalms, however, for our purposes, and we can, if we want to, then extrapolate from it to other psalms.

Verses 1-3 [2-4]<sup>12</sup> are a retrospective on what the speaker had done. It is looking back on a longstanding piety. In verse 1a[2a] the speaker says, "I said." It is a soliloquy in which he says aloud, "I said," and then reports on what he had said, "I will keep silent. It is a sin to speak out." Just listen to that! "It is a sin, to speak out in front of the wicked." One ought not to express pressure against God among the nonbelievers because you will sound like a nonbeliever. Perhaps such speech, where you dare to utter it, would expose doubt or anger

<sup>10</sup> See David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 64.

<sup>12</sup> The numbers in square brackets refer to the verses of the Hebrew text.

or give the appearance of diminished faith. Calvin says that such speech would be an occasion for blasphemy.<sup>13</sup>

However, the speaker's intention to keep silent turns out to be too costly. In verses 2-3 [3-4] he says, "My distress grew worse and I got a hot heart. And when I thought about it, the fire burned so I spoke. I tried to be silent but then I worked my tongue because I couldn't do otherwise."

Verses 4-6 [5-8] contain a unique combination of speech forms. Verse 4 [5] seems like a more reflective statement because it does not seem to follow from verse 3 [4]. Verse 3 [4] really is hot, whereas verse 4 [5] is rather cool. Verse 4 [5] is in a deferential tone, saying to God, "LORD, why don't you tell me what I don't know about the limits of my life?"

In verse 4 [5], the speaker names Yahweh for the first time. In that moment of bold address, things already begin to change. The cause of trouble has now become an open question in the relationship.<sup>14</sup>

The NIV and NRSV have a colon at the end of verse 3 [4], suggesting that verse 4 [5] is what this speaker said when he finally got his tongue. I do not know if that is right. Artur Weiser thinks not.<sup>15</sup> Verse 4 [5] is quite reflective. Verse 5 [6], which continues this speech, is of a different kind. This verse begins with the Hebrew word הִנֵּה ( *hinneh* ), "behold," which the NIV and NRSV have left out. Then notice that in verse 5b [6b] the speaker claims that God has nullified him. He says, "My lifetime is as nothing (אֵין, *ayin*) in your sight." This claim is followed by three clauses, each of which begin with אַךְ ( *ak* ), "surely":

<sup>5c</sup> Surely every man stands as a mere breath! אַךְ כָּל-הַבָּל כָּל-אָדָם נֹצֵב 6c

<sup>6a</sup> Surely man goes about as a shadow! אַךְ-בְּצֵלִים יִתְהַלֵּךְ אִישׁ 7a

<sup>b</sup> Surely for nought are they in turmoil... אַךְ-הַבָּל יְהִמְיוּן b

It is important to note that in verse 5c [6c] and in verse 6b [7b] the psalmist employs the Hebrew word הֶבֶל ( *hebel* ), which means "vanity," "zero," "bubble." It is the same word as in Ecclesiastes: "mere breath," "shadow," "nothing."

Most interesting about verses 5-6 [6-7] is their dissimilarity from verse 4 [5]. Verse 4 [5] is kind of a serene, trustful petition. However, verses 5-6 [7-8] are in fact an accusation. And if my life is הֶבֶל and בָּל and shadow, it is, claims the psalmist in verse 5bc [6bc], "because you have made it so."

Observe about verses 4 [5], 5, and 6 [6-7] that they are a strange combination of deference and accusation, saying to God, "You have reduced all human life and my human life to meaninglessness." Israel speaks in this psalm on the convic-

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 2:73.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 109.

<sup>15</sup> Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, trans. Herbert Hartwell, OTL (London: SCM Press, 1962), 328-29.

tion that to speak seriously about meaninglessness is to render meaning. Speech turns meaninglessness into meaningfulness!

Verse 7 [8] marks a major turning point that is introduced by the conjunction וְעַתָּה (*we'attah*), "and now" (Ps. 2:10). This verse signals a crucial rhetorical move from past reflection to present intensity, from meditation to active, insistent hope:<sup>16</sup>

7a And now, what do I wait for, O LORD, אֲדַנְי מַה־קְוִי־יְיָ אֲדַנְי 8a

b My hope is in you. תּוֹקְלִי לְךָ יְיָ: b

The speech in this verse grows bolder. Remarkably, through the course of Psalm 39 this silent speaker gets more and more voice. Calvin says predictably about verse 7 that now begins right prayer.<sup>17</sup> This means that the first six verses are not so hot.

In verse 7a [8a] the speaker first asks about his hope, "for what do I wait?" Significantly, he addresses this protesting question directly to Yahweh.<sup>18</sup> This is only the second time that the speaker names Yahweh. The focus on Yahweh is an insistence that things need not and will not stay as they are, for the very utterance of the divine name constitutes an act of hope.<sup>19</sup> Strikingly, the psalmist answers his own question, "My hope is in you" (vs. 7b [8b]). This is a statement of incredible trust, even though uttered by the one who has recently accused!

After this remarkable expression of trust in Yahweh, there follows a series of powerful imperatives addressed to Yahweh in verses 8-10a [9-11a]. We grow so accustomed to these stylized imperatives that we do not notice their rhetorical force or their theological daring. However, think what it means for a petitioner to address an imperative to "the maker of heaven and earth." In much of our rather conventional prayer, we trivialize prayer imperatives. You know: "Help us, O Lord, to care about each other, and remind the elders that we meet Tuesday night in room 206 and all this kind of business." Characteristically, in the lament psalms these are big imperatives. They are life-and-death imperatives. They voice an urgency to God because everything is at stake for the petitioner. The urgency of imperatives matches the helplessness and need of the speaker.

The innocent looking statement in verse 7b [8b], "My hope is in you," is a strategy for leveraging Yahweh about the imperatives: "It's all up to you and you better fulfill my hope." You can see whether you think that is an over-reading of the text.

<sup>16</sup> Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," 109.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 2:81.

<sup>18</sup> The Hebrew text reads אֲדַנְי but some evidence suggests a second reading of Yahweh.

<sup>19</sup> Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," 109.

At any rate, with powerful imperatives the psalmist pleads in verse 8 [9]:

8a Deliver me from all my transgressions. מְכַל־פְּשָׁעַי הַצִּילֵנִי 9a

b Make me not the scorn of the fool! אַל־תְּשִׂימֵנִי: b

There is, as you may know, a growing literature about the power of shame, about being embarrassed and therefore wanting to conceal self. One of the things we are discovering in light of attention to shame is that the church is all tooled up to deal with guilt and now we are discovering that guilt is a secondary kind of phenomenon that is built on top of shame and we do not know how to deal with it very well. Israel is "a shame society." Israel understands the social power that makes one crawl into a hole and become invisible. Israel seeks protection from God against the negating power of humiliation.

Verse 9ab [10ab] is an odd statement of deference that looks back to verses 1-2 [3-4]:

9a I am silent.

נֶאֱלַמְתִּי 10a

b I do not open my mouth....

בִּלְאֵ אֶפְתָּח־פִּי b

But then it is as though the audacious כִּי clause of verse 9c [10c] reverses the feeling:

9c because [it is] you, you have done it [to me]. כִּי אַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ: 10c

Hans Joachim Kraus' comments on the tension in this verse are very perceptive.<sup>20</sup> One can see the tension without Kraus: This psalmist is voicing an incredible contradiction in vs. 7b [8b] and vs. 9c [10c]: "My trust is in you" (vs. 7b [8b] and, "You, you have done it to me" (vs. 9c [10c]). The prayer voices a terrible ambiguity. On the one hand, this psalm reflects a kind of conventional deference and piety, but, on the other hand, the speaker is beginning to discover that the very God upon whom one must rely is the great problem in one's life: "Because you have done it" (vs. 9c [10c] ).

When I read this psalm, it occurred to me that this situation of the speaker is very much like the situation of a small child who gets very angry at mother but who has nowhere to go to get succor and embrace, except to mother. When that happens a good-enough mother embraces the child, even while the child is still beating on the breast of mother in anger. This psalm, so it seems to me, voices a situation of faith that is fraught with incredible ambivalence. The very God upon whom we must rely is identified as the very God who really has done us in.

Verse 10a [11 a] issues one more forceful imperative. The psalmist just said in verse 9c [10c], "you have done it to me." In verse 10a [ 11 a] he says, "Remove your stroke from me! Why don't you stop it now? It is enough." The speaker is a jumble of conflicted emotions, all of which are voiced in trusting candor to God.

<sup>20</sup> HansJoachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 418.

Verse 11 [12] returns to a more reflective tone. It seems like a distancing statement, not so particular and personal. Instead, it offers generalizing wisdom: "you chastise mortals in punishment for sin." This verse sounds like verse 4 [5], which, as we noted above, is also reflective. The last clause of verse 11 [12], **אֵךְ הֶבֶל כָּל-אָדָם** ("surely every man is a mere breath!"), looks back to verse 5c [6c] with another **אֵךְ** ('ak), "surely," and another use of the word **הֶבֶל** (*hebel*). This psalm uses the word *hebel* three times, a primary accent on this "conversation of the heart addressed to God." When a therapist says, "Did you notice in the last three minutes you used this one word seven times? Do you think it's important?" "No," you reply, "I just have a limited vocabulary."

This reiteration of the term **הֶבֶל** (*hebel*) sounds to me like somebody who is at the brink of ceasing to be. The speaker can just barely get the words uttered. When one finally speaks, there is such desperation that it comes out as frantic anger. I must speak to you, because you are my only hope. There is a double mindedness of scolding and trust. This dread-filled ambivalence is about where this speaker is positioned in front of God.

Verse 12abc [13abc] is the most conventional part of the psalm. It is a passionate plea for a hearing that sounds much more like a regular lament and consists of vigorous imperatives that name Yahweh for the third time:

12 Hear my prayer, O LORD; **שְׁמַעַה תְּפִלָּתִי יְהוָה** 13a  
 b give ear to my cry. **וְשׁוּעָתִי הֶאֱזִינָה** b  
 c Do not hold your peace at my tears. **אַל-דַּמְעָתִי אַל-תְּחַרֵּשׁ** c

The problem in this verse is not that I have kept silent, but the problem is that God has kept silent. "Hold your peace (**תְּחַרֵּשׁ**)" means, "You don't say anything." At the beginning of the psalm, the speaker noticed what has happened to him because he has kept silent too long. Now, at the end, he is noticing that what happens to him is because God kept silent too long.

The last clause of verse 12 [13] offers a motivation to God. Very often in the lament psalms when there is an imperative issued to God, it is as though God says, "Why should I do that?" And then one gives a reason why God should hear prayer and speak out.

The NRSV translates the last clause of verse 12 [13] as follows: "For I am your passing guest, a sojourner, like all my fathers." The NRSV's translation of verse 12d [13d], "I am your passing guest" (**כִּי גֵר אָנֹכִי עִמָּךְ**), is very weak.

Together with the Hebrew noun **תּוֹשָׁב**, **גֵּר** forms the word pair "resident alien-sojourner."<sup>22</sup> This word pair is a social category for an alien who is given permission to live in another people's land without the rights of citizens (Gen. 23:4). In other words, "I am your problem. I am exposed and dependent and *vul-*

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ps. 119:19.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Gen. 23:4; Lev. 25:23; and 1 Chron. 29:15.

*nerable* and you are responsible for me." The NRSV's translation of the Hebrew noun נַגַּל as "passing guest" is too sweet.

The concluding verse, verse 13 [14], ends in a strange petition: "Look away from me, that I may know gladness, before I depart and be no more!" This closing entreaty sounds like Job.<sup>23</sup>

Calvin has a wonderful phrase for this unusual plea. He says that the speaker's despair is forced to exceed the proper limits of grief.<sup>24</sup> There are, to be sure, conventions for grief. This psalmist, however, is in such deep despair that he violates the conventions of grief. In this last verse he says, "Quit staring at me, quit watching me in order that I can have peace and exist. Because if you keep watching me, I am going to cease to exist."<sup>25</sup> It is a very odd ending in which the prayer asks for distance from God, weary of endless surveillance. The most poignant point about this psalm is, as Kraus writes, that "Psalm 39 is permeated by two sensations that are at war with each other"<sup>26</sup> and "therefore it is wrong to neutralize the tension by means of text corrections or transpositions."<sup>27</sup> Just let the tension persist.

In a society that is increasingly silenced, this terrible ambivalence about more silence and some speech is enormously important. There are of course people in marriages in which the silent member cannot bear the relationship anymore. The silenced knows she must speak, but she also knows that if she speaks everything will all fall apart. Indeed, we all know about social situations in which the silenced and marginalized dare not speak out, but they must or they will continue to be הַבֵּל. The amazing thing about this psalm and about Israel's characteristic speech is that this drama of silence and speech is understood as a theological transaction. In a world that is unjust, where Yahweh is one of the workers of injustice, Yahweh's serious devotees who hope in Yahweh must ponder when it is time to wait, when it is time to hope, when it is time to knuckle under, and when it is time to issue a loud imperative in order that I shall not pass away in nonbeing. The same writer who famously celebrated *hebel* (vanity; Eccl. 1:2) also knows there are many different times (Eccl. 3:1-8). It matters what time it is, for one who prays must know when to say what. . . and when to keep silent.

I want to conclude with some reflective comments. The first comment is to question: Does a lament psalm do anything? Or, is it simply cathartic activity? We know of course that we cannot answer that from inside the psalm. We

<sup>23</sup> Cf., Job 7:19; 10:20-21; 14:6.

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 2:88.

<sup>25</sup> This concluding petition ends with the terse אֵינִי נִינֵי (cf. קָאֵן, vs. 6).

<sup>26</sup> Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 419.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

answer that according to our theological presuppositions. I simply want to cite for you two answers that I think are deeply important.

The first answer is found in Harold Fisch's wonderful book, *Poetry with a Purpose*.<sup>28</sup> In this book, Fisch claims that the psalms are not monologues but insistently at all times dialogue poems. He writes, "We are not speaking of an encounter merely for the sake of discovering the existence of the other and the self in the relationship to the other. The 'thou' answers the plea of the 'I' and that answer signals a change in the opening situation."<sup>29</sup>

He is saying this really does compel God to act; except, of course, in Psalm 39 there is not any hint of that. I want to suggest to you that Psalms 39 and 88 pose for a pastor the acute problem of theodicy, the problem of the justice of God. Of course, I know all of that discussion about speculative answers to the problem of theodicy. But I suspect that Israel's primal, pastoral theodicy is not apocalyptic or creation or life after death. Instead, Israel's primal strategy for theodicy is to pray the psalm again and again and again. Israel's faith is finally not a cognitive operation, but it is a dialogue in which this voiced partner insists that the too-long silent partner in heaven must come to voice. It is possible, for example, to conclude that the whirlwind speech crushed Job; but the truth of the matter is that Job got an answer. If faith is essentially conversation, what Israel most craves is an answer.

There is a second, alternative answer to the question: Do these psalms do anything? Gerald T. Sheppard is an evangelical scholar who teaches at the University of Toronto. He has written about this matter in two publications. He first wrote about it in the journal *Interpretation*<sup>30</sup> and then expanded this alternative answer in the *Gottwald Festschrift*.<sup>31</sup> He suggests that the lament psalms that are ostensibly addressed to God are, in fact, designed for the overhearing by the human oppressor. That may strike you as reductionist. Sheppard wants to say that these speeches are always political and that they are always aimed at the rearrangement of earthly power.

One could of course say of Sheppard's claim, "That's a very interesting way to handle the psalm if you do not believe in God," except that Sheppard is an evangelical scholar. My own judgment is that it is not an either/or but probably a both/and: the prayer is serious theological discourse engaging God but at the same time serious political discourse as well.

<sup>28</sup> Harold Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>30</sup> Gerald T. Sheppard, "Theology and the Book of Psalms," *Interpretation* 46 (1992): 143-55.

<sup>31</sup> Gerald T. Sheppard, "Enemies and the Politics of Prayer in the Book of Psalms," in *The Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman Gottwald*, ed. D. Jobling, P. Days, and Gerald T. Sheppard (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 61-82.

By way of consolidation, I want to make some obvious, quick reflections of a theological kind. The first one is this: Israel understands that life consists in speech, and if you do not have a voice in the community, you do not exist. Every silenced part of a community knows this fact deeply and painfully.

Second, behind the rather obvious phenomenon of speech and power there is also the deep problem of covenantal monotheism. That is, Israel in its faithfulness has nowhere to go except to Yahweh. Israel in need must talk to Yahweh. If Israel wants to give up on Yahweh, Israel can do that, but we are talking about people who are not prepared to give up. I heard Elie Wiesel once asked whether he believed in God. He said, "No." He could not believe in God after the holocaust. "But," he said, "Yes, I'm a Jew, I must believe in God, so what I do is believe against God." That is taking God with utmost seriousness. I think that that is what these psalms of complaint characteristically do in highly stylized form.

Third, I cite Terrence W. Tilley's book called *The Evils of Theodicy*.<sup>32</sup> The argument of this book is that all the speculative theodicies are evil because they talk people out of their legitimate pain by way of explanation. Pain does not need to be explained. It needs to be honored and answered. One of the cases that is cited in Tilley's book is George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (London: J. M. Dent, 1906).<sup>33</sup> You recall the story of this peasant woman who falls in love with the son of the manor. She must run away in humiliation and finally ends up in a prison where she will rot, forgotten. Her good friend hunts her down, visits her in prison, and urges her to cry out. It will not get her out of prison, it will not save her from execution, but the last neighborly act is to get a voice.

We now understand in sophisticated sociological and psychological and all kinds of social-scientific ways about these psalms. But, in fact, our faith-family knew long ago about the transformative processes intrinsic to these psalms; we are the ones with the best script! Is it not strange that this best script has become awkward to us, so awkward that the church mostly disregards these vehicles for transformation.

Fourth, it may be that these psalms do indeed move Yahweh to new speech. In Isaiah 42:14 Yahweh says, "I have kept silent long enough, I will speak for my people that is in the Exile." And, in Isaiah 62:1 Yahweh says, "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent." The end of the exile happens because Yahweh breaks Yahweh's silence. Moreover, that break in the silence is a response to Israel's demanding utterance.

Fifth, I propose that Psalm 39 makes available to us the terrible ambiguity of life with God. To legitimate the ambiguity, Israel knows deeply of wanting to

<sup>32</sup> Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1991). See more recently Zachary Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> Tilley, "Giving Voice to the Victim," in *The Evils of Theodicy*, 189-216.

trust and having to speak. When one has long been silenced, the first speech one speaks is likely to be anger. I dare imagine that Psalm 39 affirms that both sides of the ambiguity voiced here are acts of faith. The trusting affirmation is an act of faith; but so is the abrasive accusation an act of faith. I understand that such a tension does not fit the kind of preaching that announces that everything is settled. But then, biblical faith is not and never intends to be a statement of outcomes. It is, rather, a dip into the drama of life and death that continues to be underway.

Sixth, I suggest (your experience may tell you otherwise) that very much pastoral care and pastoral counseling has to do with helping the silenced find a voice. I hypothesize that it is principally the silenced who seek help. It may be the loud mouths who have learned to be silent about the precious things in their lives or it may be the timid who have never dared speak. In either case, it is a very hard thing in habituated silence to gain speech. But I imagine that very many people seek out this kind of help when they become aware in their gut that, if they don't speak soon, they are going to cease to exist. *Hebel* (הֶבֶל)! *Hebel* (הֶבֶל)! *Hebel* (הֶבֶל)!

Seventh, I think that the question before the liturgy of the church, if my general extrapolations have merit, is that we must recover the sense that worship is a covenantal drama in which both parties are at risk. I do not insist that the two parties are fully commensurate. However, both parties are to some extent at risk and that matrix of shared risk is the context for reselfing in the presence of God. This is contrary to any enlightenment notion that the self is an autonomous agent; it is also to oppose a one-dimensional deference that cedes everything to God.

Finally, theologically, where there is not speech from below, pain is characteristically reduced to guilt. Psychologically, without speech the self is characteristically reduced to הֶבֶל (*hebel*). Sociologically, without speech established power goes unchecked. What this psalmist knows is that speech is indispensable to survival and it is inordinately risky. The good news is there is an alternative listener who characteristically—but not always—heeds and honors such abrasive petition.

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