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FOR WITH HIM IS PLENTEOUS REDEMPTION:
A POETIC ANALYSIS OF PSALM 130

A Term Paper

Submitted to Dr. Lance Hawley

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Hebrew Poetry

By

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Introduction

Psalm 130 has traditionally been understood as not only a lament psalm that protests or grieves calamity, but as a penitential psalm that admits complicity and seeks forgiveness. This is a perfectly respectable reading with a venerable theological and liturgical history. It is, however, incomplete and perhaps in some sense inadequate. The lament-penitence reading is generally more reflective of its own status as tradition than of the inner dynamics of Psalm 130 itself. An important aim of this paper, then, is the interrogation and reevaluation of form-critical and theological assumptions about the nature of lament in the Psalms.

Song of Ascents: Significance of the Superscription

Psalm 130 falls in the middle Book V of the Hebrew psalter (Pss. in the middle of a redactional section (Pss. 120-135) marked by the superscript שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת/הַמַּעֲלָה.¹ This is a notoriously difficult term to define, but perhaps more difficult to translate.² There are three broad ways to understand the superscription: metaphorically, as a reference to the return from exile, or as a reference to the Jerusalem and/or the temple.

Most interpreters take the term in various literal ways, though a few take it as a metaphor describing the internal progression of content or performance techniques.³ A

¹ It is possible that these psalms were all originally composed with the superscription included, but the fact that they all occur together in the psalter would seem to suggest at least some level of redactional influence. It seems clear that these psalms were intentionally gathered together. See John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 3, *Psalms 90-150* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 752; also note 6 below.

² Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 287-288, gives no fewer than eight attested renderings, and it is possible to imagine more.

³ Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, *Biblical Commentaries on the Old Testament* 4.1. trans. Davi Eaton (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1867) 692, argues for the “internal progression” understanding and describes this as a continuation of Gesenius’s understanding.

metaphorical understanding of *המעלות* seems unlikely. Dahood suggests that “ascents” refers to the spiritually “upward” tone or progression of the psalms, but there is no significant evidence for this.⁴ The suggestion that these psalms are connected by similar performance practices is interesting, but unprovable.⁵

Concrete interpretations of the phrase *שיר המעלות* generally focus on the travel aspect of “going up.” One explanation is that these were psalms sung by returnees from the exile in Babylon.⁶ A few interpreters note the fact that there are 15 psalms in the collection, 15 words in the Aharonic Blessing, and 15 steps between the Court of Women and the Court of Israel in the Temple and so suggest that these psalms served a particular cultic function.⁷ Other interpret “going up” as a reference to the (three) annual

⁴ Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 101-150*, AB 17A (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 195, holds—on the basis of 1 Chr. 17:17 and a single line from Qumran—that *שיר המעלות* should be understood as “Song of Extolment.” However, the Hebrew text of 1 Chr. 17:17 is very difficult and highly contested. It is unclear that it necessarily should read *מעלה*. Nor is it necessary to read Dahood’s citation from 11QPs^a as “extolments;” it seems, on the information he provides, that “a going up of all the world” would suffice as a translation. More to the point, Dahood’s suggestion is entirely divorced from the nature of the collection at hand. In fact the entire psalter could be seen as having an “upward orientation” to the extent that it comprises poems to or about YHWH and may be considered liturgical.

⁵ Radak, cited in Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 288, argues for understanding “ascents” as a description of performance practice—perhaps increasing volume or rising pitch. If this were the case, however, the structure of the psalms in question might be expected to be more similar or to share similar grammatical markings or Masoretic markings indicating tonal or volume changes.

⁶ Michael Goulder, “The Songs of Ascents and Nehemiah,” *JSOT* 22, no. 75 (1997), 43-58, holds that the Songs of Ascent were composed by a single author in celebration of Nehemiah’s successful rebuilding project and would have been sung at the feast of Sukkoth. He argues on the basis of certain compositional similarities (these psalms are shorter than average; they utilize repetition and simile; they seem to contain a higher than average number of LBH expressions and Aramaisms), but none of these proves anything about the authorship of the Songs of Ascents. At most they argue for a later origin of certain poems in the collection.

⁷ This is a particularly common Rabbinic interpretation, per Goldingay, *Psalms*, 752; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 291. John Eaton, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and New Translation* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 423, also takes this position. Leon Liebreich, “The Songs of Ascents and the Priestly Blessing,” *JBL* 74, no. 1 (March 1955), 33-36, argues that the Songs of Ascents were recited in response to the priestly declamation of the Aharonic Blessing. Liebreich’s intertextual examination is fascinating, but quite a lot of it is better explained by theological overlap than by intentional reference. His note on Ps. 130 in particular fails to account for the contextual meaning of the root *שמר*.

pilgrimages to Jerusalem.⁸ On the whole, it seems impossible to determine a specific *Sitz im Leben* for this psalm collection, and many of these positions are mutually compatible. It seems especially clear that cultic use in the Temple and use on pilgrimages to the Temple are very likely to overlap.⁹ On the whole, I take it that the Songs of Ascents were redacted together after the return from the exile for use in the reestablished cultic apparatus at Jerusalem.¹⁰

Structure, Lineation, and Original Unity

Psalm 130 is laid out in four major sections/stanzas plus the superscript in v. 1a. This sectional layout is determined largely by content, but also by considerations of grammatical person.¹¹ The first section (vv. 1b-2b) is about the psalmist's request of YHWH. Section 2 is direct address to YHWH about YHWH's forgiveness and response to iniquities. Section 3 describes the psalmist's longing for YHWH's presence. The fourth and final section commends YHWH to Israel and urges Israel to seek YHWH's presence. These sections also leave distinct emotional impressions as a result of their content and poetics.

⁸ This seems to be the majority position in contemporary scholarship. See Walter Brueggeman and William Bellinger, *Psalms*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 523; Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, vol. 15 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 318, 320-321; Goldingay, *Psalms*, 752; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 294; James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, 385-386; and Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message*, trans. Ralph Gehrke (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing, 1980), 104.

⁹ See Westermann, *The Psalms*, 104.

¹⁰ The form of this cultic use is impossible to specify. For the post-exilic date of Psalm 130, see Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 427.

¹¹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 425, notes this, as well.

The lineation of sections 1-3 is fairly straightforward: sections 1 and 2 consist of two couplets each; section 3 is a pair of triplets.¹² However, section 4 is a triplet followed by a couplet, an unusual situation which has led to some rather extravagant attempts to argue for a different lineation, as well as arguments that it might be a later addition.¹³ This suggestion seems unnecessary; Psalm 130:7-8 can and should be considered original to the poem.

The Lineation and Sectioning of Psalm 130

מִמַּעַמְמִקִּים קָרָאתִיךָ יְהוָה:	אֲדַנִּי שְׁמֵהָ בְּקוֹלִי
תְּהִינָה אֲזִנֶּיךָ קְשׁוּבוֹת	לְקוֹל תְּחִנּוּנָי:
אִם־עֲוֹנוֹת תִּשְׁמַר־יָהּ	אֲדַנִּי מִי יַעֲמֹד:
כִּי־עָמַד הַסְּלִיחָה	לְמַעַן תִּזְרָא:
קוֹיְתִי יְהוָה	קוֹיְתָה נַפְשִׁי
נַפְשִׁי לֹאֲדַנִּי	מִשְׁמָרִים לְבַקֵּר
יַחַל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יְהוָה	כִּי־עַם־יְהוָה הַחֹסֵד
וְהוּא יַפְדֶּה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל	מִכָּל עֲוֹנוֹתָיו:

¹² Dahood, *Psalms 101-150*, 234; J. P. Fokkelman, *The Psalms in Form* (Leiden: Deo Press, 2002), 137; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 424; and Peter van der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry III: Psalms 90-150 and Psalm 1* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 396, all take vv. 5-6 as triplets. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 521-522, considers these verses as couplets (vv. 5a-5b // 5c and 6a-6b // 6c). This reading, though understandable from an interpretive standpoint requires ignoring the significant textual indications that these verses consist of triplets. The repetition of קוֹי and of עַם break up vv. 5 and 7, and the repetition of שְׁמָרִים לְבַקֵּר does the same to v. 6. For conventions of lineation, see F. W. Dobbs-Allsop, *On Biblical Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 42-57; van Der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes*, 2-9.

¹³ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 435-426, gives 5 reasons for viewing this section as a redactional addition. The first 3 points all have to do with a perceived disconnect between the references to Israel in vv. 7-8 and the focus on YHWH and the individual in vv. 1-6. Their fourth point notes the grammatical shift from the *hiphil* to the *piel* in יַחַל. The final reason is the recurrence of the imperative, “Wait for YHWH, O Israel,” in Psalm 131. The first three reasons are easily overcome by a deeper understanding of lament-penitence and thanksgiving. The shift in *binyan* for יַחַל is best explained as a poetic technique (see Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, revised and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 36-40). The recurrence of a phrase between only two psalms is not proof of similar origin.

Johannes Tromp, “The Text of Psalm CXXX 5-6,” *Vetus Testamentum* 39, no. 1 (Jan. 1989), 100-103, suggests reading v. 6c as the beginning of 7a: “Like watchers for the morning, hope in YHWH, O Israel...” Though Tromp’s desire is to avoid emending the text, it is possible to read the MT as it is and also come to a coherent understanding of this psalm.

Poetic Analysis: The First Stanza

The two most immediately noticeable parallelistic features of Psalm 130 are repetition (with slight alteration) and chiasmus. Verse 1 demonstrates both of these quite clearly. The a-line begins with a prepositional phrase, which is followed by a verbal form and a vocative; the b-line begins by addressing the same referent as the a-line but with a synonymous lexeme and finishes with a verb and a prepositional phrase. Not only is the addressee the same in both lines (YHWH and Adonay), but both verbs have 2nd person markers, though the first is as the object and the second is as the implied subject. This tightly interwoven structure contrasts sharply with the metaphorical content of the verse.

The very first word of Psalm 130 (considering v. 1a the title and not a part of the poem itself) activates an extensive network of metaphors. The lexeme מעמק is rare (DCH gives only five occurrences in the HB) and, though usually translated “deep” without further specification, refers specifically to deep water or the bottom of the sea.¹⁴ The use of מעמק thereby activates the metaphor EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTY IS DROWNING.

In Isaiah 51:10 this lexeme is paired with ים, מים, and תהום; it is also used in Psalm 69:3, and Ezekiel 27:34, most likely with chaos waters in mind.¹⁵ In Psalm 130, then, it likely indicates specifically the waters of the netherworld or of primordial chaos.¹⁶ I am inclined toward primarily understanding מעמק as the primordial chaos/waters in this

¹⁴ David J. Clines, ed., *Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 235.

¹⁵ Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 355-356.

¹⁶ Harry Nasuti, “Plumbing the Depths: Genre Ambiguity and Theological Creativity in the Interpretation of Psalm 130,” in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, ed. Hindy Najman and Judith Newman, 95-124 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 96-97.

verse, more than as a reference to Sheol.¹⁷ Thus, the metaphor EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTY IS DROWNING may be further specified as SPIRITUAL DIFFICULTIES ARE PHYSICAL CHAOS.¹⁸ The psalm begins with significant tension between the dynamics of the text-external experience of the reader and the text-internal experience of the psalmist.

There is significant debate over the nature of the psalmist's situation based on verse 1. The *qatal* form of קראתיך can be taken as a reference to the present ("I call to you...") or as an indication of the psalmist's past experience ("I have called...").¹⁹ An actual grammatical decision here is impossible, since this verbal form is unspecified with regard to tense. It seems that interpretations of the theological orientation of this psalm drive determinations of tense in v.1.²⁰

I would argue that the ambiguity of this tenseless verb form should not be resolved. If the psalmist wanted to indicate a specific temporal frame of reference, they could have done so in various ways, but the *qatal* has been allowed to stand on its own

¹⁷ However, מעמק does cohere metaphorically with שחת ("pit") which coheres with שאול throughout the Psalms. In this instance it is better to read it as a reference to primordial chaos rather than the netherworld since the Psalm is not speaking of future dereliction but of present experiences of difficulty.

¹⁸ This is not at the expense of other understandings of מעמק (as a reference to cisterns and their use as prisons, as a metaphor for Sheol, etc.). Metaphoric associations are never purely singular. However, the reference to "...awaiting his word..." in v. 5 seems significant in light of Genesis 1, and along with the other uses of מעמק seems to indicate a more particular association with primordial waters. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 525, reads this as a metaphor for death or sickness. For a thorough explanation of the other associations, see Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 428.

¹⁹ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 525, takes this as a past tense scenario. Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 550; Dahood, *Psalms*, 234; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 421, all understand it as present. In my own translation, I have similarly used the English gnomic present on the grounds that it allows for a past-time occurrence that is being expressed in the present and thus preserves some of the ambiguity inherent in the Hebrew.

H.G.M. Williamson, "Reading the Lament Psalms Backwards," in *A God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003) 3-15, suggests that lament psalms should be understood as past tense shifting to present.

²⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 421-422, n. a, argues that the use of the imperative in line 2a requires a present understanding of קראתיך. This is not a necessary understanding of the imperative (it could easily have a future orientation here, perhaps more so if the perfective is understood as present).

without further elaboration, and there are no directly grammatical arguments for either a past or present timeframe. Regardless of timeframe, the psalmist is clearly entreating YHWH to do something YHWH has not yet done. The temporal indeterminacy of the entire poem might be understood as the grammatical equivalent of the underlying chaos metaphor. It destabilizes the reader's perception of the text and thereby draws the reader into the psalmist's experience of confusion and uncertainty.

The grammatically dense connections in the first couplet are contrasted with the decidedly non-paralleled second couplet. Chiasm gives way to a pair of lines connected more loosely. The adjective קשבורה in the a-line expects an indirect object which is provided by לקול in the b-line, and this syntagmatic relationship draws the two halves together. This relationship is also paradigmatic to the extent that ears perceive sonic phenomena such as voices or sounds.²¹

The second couplet also seems to soften the harsh tone of the first. The pointed imperative שמעה (given in its plenary form) is replaced with the 3fs jussive תהיינה. Not only is the degree of command lessened, the subject is no longer YHWH but YHWH's "ears." The lessened grammatical density and the gentling of the tone seem to imitate a wail that begins harsh and high before settling into sobbing or (more likely in the ANE context) moaning or groaning. The psalmist has cried themselves out and is ready to think things through in the next stanza.

Poetic Analysis: The Second Stanza

²¹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 428-432, discuss the use of אָז with regards to YHWH in depth. They give particular attention to the iconographic use of ears in petitionary settings and argue that the ability to hear is a key identifying mark of divinity (cf. the story of Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al, where Elijah mocks Ba'al for being deaf).

As already noted, section 2 represents a noticeable shift in content from section 1. Several factors prevent this from being a complete breakage, however. First, the conjunction אִם carries on the sense of the psalmist's unfulfilled-ness or perhaps even conditionality. In the first stanza, the psalmist is requesting the YHWH take certain actions and assume certain states, implying that YHWH has not done so—or at least that the psalmist cannot perceive that YHWH has done so. The counterfactual beginning of the second stanza carries this on. The second stanza also begins with a repetition of YH(WH)-Adonay across the line break from the first line of the psalm.

These continuations notwithstanding, the second stanza is a clear progression from the first both in subject and in tone. The primary topic is no longer the psalmist and their relation to YHWH, but YHWH and YHWH's eternal character as forgiving and merciful. The perfective, imperative, and command-jussive verbs of the first stanza are replaced by the modal imperfective and the resultative-jussive in the second. These give the impression of meditating or ruminating, as if the psalmist has stopped to consider their condition in more depth (pun intended).

While the אִם clause in the first couplet does carry over the sense of indeterminacy from the first stanza, it also serves to connect the a- and b-lines of the first couplet in stanza two. The a-line is the protasis, which requires completion by the apodosis in the b-line. The use of אִם here is therefore not merely a continuation of the indeterminacy of the second stanza, but a response to it: it establishes a grammatical scenario that expects and anticipates completion, an end to the chaos. This is a fitting construction for the shift away from pure lament.

At the same time, however, this stanza should not be taken as a straightforward assertion of faith in YHWH or as an indirect petition.²² The fact that the entire section is couched in terms of conditionals, adversatives, and resultatives indicates that the psalmist is not simply turning to faith but must reason their way there, and even then is not completely comforted, as the third stanza will show. Furthermore, the stanza does not end with the psalmist's comfort, but fear, awe, or reverence. The stanza on the whole gives the impression of tentativeness.

A central interpretive question in v. 4 is the nuance of the conjunction כִּי. A handful of interpreters read it as the standard, “for/because.”²³ However, the majority understanding—the adversative כִּי, “rather”—is correct.²⁴ The first understanding seems to be equating two opposite actions (keeping stock of wrongs and forgiving iniquities), only one of which YHWH clearly does (cf. vv. 7-8). YHWH is not envisioned here as both forgiving and not forgiving. Furthermore, תִּשְׁמֹר is clearly a modal counterfactual given the particle אִם, and therefore implies that YHWH does not in fact keep stock of iniquities. This reinforces the point made below that the second stanza is not about the sinfulness of the psalmist, but the graciousness of YHWH.

The second stanza also introduces the ontological metaphor SINS ARE OBJECTS or SIN IS A SUBSTANCE by the use of שָׁמַר with the direct object עוֹן. At the same time, the use of עָמַד continues the water metaphor, but this time, rather than letting the metaphor

²² Contra Goldingay, *Psalms*, 526-527; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 432.

²³ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 527. This is the common translation among English versions.

²⁴ Brueggeman and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 551; Dahood, *Psalms*, 235; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 422, n. b.

stand, the second couplet of the second stanza responds to the psalmist's complaint of being overwhelmed by chaos-waters. The two metaphors SIN IS A SUBSTANCE and EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTIES IS DROWNING should not be mapped onto each other to argue that the psalmist is drowning in sin in the first stanza.²⁵ The psalmist's sin might be understood as a component of their difficulties in the first stanza, but this is not a result of metaphorical coherence.

This stanza is often construed as being about the psalmist's sin or their awareness thereof.²⁶ However, this focus reads directly against the text, which is concerned with YHWH's refusal to catalog sins and the abundance of YHWH's forgiveness. The deliberative sense of the stanza, combined with the focus on the fact that sin is not an issue in the psalmist's scenario means that this section should be read as communicating the psalmist's perplexity at their scenario. They have not brought this on themselves by incurring the wrath of YHWH, for YHWH does not keep sins, so they are still searching about for answers.

Poetic Analysis: The Third Stanza

The third stanza shifts from couplets to triplets. This simultaneously causes the rhythm to speed up and slow down, increasing the tension of the poem. On the one hand,

²⁵ Contra Brueggeman and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 551; Dahood, *Psalms*, 235.

If the psalmist were drowning in sin in the first stanza, the reflection on YHWH's forgiving nature would be the end of the discussion. It is not the end, however, and the notion of "drowning in sin" does not seem to be a prominent theme in the ANE. Drowning is more closely associated with chaos, which is not a result of sin. Cf. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 525; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 428.

²⁶ Contra Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 551; Dahood, *Psalms*, 235-236; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 432-435; Patrick Miller, "Psalm 130," *Interpretation* 33, no. 2 (April 1989), 176-181. Cf. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 526, who rightly understand this section as centered on YHWH not the psalmist, though he still calls the stanza a "statement of confidence," which it is not.

the individual lines are shorter; on the other hand, they are grouped into longer phrases. The poetic structure thus mirrors the content of the stanza. Just as waiting involves the tension between anticipation and retention, the use of short lines in triplets both hurries the reader forward and prolongs their experience.²⁷

The third stanza is also characterized by intensified repetition and parallelistic density. The repetition of $\sqrt{\text{קוה}}$ draws the a- and b-lines of the first triplet together, and the paradigmatic parallel $\sqrt{\text{יחל}}$ in the c-line draws the entire triplet together. This triplet is also roughly chiasmic: the a- and c-lines are mirror images of one another, and the phonetic repetition of /i/ at the end of all three lines allows the b-line to blend in with the other two and avoid disrupting the structure. The verbatim repetition of $\sqrt{\text{קוה}}$ enhances the feeling of being held back; each movement forward is a return to the initial place of departure.

In the second triplet of the stanza, the longing is carried on by the gapping of the verb in the a-line. The psalmist is yearning so deeply for YHWH's presence that they cannot be bothered to articulate a verb. This gapping also creates a double entendre. The context would indicate that the gapped verb either $\sqrt{\text{קוה}}$ or $\sqrt{\text{יחל}}$, but the Hebrew could also be taken as a null-copula locative construction, and so the whole line could be taken as "My soul holds out hope for the Lord." This ambiguity prolongs the indeterminacy of the first stanza and the tentativeness of the second.

The phrase שמרים לבקר has inspired several interpretations. It could be understood as a merism for "all day long," or as a comparison to keeping watch. In the first instance,

²⁷ Cf. Dobbs-Allsop, *On Biblical Poetry*, 204-210, for an excellent description of a similar phenomenon in Lamentations.

the preposition מן is taken as temporal-spatial, and שמרים is repointed as *šimmūrîm*.²⁸ In the second, the pointing of the MT is retained for שמרים and the מן is taken as the comparative.²⁹ The difference between these two readings is minimal, since they both activate the metaphors YHWH'S PRESENCE IS LIGHT and YHWH'S ABSENCE IS DARKNESS. The activation of the *light/dark* metaphors further reinforces the feeling of anticipation in this stanza.

The metaphor YHWH'S PRESENCE IS LIGHT also connects the third stanza to the first. The first stanza turns upon the metaphor EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTY IS DROWNING, which depends upon the metaphor BAD IS DARK/MURKY.³⁰ The notion of waiting for YHWH as for the morning may therefore be understood as waiting for YHWH to restore order in the manner of YHWH's initial acts of creation, which is made explicit by the metaphoric associations at play.³¹ The metaphors in these stanzas thus reinforce one another and provide coherence to the entire psalm; metaphors for primordial chaos functionally provide underlying coherence—in sharp contrast to their semantic content .

However, it is important to note that the third stanza does not resolve. The psalmist is left awaiting YHWH, still during the nighttime or in the murky deeps. Hope is mentioned here only as potential.

²⁸ Dahood, *Psalms*, 236, argues for this position on the basis of a proposed parallel with Exodus 12:42 and the fact that Greco-Roman timekeeping reckoned nights in terms of “watches.” This is glaringly scanty evidence to emend a perfectly sensible Masoretic reading.

²⁹ Brueggeman and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 550-552; Eaton, *Psalms*, 440-441; Goldingay, *Psalms*, 529-530; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 437-438, all take this position, presumably because there is no reason for Dahood's stance.

³⁰ See notes 15 and 16 above for this metaphor. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 437, suggests that this phrase could be indicative of cultic use in a nighttime vigil, which is interesting, if purely speculative.

³¹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 437-438.

Poetic Analysis: The Fourth Stanza

The first word of stanza four immediately releases the pent-up tension of the previous stanza by expressing it as an imperative. All the waiting that the psalmist has been doing, the tension of anticipation and retention, is exhaled all at once and enjoined upon Israel as a positive command. The repetition of $\sqrt{\text{יהל}}$ from the previous stanza, but here reconfigured as encouragement, increases the theological significance of this release.³²

The use of $\sqrt{\text{פדה}}$ activates the metaphor SIN IS SLAVERY, as well as FORGIVENESS IS MANUMISSION.³³ There are thus three ontological metaphors at play in this psalm: 1) MORAL STATES ARE SUBSTANCES, 2) EMOTIONAL STATES ARE LOCATIONS, and 3) MORAL STATES ARE LEGAL STATES.³⁴ This supports the separation of the metaphors for sin from the metaphor for distress discussed above, though it does not render it airtight.

The feature of this stanza that garners most attention is the turn to addressing Israel. This is commonly interpreted as a change in the focus of the psalm: from the individual to the communal.³⁵ However, the entirety of this psalm could be interpreted as a communal psalm couched in individual terms.³⁶ This would not be out of the ordinary,

³² Rick Marrs, "A Cry from the Depths (Psalm 130)," *ZAW* 100, no. 1 (1988), 88, also notes that the construction כי עמך הסליחה parallels the construction כי עמ־יהוה החסד .

³³ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 438.

³⁴ MORAL STATES ARE SUBSTANCES is common throughout the Hebrew Bible and may be conventionalized, so care should be taken to avoid over-reading this concept.

³⁵ Eaton, *Psalms*, 441; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 438; Miller, "Psalm 130," 181.

³⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 530-531, suggests that this shift reflects a change in the role of the speaker (from the congregation to the priest), though he ultimately dismisses this proposal.

especially considering the proposed post-exilic, communal setting of the Songs of Ascents.³⁷ The 1cs grammatical marking in the first three stanzas should then be understood metonymically in terms of THE INDIVIDUAL FOR THE COMMUNITY. The community is not introduced in the fourth stanza, merely made explicit.³⁸

The triplet structure of v. 7 carries over the feeling of elongation from the previous stanza. Regardless of the shift from the perfective aspect to the imperfective, YHWH's hope is not fully realized. The final stanza might represent a statement of confidence—YHWH is redeeming Israel because great forgiveness and steadfastness are with YHWH.³⁹ However, this stanza does not represent a drastic change regarding YHWH's nature as forgiving. The psalmist has already determined—at great length in stanza 2—that YHWH does not “keep sins” but rather grants forgiveness. By the same token, this stanza also does not entreat Israel to do anything the psalmist has not already done and more. So this would not seem to be mere optimism about current scenarios and

³⁷ This sort of metonymy which then expands to the explicit community also occurs prominently in the book of Lamentations, especially between Poems 4 and 5.

³⁸ Carleen Mandolfo, *God in the Dock: Dialogic Tension in the Psalms of Lament*, JSOT Supplements Series 357 (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 88-92, interprets this stanza as the didactic interruption of another speaker who interrupts the lament of the individual. However, if this is indeed a communal psalm, centered around the Temple, this argument falls apart a bit, since the two voices are actually a single voice, with the community sublimated into the singular for the first part of the psalm. Moreover, there would seem to be no tension between this stanza and the others, since stanza 2 is a thorough logical consideration of YHWH's character. Thus, the ending here is not a correction, but a furthering.

Derek Suderman, “From Dialogic Tension to Social Address: Reconsidering Mandolfo's Proposed Didactic Voice in Lament Psalms,” *Journal for the Hebrew Scriptures* 17 (2017), 1-26, points out that there is no grammatical reason to interpret the ending this way.

³⁹ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 552; Goldingay, *Psalms*, 530-531; Eaton, *Psalms*, 441; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 438. Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 357 attempts to take it both ways, as “promissory” and “factual.”

future redemption—after all, the psalmist is decidedly not drowning in their own sins.⁴⁰

What is the nature of this resolution, then?

Interpretive and Theological Comments

Psalm 130 demonstrates a fairly sure conviction that YHWH is forgiving. The second stanza spends a significant amount of time and effort meditating on that fact and thinking through its consequences. The theological *crux interpretum* of this psalm is juxtaposition between the verses 3 and 4. “If you, O Yah, were to keep account of sins, O Lord, who could stand?” falls next to, “But instead, there is absolution with you: for this reason you are feared.” Surely this is no accident.

The psalmist is struggling or has struggled, perhaps even to the point of unmaking in the primordial deeps. They have cried out to YHWH and demanded a hearing. Then, they lay out the case that YHWH forgives sins.⁴¹ Both the crying-out and the laying-out are directed at YHWH. The dynamic seems to be one of determining whether or not YHWH is responsible for the psalmist’s suffering in the first stanza, not convincing YHWH that YHWH actually forgives sins.

The deliberative, logical, cognitive, perplexed feeling of the second stanza comes right after the anguish of the first. The psalmist has been or is crying to YHWH and clearly receiving no response; it is perfectly natural to wonder, in such circumstances, whether YHWH is the source of the suffering or if the psalmist deserves it. Whether or

⁴⁰ See note 23 above.

⁴¹ At one point, I considered that vv. 3-4 might be the actual petition mentioned in v. 2. This is certainly possible, but I am no longer convinced of that reading.

not YHWH is the source of suffering, it is clear that the psalmist does not deserve their state of distress, since YHWH forgives sins.

In the context of a post-exilic community, this is probably not the denial that the exile was unjust, as there are plenty of instances elsewhere where that fact is established. It is more likely an assurance concerning the fact that Israel, though returned to the Land, is not fully restored. The primordial chaos of the exile, the unmaking of Israel has subsided slightly but not completely, and the community must come to grips with it. Psalm 130 allows them to reinterpret the exile into terms of dissolution into chaos—of unmaking—but not permanent dissolution, and not hopelessness. Though they might deserve more the exile, YHWH does not punish according to sins, so they can be assured that all they have endured is ultimately restorative.

Since YHWH forgives sins, YHWH is safe to wait for in the third stanza. YHWH will not come to the psalmist in anger, but with mercy and steadfastness. The psalmist knows that they will be able to stand, because YHWH does not respond in accordance with iniquities. On these grounds, the psalmist commends YHWH to Israel. Israel can be assured that their God is not capricious or malicious.

Psalm 130 is therefore a pure and proper lament. At no point does the psalmist indicate that they have ceased to suffer. YHWH is never described as relieving suffering, only as erasing sins. Nor do they indicate that they have accepted the suffering, or come through it to look back with confidence in YHWH.⁴²

⁴² In this case, contra Williamson, “Reading Backwards,” 1-26, though his point holds up in many other cases.

However, it is not a lament of abject despair, since it is still safe to trust YHWH. The hope expressed is not that YHWH will rescue the psalmist, but the assurance that YHWH will turn out to be good. There is no indication that this lessens the psalmist's anguish, but clearly it is considered worthwhile to meditate upon. In light of the post-exilic nature of this psalm, the message is: despite Israel's travails and current state of ongoing chaos, YHWH is in fact good and awaiting them with good intentions.

Genre: The Nature of Lament

Psalm 130 is a breaking point for Form Criticism and other structuralist approaches in that it resists reduction to monovalence. All of the commentators previously cited in this paper identify some element of lament in this psalm, and it is always a singular designation.⁴³ Even in the previous paragraph I identified it as a lament. It is not penitential (despite its Christian liturgical application), but neither does it resist blame.

But clearly the singular genre of lament is insufficient to capture the depth and breadth of this psalm.⁴⁴ Our notions of lament—at least literarily—are typically set in an either/or dichotomy. Tragedies are not comedies.⁴⁵ But clearly this is not a true-to-life conceptualization. Clearly it is possible to feel multiple things at once and to verbalize these emotions in complex ways. In fact, doing so is necessary for emotional and theological health.

⁴³ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 550; Dahood, *Psalms*, 234-235; Eaton, *Psalms*, 440; Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 357; Goldingay, *Psalms*, 522; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 426; Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 89.

⁴⁴ For a detailed treatment of this topic, see Nasuti, "Plumbing the Depths," 96-124.

⁴⁵ Some comedies are tragedies though.

Psalm 130 reminds us that it is not only possible, but important to feel complex things in complex ways. For the post-exilic community, there was tension in the fact that their God was loving and forgiving, yet they had been so brutally treated. Psalm 130 is one instance of their attempts to reconcile these complexities. It represents their desire to remain identified as a community faithful to one another and to YHWH.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Note: due to library restrictions, I was unable to access the WBC volumes by Tate and Allen, Weiser's OTL volume, Schaefer's volume in *Berit Olam*, Westermann's more comprehensive works, and several articles available only in print. The JPS volumes on the Psalms are not yet complete.

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Appendix 1: Translation

From the depths I call you, O YHWH—
My Lord, listen to my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
To the sound of my cry.

If you kept stock of iniquities, O Yah
My Lord, who could stand firm?
Rather, with you there is forgiveness;
For which reason you are revered.

I await YHWH;
My soul awaits,
And I hold out hope for his word.
My soul waits for the Lord
More than watchmen for the morning,
Watchmen for the morning.

Hold out hope, O Israel, for YHWH,
Because with YHWH is steadfast grace,
And with him is plenteous redemption,
And he will forgive Israel
From all its iniquities.

Appendix 2: Analysis Chart⁴⁷

130	Line	Text	Morphological/ Lexical	Syntactic/ Semantic	Supralinear/ Notes	Translation
1	a	מְמַעְמָקִים קָרָאתִיךָ יְהוָה:	Inversion of subject/object person Repetition of יהוה as יהוה	PP+VP+VOC !// VOC+VP+PP[D O]	V.1 begins with מן+a plural object and v.8 ends the same way: crying from depths gives way to redemption from sins	From depths I call/have called you, YHWH
2	b	אֲדַנִּי שְׁמָעָה בְּקוֹלִי		√שמע anticipates object קול (syntagmatic)		Lord, listen to my sound
2	a	תְּהַיְינָה אָזְנוֹיךָ קְשׁוּבוֹת	Inversion of person in possessive suffixes	VP+NP+ADJ -// PP+NP		Let your ears be attentive
	b'	לְקוֹל תְּחַנּוּנָי:	Paradigmatic parallelism between לקול and תחנוני	Syntagmatic parallelism between קשבות and קול	The prep. ב in 2b becomes ל in the second occurrence of קול	To the sound of my petitions
3	a	אִם-עֲוֹנוֹת תִּשְׁמְרֵיהָ	Repetition of יה as אדני	NP+VP+VOC -// VOC+NP+VP		If iniquities you should keep, Yah
	b	אֲדַנִּי מִי יַעֲמֵד:		אם is completed by 3b	The first section is tied together by the repetition of קול and by שמע + און	Lord, who could stand
4	a	כִּי-עֲמַד הַסְּלִיחָה		CONJ+VP** // CONJ+VP		Rather, with you is [the] forgiveness
	b	לְמַעַן תִּוָּרָא:			Repetition of יהוה אדני connects the 1st section to the 2nd	On that account you are feared
5	a	קוֹיְתִי יְהוָה	1cs verb in 5a becomes 1cs possessive in 5b	VP+NP // VP+NP -// PP+VP		I await/have awaited YHWH
	b	קוֹתָה נַפְשִׁי			Repetition	My soul awaits/ has awaited

⁴⁷ Categories from Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

Parallel — //

Not-parallel — -//

Inverted — !//

130 Line		Text	Morphological/ Lexical	Syntactic/ Semantic	Supralinear/ Notes	Translation
	c	וְלִדְבַרְוֹ הוֹחֵלְתִּי:	Paradigmatic parallelism between קוה and יחל		of יחל connects sections 3 and 4 (with a shift in binyan)	And for his word I hope/have hoped
6	a	נַפְשִׁי לְאֲדֹנָי	Repetition of ל with objects replaced	NP+PP+PP+PP // PP+PP // PP+PP	Repetition of נפשי connects triplets 5 and 6	My soul [hopes/has hoped] for the Lord
	b	מְשַׁמְרִים לְבִקֵּר	Verbatim repetition of שמרים לבקר			More than watchers for the morning
	c	שֹׁמְרִים לְבִקֵּר:			Repetition of פדה/פדות connects sections 7 and 8	Watchers for the morning
7	a	יַחַל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יְהוָה	Paradigmatic parallelism between חסד and פדות	VP+VOC+PP -// CONJ+VP**+N P // ADV+VP**+NP	Potential paradigmatic relationship between קול and דבר and thus שמע and יחל?	Hope, Israel, for YHWH
	b	כִּי־עַם־יְהוָה הַחֲסָד	חסד is definite; פדות is not			For with YHWH is [the] faithfulness
	c	וְהִרְבָּה עִמּוֹ פְדוּת:	Contrast between עם +marked object vs. עם 3+ms obj. suff.			And greatly with him is forgiveness
8	a	וְהוּא יִפְדֶּה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל	Repetition of ישראל as 3ms suff.	NP+VP+NP -// PP+NP		And he is forgiving/will forgive Israel
	b	מִכָּל עֲוֹנוֹתָיו:		Syntagmatic relationship between יפדה and עונות		From all their iniquities

Appendix 3: Verb Parsing

Word	Parsing	Root	Verse	Line
קראתִיךָ	qal.pf.1cs + 2ms	קרא	1	1a
שמְעָה	qal.impv.ms	שמע	2	1b
תְּהִינָה	qal.juss.3fp	היה	2	2a
תִּשְׁמַר	qal.impf.2ms	שמר	3	3a
יִעֲמַד	qal.impf.3ms	עמד	3	3b
תִּנְרָא	niphal.impf.2ms	ירא	4	4b
קוֹיִתִי	piel.impf.1cs	קוה	5	5a
קוֹתָהּ	piel.pf. 3fs	קוה	5	5a
הוֹחֲלִיתִי	hiphil.pf.1cs	יחל	5	5b
מִשְׁמְרִים	qal.ptc.mp + מן	שמר	6	6a
שֹׁמְרִים	qal.ptc.mp	שמר	6	6b
יִחַל	piel.impv.ms	יחל	7	7a
יִפְדֶּה	qal.impf.3ms	פדה	8	8a