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Psalm 44 and the Function of Lament and Protest¹

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ABSTRACT

Approaching the text with a psychological lens along with historical-critical tools, this essay examines the role of lament and protest in the worship of ancient Israel. Given the nature of the book of Psalms as a worship hymnal, the text reveals praise, thanksgiving and petition alongside with lament and protest. Considering both the cognitive and non-cognitive aspects in humanity's reaching out to God, Psalm 44 exemplifies the function of lament/protest in the context of cognitive behavioural practice and emotive needs on the part of the lamenter/protester. Engaging the text from a culture-context-situatedness perspective, I shall further explicate the effect of this Psalm on its readers.

A THE MERGING OF TWO HORIZONS AND FOUR VOICES

1 The Merging of Two Horizons

The act of biblical interpretation has been articulated as the merging of two horizons: the horizon of the ancient text and that of the reader. This fusion is a vibrant and dynamic process in that the reader brings the whole text-person – Blumenthal's term which refers to the whole narrative/text, or flesh and blood life-experience, of an individual (1993:61) – into the meaning-making process. The significance of the text to the reader is located at the intersection of the two. Engaging Psalm 44 (a psalm of protest) with a psychological lens, what happens is the merging of the emotive sphere of the human psyche and the rage of the psalmist as expressed in the text. This vibrant phenomenon surpasses what the concept 'hermeneutics' (i.e. often referred to as the 'science' of biblical interpretation) can encompass.² It involves a consciousness of the external shaping forces that have crafted the reader into an individual 'self' (with a unique life-text), an apt attention to the status of the given text, and a readiness to accept whatever outcome this interpretive encounter may present.³

¹ This was originally a paper read at the Psychological Hermeneutics of Biblical Themes and Texts Consultation at ISBL, Edinburgh, Scotland (July 2-6, 2006).

² Biblical interpretation has been affirmed by many as neither a science nor an art, rather *both* a science and an art. Cf. Klein, Blomberg & Hubbard (1993:5).

³ As Rollins has observed, the two possible outcomes are either therapeutic or pathogenic (1999:175-182).

Three factors play an important role in determining the research agenda of this essay. The first is my culturally shaped interpretive interest in the strong language of lament and protest in the Book of Psalms. Nurtured in a culture that values 'eating bitter' (literally, or perseverance conceptually) as one of the highest virtues, the fact that lament and protest appear so frequently in this hymnal of worship in Ancient Israel greatly intrigues me. Lamenting and protesting are not only approved means of worship within the Psalms, but these cries from the inmost part of the human soul are also encouraged in the faith community of Israel. What, then, is the role and function of lament and protest? This personal inquiry provides both the impetus and drive behind this undertaking.

Secondly, the sheer reality of human suffering in recent years – its intensity, scope, senselessness, diversity and magnitude – has shaken all theologies on the suffering of the innocent. As I bring my life-text and the recent, collective mega text-experience of humanity – i.e. national and global disasters and catastrophes – into my horizon, I cannot help but sigh silently with a feeling of helplessness. Yet the psalmist in Psalm 44 cries out openly, 'Why do you sleep, O Lord? Why do you hide your face and forget our affliction and distress?' (vv. 24-25). Upon introspection, I believe that there is still a huge gap between lamenting to God inwardly and silently and having the courage to confront God outwardly and openly for his apparent injustice.

Shortly after the Tsunami catastrophe, Yale theologian Volf wrote a popular piece entitled, 'I protest, therefore I believe' (2005). He posed a hard question, one likely echoed by every human soul on earth: 'How can one believe in a good God in the face of such suffering?' (2005:39). Embracing this reality, I can truly identify with Volf's sentiment when he says, 'That's why I am still disturbed by the God to whom I am so immensely attracted and who won't let go of me' (2005:39). For me, engaging in this writing is more than an academic endeavour. It is also wrestling with a faith matter: How can one embrace a seemingly abusive God?

Thirdly, I was greatly encouraged, and yet, discomfited by Blumenthal's monograph, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (1993). It had a significant impact on my investigation into the biblical theme of protest. The book emerges out of the Jewish response to the holocaust, and it is an emotionally powerful and profoundly pastoral book. Blumenthal urges his readers to embrace 'abusive-ness' as an attribute of God. As Rita Nakashima Brock pointed out in the preface, where Blumenthal's challenge leads us will depend on our own answers as we wrestle with the issue of suffering (Blumenthal 1993:xiii). In my case, whether my reading will yield therapeutic or pathogenic results largely depends on the degree of freedom I exercise in engaging text with my emotion, will and intellect – freedom from all constraints whether faith-oriented, self-imposed, culturally, professionally or ecclesiastically bound.

In essence, stating this directly is an intentional break from my constraints. However, I still anticipate a rather challenging and agonizing endeavour.

2 Four Voices and Inter-Dynamics

As an overarching methodology, my approach to the theme of lament and protest in Psalm 44 is interwoven with four voices: the given text, the voice behind my translation, the collective inter-textual voices in the Hebrew Bible (particularly reading inter-textually with other psalms of lament and protest), and the multiplicity of voices represented in the collective ‘text,’ i.e., the flesh-and-blood collective lived experience under the sun (in Blumenthal’s term, the ‘text of life’ [1993:6]). Any text-centred and reader-oriented approach should pay due attention to the given text. The translation is, in essence, my interpretive voice as all translations involve interpretation. Hearing the voice of the psalmist in Psalm 44 against the context and voices of other psalms of lament and protest enriches my understanding of the role and function of protest in the worship of Israel. The fourth voice, the collective ‘text of life’ expands the horizon of one’s perception, and it also gives vigour and passion to the reading.

Moreover, the interplay between the given text and this ‘text of life’ is an interactive phenomenon. At the juxtapositions, there are potentially serious disjunctions, dissonance and existing tensions. Engaging this psalm of protest as a reader, my own emotionality (which is shaped by my gender-culture-context situatedness) also plays a major role. Therefore, as an interpretive tool, the psychological lens is always present as I seek to explore the function of lament/protest through the unique language employed, the flow of development in the psalm, and as I strive to make sense out of the whole experience of suffering and humiliation of the faith community as expressed in the psalm. My reading is then, an emotive-experiencing event.⁴

B DEVELOPING SELFHOOD: CORPORATE SELF, INDIVIDUAL SELF, FALSE SELF, AUTHENTIC SELF

1 Self and Emotion

With the post-modern consciousness of the ‘self’,⁵ Psalm 44 provides another window of perception. Different studies in and adjacent to the Old Testament have made use of the idea of the developing self/selfhood to break new ground in their respective fields. Most significant is the anthropocentric approach in

⁴ Cf. the demonstrated examples of this kind of reading in Leung Lai (2004a and 2004b).

⁵ The word ‘self’ has many different conceptual meanings in the English-speaking world, and its meaning differs across cultures. Here I have adopted a popular view of ‘self’ as the essential quality of a person, the center of feeling and worth that each of us has at the core of our being. See Margolis (1998:1-14) for an introduction of different theories of ‘self.’

wisdom research. By establishing the interconnectedness between biblical wisdom and the development of the 'self' or character formation, fresh approaches have been successfully carried out.⁶ An integrated study between wisdom teaching and educational ministry has been advanced through Melchert's monograph, *Biblical Wisdom and Educational Ministry* (1998).

Since Psalm 44 is a pathos-filled and bitterness/anger-laden poem, establishing the link between emotion and self is crucial to my pursuit. Studies on emotion can be conducted from different approaches in the social sciences and humanities.⁷ I have taken the same anthropocentric approach here and have adopted a popular statement that has gained much consensus within various fields of emotion studies: 'Emotion is the marker of the construction of the self.'⁸ Adopting the emotional theory of reading Hebrew poetry,⁹ Psalm 44 can be read as a spontaneous outpouring of powerful feelings and emotions, an expression of personality.¹⁰ Reading from a psychological perspective, the reader's self is emotionally engaged in the loaded and highly expressive language of lament, accusation (vv. 10-17) and protest (vv. 18-23) of the psalmist against God for God's 'abusiveness.' The reading is then a potentially explosive emotive experience through the transference of the feelings of rage and humiliation.

2 The Shifting and Reshaping Self: The Corporate Self and Individual Self

It is a commonly accepted axiom that there is no stable, unchanging idea that comprises the self. The self is an ever-changing, developing process; and members of the society to which one belongs contribute to shape moral systems and cultural constructs as well as the developing self.¹¹ The self, when it interacts with others in different social situations, also reshapes moral systems of the society. These two premises – of the self *shaping* and the self *shaped* – are the basic ingredients of the concept of 'selfhood,' and they serve as my points of entry here.

⁶ Cf. especially, Brown (1996:1-21).

⁷ E.g., socio-psychological, anthropological, socio-cultural and philosophical.

⁸ In Margolis' term, is the so-called 'cosmic self' (1998:4). See especially, Denzin's threefold structure of emotion as 'feeling-for-the-self' (1984:3) and 'emotion as lived experience' (1985:224).

⁹ Cf. J. Kenneth Kuntz's comprehensive two-part survey (1998, 1999); Niccacci (1997); and Cooper (1987).

¹⁰ Cf. Wordsworth (1971:441); contrast Eliot (1971:783-787).

¹¹ Cf. Margolis (1998:6).

The same concept of the self can be witnessed through the flow of development in Psalm 44. Unique to this psalm of protest¹² are interchangeable personal pronouns. In the context of the God-humanity relationship, verses 2-4 are the psalmist's recollection of God's gracious deeds in the nation's past, and they form a 'You-They' relationship from a third-person perspective. From verses 5-9, there is a double-shifting in the development of the psalmist's self. First, there is a transference or affirmation of personal faith with the community (i.e. shifting from the 'You-They' to the 'You-Me' relationship): 'You are He, my king, O God; Command *deliverance* for Jacob' (v. 5). 'For (וַי)'¹³ I will not trust in *my* bow, nor shall *my* sword save me' (v. 7). Second, this personal affirmation (vv. 5, 7) is again submerged (in the 'we') in reshaping the corporate faith: 'By *you*, we will push our enemies. By your name, *we* will trample those who oppose us' (v. 6). 'But you have saved us from our enemies, and have put to shame those who hated us' (v. 8). 'In God, *we* boast all the day, and *we* praise your name forever' (v. 9). Also, in verses 15-16, the psalmist identifies with the national 'shame' experienced by the people in a most personal way: 'You made *us* a byword among the nations, a laughing stock among the people. *My* shame is continually in front of *me*, and the shame of *my* face covers *me*.' This concept of corporate personality is deeply rooted in the Hebrew mentality.¹⁴ As Di Vito has stated, the individual Israelite is always embedded in the patriarchal family and in the ever-widening circle of relation defined by kinship (1999:217-228). In essence, the individual and the community are inseparable, and each finds its existential significance in close relationship to one another.¹⁵ In this sense, the 'individual self' of the psalmist and the 'corporate self' of the community are intimately connected as ONE.

Traditionally, Psalm 44 has been classified as a psalm of national lament (cf. Westermann 1981). In reality, there should be no distinction between the individual and the communal psalms of lament beyond the form-analysis level. Form-critical results have, in a way, set rigid boundaries for Psalms research in the past and failed to go beyond the literary, historical¹⁶ and form-critical

¹² Also, in the so-called historical psalms, the shifting of personal pronouns in the context of God-humanity relationship is a characteristic feature.

¹³ Note that וַי is used through out this psalm as a key connecting word to underscore the contrast or for emphasis.

¹⁴ The Book of Psalms is full of reference to this corporate personality. For example, in Psalms 44 and 73, the personal pronouns are interchangeable within the development of the Psalms.

¹⁵ This aspect resembles the traditional Chinese ideology of the harmony and interconnectedness of the individual (the 'small self') and the nation/country (the 'big self').

¹⁶ E.g., the *Sitz im Leben* issue. Note that Brueggemann, after reviewing the contributions of Westermann, Mowinckel, Schmidt, etc. – big names in Psalms scholarship – has commented that 'scholars have only walked around the edges of the

dimensions. Reading this psalm from the perspective of the ‘developing self’ and the interrelatedness between ‘individual self’ and ‘corporate self’ within the concept of corporate personality lays the groundwork for my exploration into the role and function of lament/protest in ancient Israel.

3 The Developing Self: False Self and Authentic Self

Walter Brueggemann has likely written the most serious scholarly works on the theology, role and function of lament/protest. In his ‘The Costly Loss of Lament’ (1986), he relates the presence of lament to both the protest for justice on the social level and the need for self-affirmation by another in order to attain authenticity on the psychological level. The absence of lament conceives a sense of ‘false self’ in the individual, whereas the lament psalms provide a prayerful space for the cry that is necessary for the development of the ‘authentic self’ (both in the individual and corporate sense). The individual and community’s refusal to remain silent in the face of injustice and undue suffering is, therefore, a demonstrated act of self-authentication. People become authentic selves as they cry out to God in lament and protest.

Recent approaches to wisdom literature and Psalms studies provide another window of perception for self-development. Both Brown (1996) and Brueggemann (1986) describe this development of the ‘authentic self’ as a movement ‘from orientation, to disorientation, then to new orientation (or re-orientation).’ This set of articulations best captures the true dynamics of the development. Reading Psalm 44 with this new window of perception – as a paradigm of ‘becoming true selves’ – has broken new grounds in the study of lament psalms.

C CONFRONTING AN ABUSING GOD: LAMENT, PROTEST AND HUMANITY REACHING OUT TO GOD

In *Facing the Abusing God*, Blumenthal lays out a roadmap towards a theology of protest. Approaching the subject from a multi-vocal frame of reference¹⁷ and adopting the personalist psychological language in speaking of God, he calls for embracing ‘abusiveness’ as an attribute of God. He cautions that confronting an abusing God in lament and protest may be a disturbing and emotionally upsetting act to many. Yet he affirms that it is also a pastoral and theological task, a demand for pastors and theologians to be ‘healer(s) of that relationship... binder(s) of wounds, (those) who comfort....’ (1993:3). His monograph

theological significance of the lament Psalm. We have yet to ask what it means to have this form available in this social construction of reality’ (1986: 59).

¹⁷ The six voices that Blumenthal incorporated into his reading are: the given text, the English translation, ‘Words,’ ‘Sparks,’ ‘Affections,’ and ‘Con-verses.’ The last four are actually the four commentaries representing four distinct perspectives/traditions (see 1993:57-66).

concludes with a section on ‘healing’, signifying the final goal of his endeavour. I have engaged in reading his work with the required psychological preparedness and a high level of expectation. The way that I structure the body of this section reflects the ethos which Blumenthal and I share in the task of confronting an abusing God.

1 Confronting God through Human Means: Lament and Protest

The strong language of lament and, in particular, of protest is evident through this psalm. While studies on the language,¹⁸ theology,¹⁹ and re-contextualization²⁰ of protest in the Hebrew Bible flourished in the past decades, the language and development of protest as distinct from that of lament in the traditionally classified psalms of lament (e.g. Psalm 73), have seldom been discussed with that refined intentionality. Through the flow and development in this psalm, I seek to establish some uniqueness in the language of ‘protest.’ At the core of my inquiry is exploring whether lament is a means to an end, simply a basic ingredient in the development of protest. Since the function of the practice of lament is ‘to provide resolution to the troubled and restoration to the sufferer towards a renewed relationship’,²¹ what fruit would the act of protest yield if it is considered a further development of the practice of lament? What, then, is the function of protest in the context of this God-humanity relationship?

What follows, outlines the thrust of the development in Psalm 44: (1) the title which states that the purpose of the psalm is ‘contemplation’, a *maskil* (משכיל v. 1); (2) the psalmist recalling God’s gracious deeds in the nation’s past (vv. 2-4); (3) transference of faith (affirmation of faith from corporate to personal) (vv. 5-9); (4) laments (God’s past acts versus present realities) (vv. 10-17); (5) protest (getting into the heart of the protest) (vv. 18-23); and (6) addressing God with desperate cries for God’s intervention (vv. 24-27).

Characteristic to Psalm 44 are (1) the emphatic second person singular pronoun ‘you’ in referring to God’s powerful and gracious deeds in verses 3, 5, 6; and (2) the use of כִּי in the context of drawing sharp contrasts between the omnipotence of God and the helpless state of humanity in the absence of God’s aid (vv. 4-5, 6, 7-8). It is against this background that the psalmist’s personal faith is identified with the corporate faith of the community (the transition from vv. 4-5 and 6-7). This sets the stage for the psalmist’s lament in verses 11-17.

¹⁸ E.g., Diewert (1987:203-215); Song (1999:87-92); Smudi (1981/82: 229-232); Hunter (2000:109-124); Linafelt (2000); Clines and Gunn (1986:20-27); and Brueggemann (1986:57-71).

¹⁹ Particularly, in the theology of the character of God and of the God-humanity relationship, cf. Neary (1986:180-192); Holmgren (1990: 5-17); de Jong (1997:154-167); Milazzo (1992); and Blumenthal (1998:38-51).

²⁰ See especially, Brueggemann (1995:87-104).

²¹ Cf. Leung Lai (forthcoming a)

Verse 10 begins with another emphatic ‘now’, turning the scene from the community’s past experience with God to present realities: an articulation of their miserable state (vv. 10-17) and of the fact that God is the author and initiator of the harm done to God’s own chosen people (note the ‘you made’ [vv. 11, 14-15], ‘you handed over’ [v. 12], ‘you sold’ [v. 13]). With the framing device in verses 10 and 16, one can recognize that ‘shame’ is what is at stake here, and it is what the psalmist is lamenting. It is God who (has) brought humiliation and shame upon them. (In verse 15b, a dynamic translation may read: ‘God has made them a head-shaking among the people – in disbelief that something like this is happening to God’s chosen’.)²² The significance of the lament is that God’s glorious name does not support the status of their present situatedness (Blumenthal 1993:101). Vulnerability (v. 12) and disgrace were felt and experienced nationally (vv. 19-25) and personally (v. 16). The emotive realm up to verse 17 is primarily that of rage and bitterness.

If we are to collapse the distinction between the language of lament and of protest, the movement of the psalm still continues to develop into another stage of complaint. The psalmist protests against God for his injustice and unfairness.²³ I am seeking to establish here that verses 18-23 begin a new stage of the psalmist’s complaint – the language of protest as distinct from that of lament. In verses 10-17, the purpose for such lament is to hold God accountable for the shame and humiliation experienced by the people. Verse 18 turns the whole scene around from complaint to the language of protest and accusation: ‘All this has come upon us, and yet we have not forgotten you, nor have dealt falsely with your covenant.’ These declarations are strong words of protest: God treated them unjustly! The two layers of movement are outlined with two instances of emphatic כִּי in verses 20, 23 – ‘Though (כִּי) you have crushed us in the place of jackals, and covered us in deep darkness’. ‘Yea (כִּי) for your sake we are put to death all day long. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered’. The whole protest is highlighted with a powerful rhetorical question: ‘If we have forgotten the name of our God, and stretched out our hands (in prayer) to a strange God, would not God search this out? – for (כִּי) God knows the secrets of the heart’ (vv. 21-22). These verses are, in essence, a double negation: (1) we have not been unfaithful to God; (2) God does not seem to recognize that we are innocent!

The real sense of perplexity is finally expressed in verses 24-27. Employing assertive language in the military context (cf. Judges 5:12; Num 10:35), four imperatives are used here in addressing God: ‘Awake!’ (עוֹרֵה v. 24a); ‘Arise!’ (הִקְיֵצֵה v. 24b); ‘Rise up!’ (קוּמָה v. 27a); and ‘Redeem us!’ (פִּדְנוּ v. 27b). These are no longer complaints or laments, these are demands addressed to

²² See Blumenthal (1993:100).

²³ Note Blumenthal’s preference to refer to the unfairness, rather than injustice, of God (1993:107).

God for God's immediate action because the people are entitled to God's vindication. The whole thrust of these appeals is further emphasized with two hard questions: 'Why do you sleep, O Lord?' (v. 24a). 'Why do you hide your face and forget our affliction and distress?' (v. 25).

In the context and movement of this psalm, lament (vv. 10-17) is the key element for building up to the goal of protest (vv. 18-23) and finally arriving at the ultimate demand for God's immediate response (vv. 24-27). While the basis for lament is the contrast between the status quo and present realities, the ground for protest is entitlement. The final objective is to seek out God's vindication in hopes that God will respond immediately to their plea. Blumenthal best captures the mood and thrust of the protest and appeal in *Facing the Abusing God*. He states:

The text [vv. 24-27] contains no language of resolution, no talk of revolt. It contains no language of redemptive suffering, no talk of salvific oppression. There is the Word of anger, the Word of anguish, the Word of demand, even of command. There is the speech of relatedness, of justification, of vindication—hard words, hard speech; hard issues... no letting go of God and self; no letting Him off the hook (1993:107).

2 'Abusive-ness' as the Portrayal of God

The emotion in Psalm 44 is rage; the hurt and anger towards God is magnified in the text. As Blumenthal asks, is it valid to portray God as abusive here? How can one embrace the two characters of God: Abusiveness and loving-kindness (note *חסד* is used in v. 27)?

Using such powerful language to articulate the 'abusiveness' of God is evident throughout the psalm. The same outstretched arms and powerful hands that once performed miraculous deeds in Israel's deliverance and in the possession of the promised land (vv. 3-4) are now used to sell and hand over God's own people to their enemies (vv. 12-13). The face once shown among the people as a symbol of divine presence is now turned into shame and disappointment (vv. 11, 12, 16). The horror of the misery they now endure is emphatically portrayed as God's cruelty: the people are bywords and laughing stocks, God has given them over to reproach and scorn among nations (vv. 14-15), treated them as sheep to be slaughtered (vv. 12, 23), crushing them like jackals (v. 20a) and degrading them to utter humiliation and lowly states (vv. 20b, 26).

After the development of the psalm moves from lament (vv. 10-17) to protest (vv. 18-23), the psalmist now turns to bold address to God in the form of four pleas (vv. 24-27). God is the target as well as the ground (cf. vv. 18, 24) for these daring human actions. The thrust of these human acts can be perceived as 'confrontation.' Yet the question to be addressed here is: What kind of God is the psalmist portraying here? If God is the 'target' as well as the

‘ground’ for lament and protest, how can one plead to an abusing God for kindness and protest against an unfair God for justice and vindication? There is definitely an existing tension, a disjunction between the belief in the God witnessed by the fathers of Israel and the present realities experienced by the present faith community of Israel to which the psalmist of Psalm 44 belongs.

3 Toward a Paradigm of Humanity reaching out to God

Reading Psalm 44 and hearing the anguish in the voice of the psalmist, is in itself an emotive-experiencing event. Amidst the strong language of lament and protest, there is yet a firm affirmation echoing towards the end of the psalm. Given that God is both the target and the ground of the psalmist’s protest, I shall ask a fundamental question of the text. What is the ultimate goal for the protest against God reflected through the movement of the psalm? The need to cry out in boldness and with courage, the protest against God as entitlement for the sake of vindication, the plea or even command for God’s quick intervention, are all present in our analysis. One thing that strikes me most is that the lament, protest, and demand directed towards God are all cast against a relational context. This observation is evident in the shifting of the pronominal words as well as the transference between corporate and individual selves and identities. In other words, a God-humanity relationship, or a relational context, sets the background for our discussion here.

Unlike the case of Psalm 73 (a psalm of lament), there is no resolution to the lamenter or restoration to the protester witnessed in Psalm 44. While a renewed relationship is evident through the transition in Psalm 73:16-17, Psalm 44 ends with two unanswered questions – ‘Why do you sleep, O Lord?’ (v.24a). ‘Why do you hide your face and forget our affliction and distress?’ (v. 24b) – and four imperatives: ‘Awake!’ ‘Arise!’ ‘Rise up!’ and ‘Redeem!’ (vv. 24-25). The significance at the end of this passage lies in the fact that the culmination of lament, protest and plea all form into a conclusion that provides a legitimate basis for the psalmist’s outrage. The psalmist demands vindication: ‘for the sake of your mercy (חסד)’ (v. 27). This concluding statement (as part of the plea) echoes beautifully with a previous ground for protest: ‘All these have come upon us, and *yet* we have not forgotten you, nor have dealt falsely with your covenant (ברית)’ (v. 18). The ultimate goal for confronting God (even though perceived as ‘abusive’) is a ‘renewed relationship’ in the context of the covenant (Deut 11:26-28; 28). This gives justification, entitlement, protection and guarantee to the lamenter/protester.

As a road map for humanity’s reaching out to God, different forms of this reaching-out are evident: thanksgiving (vv. 1-4), affirmation of faith (vv. 5-9), lament (vv. 10-17), protest (vv. 18-23) and demands (vv. 24-27). The forms may vary, but the essence remains the same – for a renewed relationship with God. As for Psalm 44, there are two essential dimensions: (1) a movement

heavenward, all directed to God; and (2) a movement towards the goal in the renewing of the God-humanity relationship. These dimensions remain unresolved until the end.

D FROM THE FUNCTION OF A ‘DIDACTIC’ POEM (*MASKIL*) TO THE ROLE OF LAMENT AND PROTEST IN THE WORSHIP OF ISRAEL

1 The Book of Psalms as a ‘Hymnal’ for Worship

The recognition of the Book of Psalms as a worship hymnal in ancient Israel has been well established in the field of biblical studies. Brueggemann, in his two recent works (2001, 2002), underscores the thesis that lament is an antidote to silence in that the act of lament signifies Israel’s refusal to keep silent before her enemies and before God (2001:22-23). Textual examples depicting the Exodus events also attest to the fact that Israel advances her laments on the basis of an entitlement to God’s favour (e.g. Num 11:4-15). The same textual indication is evident in Psalm 44. Thus, lament and protest are daring acts demanding YHWH’s hands to take action and invoking God’s intervention. In this sense, lament and protest are means towards an end – God’s intervention in fulfilling God’s obligations for the people of Israel based on the covenant relationship. It can also go over and above the boundaries set by the covenant (i.e. the *חסד*, God’s covenant love). In practising lament and protest, Israel’s claim to be God’s people is made a reality – God is obligated to respond to Israel’s cries of rage and distress as she is entitled to God’s favour. To the first worshippers, pouring out their anger, disappointment, humiliation, shame, and their need for justification through lament and protest is, in essence, an occasion for reclaiming their special status before God as God’s covenant people. In the case of Psalm 44, ‘for the sake of your *חסד*’ may be paraphrased dynamically as ‘for the sake of vindication and for the renewal of the God-humanity relationship.’

For the first community of believers, singing this psalm of protest in worship is, first and foremost, an encouragement to aim heavenward with courage and affirmation, an occasion for reclaiming one’s entitlement to God’s favour, a step towards a renewed relationship. In confronting God through lament and protest, each member of the faith community becomes an authentic ‘self’.

2 What is a *Maskil* (Contemplation)?

In its title, Psalm 44 is designated as a ‘*maskil*’.²⁴ Scholars differ greatly as to the function and meaning of *maskil*. Given the basic meaning – ‘to give attention to, to consider, to ponder, to give insight’ – a *maskil* in the collection of the

²⁴ Cf. other psalms that carry the same designation in the title: Pss. 32, 42, 45, 53, 54, 55, 74, 78, 88, 89, 142.

Book of Psalms is best taken as a 'contemplative poem', a skilful and artistic song that is meant for didactic purposes. However, the use of strong language in lament, protest and demand does not quite fit into the context of 'contemplation'. There is no room for reflection in the flow of the psalm. The intriguing issue is: In what way(s) can we speak of the didactic function of a psalm of protest? Related to this question is the function of lament and protest in the worship of ancient Israel. More specifically: In what way would the element of contemplation be integrated into the act of singing, reciting past history, affirming faith through the transference of identity, lamenting, protesting and demanding God's quick response and action? Moreover: What is the therapeutic function of the psalm of protest, and should there be one?

I propose to approach the function of a *maskil* through the concept of cognitive behaviour practice. Israel is nurtured to cry out covenantally by devising an astonishing culture of lament, protest and complaint.²⁵ The shaping of this culture was likely rooted in the community, through practice on both the individual and corporate levels. The framing of the protest in verses 18 and 27 may shed some light here. The covenantal relationship and stipulations become the very ground for protest. The psalmist confronts the covenant God for God's unfairness and brutality in dealing with God's faithful people. In outraged anger, the psalmist perceives that the justifiable basis for protest and demands is entitlement. The ultimate goal for these acts is that God will meet the people's demands to awake, to rise/arise, and to redeem them from their present misery because of another guaranteed ground: God's *חסד* (v. 27). If this were the culture the psalmist was nurtured in, lament and protest are all justifiable and encouraged acts of reclaiming one's entitlement before God. In other words, this cognitive awareness provides another window of perception towards the didactic function of this psalm.

On the one hand, the practice of lament and protest is for the encouragement found in crying out to God in times of distress. On the other hand, it is also a cognitive behavioural practice. As a didactic poem, Psalm 44 is meant to be sung, to be pondered, to be reflected upon. Reading Psalm 44 in this light is a powerful example of the cognitive and didactic dimensions of the practice. To the first worshippers, this cognition or didactic lesson is enforced through the practice of lament and protest. In doing so within the community of ancient Israel, individual selves become 'authentic selves' and the corporate self is authenticated.

²⁵ See Bruggemann (2002:24-25).

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