Is there a place for women in the theology of the Psalms?

PART II: Self-expression and the ‘I’ in the Ancient Hebrew Psalter

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ABSTRACT

This paper is Part II of a research project that investigates the place of women in the theology of the ancient Hebrew Psalter. Whereas Part I attempted to determine the nature of this ‘place’ from the perspective of the female imagery contained in the book (OTE 12/1, 35-56), Part II endeavours to do so from the perspective of the ‘I’. More specifically, Part II deals with the self-expression of the ‘I’, its identity and the possibility of female authorship for at least some of the Psalms. It also integrates the findings of a questionnaire that was recently distributed amongst men and women in order to test their responses to the Psalms.

A INTRODUCTION

A number of years ago I began researching whether or not women had a place in the theology of the Psalms. Seeing that there was no available material on this specific topic at the time, I identified areas within the Psalms that would most likely provide the information I sought. These were: female imagery, the ‘I’ or individual in the Psalms, the poor, and the possibility of female authorship for some of the Psalms in the light of ancient Hebrew women’s cultic participation and their role in lamentation. In the first instance, my research led to the publication of an article that sought to answer the question ‘Is there a place for women in the theology of the Psalms?’ in terms of the book’s female imagery (Efthimiadis 1999:33-56). I found that this imagery fell into two broader categories, namely, mundane and divine female imagery on the one hand and personified, mythological, and absent female imagery on the other. According to my findings, the imagery is generally positive for modern Western women and the answer to my question is, ‘Yes, there is a place for women in the theology of the Psalms’ (vide Efthimiadis 1999:48-49). Now, in Part II, I should like to probe the matter further in terms of the other research areas that I had identified, namely, the self-expression and identity of the ‘I’, the poor, and the possibility of female authorship.
Before beginning with ‘the investigation proper’, I should like to make a number of foundational observations regarding the evidence to be detected and the interpretation of this evidence.

B FOUNDATIONAL OBSERVATIONS

Firstly, the evidence to be found and the interpretation of the same relates primarily to what is meant by the question ‘is there a place for women in the theology of the Psalms?’ as well as the interpretative ‘glasses’ that a particular interpreter may be wearing. In the first place, the answer to the question depends on the interpreter’s conception of ‘women’. Is the interpreter referring to ancient Israelite women or to modern women? Which ancient Israelite women: those of the original context in which particular Psalms were written, those who were part of the period in which various collections were made, or those of the second temple period in which the collection was finalised? Which modern women and from which country, socio-economical context, degree of feminist conscientisation?

The answer to the question also depends on the stance and context of the interpreter. For example, an interpreter may find that ancient women indeed have a place in the theology of the Psalms – they are there, but that their position is androcentrically defined – according to a modern, feminist perspective. This may lead the interpreter to conclude that this ‘place’ is to be articulated negatively or pronounced non-existent for modern women. An interpreter who is androcentrically identified, may find that ancient women have a place in the theology of the Psalms and be quite comfortable with its androcentric definition. The conclusion would then be positively articulated and accepted with joy, so to speak. There are also a variety of positions in between, which makes dealing with the question a complex matter despite its seeming simplicity.

Having said that, I should like to clarify my own position: I am a Western woman who has a strong feminist consciousness but who does not believe that the Scriptures are irredeemably sexist. Obviously, I would therefore tend towards a middle position – one that would look for redeemable aspects within an androcentric dialogue – if such a dialogue indeed dominates the Psalms.

Secondly, a preliminary investigation into the topic at hand appears to indicate that the evidence to be garnered relates primarily to two factors: the intimate interrelation of form, content, and context and the intertextual witness of the rest of the Holy Scriptures. Naturally, form-content-context and intertextual witness are also firmly interrelated, which signifies not only the complexity of the study at hand, but also the solid foundation of evidence upon which the reasoning may be founded.

Thirdly, the very fact of the investigation may alter the evidence to be found. For if – as some theorists would have it – mere observation alters that which is observed, then how much more the kind of investigation that I propose – one that digs through the strata of form, content, context and Intertext. The issue is, as I have said, a complex one.
Leaving the complexity aside, so that its potential to stop the investigation altogether does not overtake me, I should now like to turn to ‘the investigation proper’ which is informed primarily by the second of my foundational observations, namely the interrelatedness of form, content, context and intertext. The material is divided into two main sections, \( \text{viz} \) self-expression and the ‘I’ (C). The identity of the ‘I’, the cultic participation of women and the possibility of female authorship for some of the Psalms (D). These sections will be interspersed throughout with the results of a questionnaire regarding Psalms preferences that was recently distributed amongst various men and women. The article will then conclude on the results of the current investigation, integrate the results of Part I and attempt to conclude on the topic as a whole.

C SELF-EXPRESSION AND THE ‘I’

In this section, I should like to focus upon the individual’s identification with the poor/needy (a), the use of female imagery in the ‘I’ Psalms (b), and being personal and open with God (c). The treatment of topics here and elsewhere does not claim to be exhaustive and assumes much of the scholarly work done on the Individual Psalms. I will, however, be making use of Croft’s categorisation of Individual Psalms (Croft 1987) as an organising factor – not necessarily because I am in complete agreement with his points of view.

1 ‘I am poor and needy’

As most Psalms scholars have rightly noted, some 60% plus of the Psalms represent the voice of an individual, an ‘I’ (\textit{vide} Croft 1987:11). This ‘I’ often expresses itself as one who is destitute/poor and needy (‘I am poor and needy’), humble and righteous (\textit{vide} e.g. 34:6; 38:17; 69:29; 70:5; 86:1 and 109:22), over and against its antagonists or opponents who are ungodly, wicked and unrighteous (\textit{vide} e.g. 5:9; 7:9; 11:2; 17:9; 22:16; 27:2; 31:17; 39:1; 55:3; 64:2; 92:11 and 119:95). Given the royal nature of some 43% of these Individual Psalms (\textit{vide} Croft 1987:73-132, especially 64-66, 78 and 80), it is obvious that terms such as ‘poor’, ‘needy’, ‘humble’, ‘righteous’, ‘afflicted’ and ‘meek’ do not always relate to socio-economic disenfranchisement as they do in other parts of the Hebrew Testament, that is, that they are used technically in order to show the suppliant’s humility before God and, perhaps, to elicit God’s favour (\textit{vide} e.g. 40:17; 70:5; 86:1; 109:22. Cf also 22:24, 26; 25:16 and 140:12-13). Nevertheless, the Psalmist identifies with the destitute by means of appropriating the language of destitution. So we find a similarity between a number of offences that are committed against the individual and certain offences committed against the ‘poor’ or the stranger, etcetera, in books such as Deuteronomy and Proverbs. These include: attempted destruction (e.g. 40:14 and 70:2), persecution (e.g. 71:11 and 109:16), injustice, perverting the cause of the poor (27:12; 9:4; 35:1, 7 and 11), affliction and so forth.

In terms of the second foundational observation in section B, this metaphorical application would not have found itself into the content and form of these Royal
Psalms had the context not permitted it. In other words, the metaphor could not be used if there were no poor and needy – as per the socio-economic application of these terms – with whom the ‘I’ could identify. The Psalmist’s identification with the poor and needy and the technical use to which these terms are put is underscored by the classification of the individual’s antagonists as ‘wicked’ (see above). The latter, as Croft has shown, are those who do not follow God’s law – precisely those who would have enforced and or perpetuated the plight of the poor and needy. The Psalmist pleads with God not to allow these wicked people to triumph over her/him, but to judge them and deliver her/him (see e g 3:7; 22:21; 31:2 and 71:4). This basic request represents the theological tenet that God is a God of the poor and needy, the One who vindicates them and the One who judges their ‘enemies’. This is stated as such a number of times throughout the individual Psalms (see e.g. 7:10-11; 9:12; 16-20; 34:6; 16-19; 35:10; 69:33; 75:10; 103:6; 104:31; 140:12 and 146:8. Cf also 132:15).

There are also Individual Psalms for private persons (see Croft 1987:133-150) that display the same affinity with the poor. Given their ‘private’ use, these Psalms may well be factually related to destitution of these ‘poor’ and the crimes of the affluent and the wicked against them (see e.g. 35:7, 11; 109:3, 16, 31; 70:2-3; 120:2-4 and 142:6-7. See also figs 1a and 1b, cols 4 and 8). Now, as we know, widows were some of the poorest and neediest in the land, and so one may indeed discern some identification with women through these ‘I’ Psalms, particularly in 94:6 and 146:9 where the image of the widow is used in a positive sense (see fig 1a, cols 5 and 8).

2 Female imagery and the ‘I’ Psalms

Here I should like to turn to Part I of this research project and see to what extent female imagery influences the theology of the ‘I’ Psalms. Figures 1a and 1b tabulate the category and sub-category of female images discussed (cols 1 and 2), the reference where it may be found (col 3), an indication of whether the parent Psalm is individual or not and which type of individual Psalm it may be according to Croft’s classification (col 4), whether its value for modern Western women was deemed positive, negative or ambiguous/neutral (cols 5, 6 and 7), and whether or not the individual identifies with the destitute in some way (col 8). Please note the following legend:

<p>| No | - Not an ‘I’ Psalm | C Prophet | - Cultic Prophet ‘I’ |
| Private P | - Private Person ‘I’ | T Singer/Poet | - Temple Singer/Poet ‘I’ |
| Royal | - Royal ‘I’ | Yes | - This is an ‘I’ Psalm but not specifically designated by Croft |
| P Royal | - Possibly/Probably Royal ‘I’ | * | - Female Imagery that I had not discussed in Part I |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>SUB-CATEGORY</th>
<th>PSALM</th>
<th>'I'</th>
<th>POS</th>
<th>NEG</th>
<th>AMBIG/NEUT</th>
<th>POOR, NEEDY</th>
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<td>Poor, needy (righteous)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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Figure 1a: Divine and mundane female imagery in the Psalms
Figure 1b: Personified, mythological and absent female imagery in the Psalms

We may deduce the following from Figures 1a and 1b:

- Most of the female imagery that was discussed in Part I is found in the ‘I’ Psalms – forty-five of a total of sixty images, that is, 75%.
- 51% (23) of the female imagery in the Individual Psalms is positive, 40% (18) is negative, and 9% (4) is ambiguous or neutral.
- According to Croft’s classification, 56% (22) of the ‘I’ Psalms that depict female imagery are Royal or Possibly Royal; 15% (6) fall into the category of Cultic Prophet; 18% (7) reflect a Temple Singer/Poet; 10% (4) are classified in the category Private Person, with the remainder being unclassified.
- 59% of the female imagery that is found in the Royal Psalms is affirmative towards Western women, 9% (2) is of ambiguous value, and 32% (7) is negative.
Nine of the eleven (82%) Psalms reflecting YHWH as Mother, Midwife, Mother Hen and Nurse are Royal or Probably Royal, and all imagery in this sub-category is positive for Western women today.

At least half the female imagery is directly related to the ‘desolation’ of the ‘I’.

One of the most surprising discoveries in terms of the above is that the bulk of female imagery is found in the Royal ‘I’ Psalms and that the overwhelming majority of the female imagery in these Psalms is positive towards modern Western women. What is even more surprising is that virtually all occurrences of female imagery depicting YHWH as Mother, Midwife, Mother Hen and Nurse – nine of eleven – are also to be found in the Royal ‘I’ Psalms! This is not what I would have expected at all, seeing that women’s lot appears to have deteriorated considerably in the monarchical period in comparison to their relative ‘freedom’ in the premonarchical or Judges period. This discovery may well necessitate a re-evaluation of women’s position in the monarchical period and is certainly a subject worthy of further investigation. Given that the female imagery discussed is an integral part of the form and content of the Royal ‘I’ Psalms and so informs their theology to a great extent, we may draw a variety of conclusions regarding the prevalence of positive female imagery in these Psalms including the following:

- It may represent a deconstructive trend in an increasingly androcentric monarchical world.
- The position of women in Royal circles was less androcentrically defined than was the position of women in non-Royal circles.

Furthermore, the Psalter appears to have been finalised during the post-exilic period. Given that the Psalms included appear to have been deliberately selected, we may conclude that the editors of the Psalter deliberately chose to fill it with predominantly Royal Psalms (Individual and otherwise). The prevalence of Royal Psalms in the ancient Hebrew Psalter and the prevalence of positive female imagery in the Individual category of these Psalms, allow me to draw the following conclusions:

- The disruption of the exile necessitated a revival of the memory of times past – the good old days when the kings reigned and Israel was an ‘autonomous’ independent state.
- The grief and severe state of loss experienced as a result of the exile called forth the image-ing of YHWH in feminine form such as Mother, Mother Hen and Nurse, all of which are nurturing, protective images, almost like someone who assumes a foetal position or exhibits childhood behaviour as a result of severe trauma. (This is not meant to be pejorative in the least!)
- The position of women was better in the early post-exilic period and permitted the selection of Royal Psalms containing positive female imagery and depicting YHWH in feminine terms.
The above conclusions are not exhaustive and require far greater deliberation than time and space allow in a paper of this nature, and I intend to take them up again in a forthcoming volume on the position of women in the theology of the Psalms.

Be that as it may, the bulk of the female imagery in the ‘I’ Psalms is therefore positive for modern Western women on the basis of mathematical considerations alone. Overall, this is once again the theology of God vindicating the poor/afflicted and/or his people/servant/king be it because of foreign/internal threat or the wiles of the wicked. Seeing that the overall nature of this imagery is positive, we can surmise that there is much with which modern women can identify in the female imagery of the ‘I’ Psalms. Their participation in the theology of the self-same Psalms can therefore be construed as generally positive and nurturing.

3 Being personal and open with God

I should like to discuss the following in terms of ‘being personal and open with God’: the religious and emotional candour of the ‘I’ Psalms (C.c.1) and the use of imagery as a vehicle for emotional candour and the appropriation of the ‘I’ Psalms (C.c.2). I will then proceed to the second major section of this paper, namely, ‘The identity of the individual and women’s cultic participation in the “I” Psalms’ (D).

a Religious and emotional candour

The reality, emotion and personal aspects with which the majority of the Psalms are imbued are some of their most arresting features. These features come to life most strongly in the ‘I’ Psalms where the individual pours out her/his heart before God, fearlessly tackles God – who is sometimes perceived as the enemy – for the antagonism that s/he is experiencing, whilst poignantly etching out the desolation s/he experiences and exuberantly praising God with highest praise. These Psalms are so real as to belie the romantic piety of much of modern-day Christianity. For instance, the ‘I’ expresses her/himself in emotional language that contrasts starkly with the negative perception of emotion that persists in the West today. Were the Psalmist to be an ordinary churchgoer, s/he would be chastised for her/his emotionalism and seeming disrespect for God. And yet, this is what makes the Psalms so real and so accessible; just as it is this aspect that clarifies the very deep personal nature of the psalmist’s relationship with God and draws the reader closer into the same.

I should like to illustrate the above by means of referring to respondents’ answers to questions 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 in a questionnaire that I recently distributed amongst men and women of varying religious backgrounds:

4.2 How do you feel about the Psalms?
4.3 What appeals to me most about the Psalms is that …
4.4 What appeals to me least about the Psalms is that …
Fixed responses to 4.2 ranged from ‘I derive great personal benefit from the Psalms’ (option A) to ‘I don’t know’ (option E), whilst respondents were encouraged to provide their own opinions in options F, ‘Other (Please Specify)’ and G (Reasons). Questions 4.3 and 4.4 were completely open. The following responses were received, which, to my mind illustrate the fact that the Psalms’ accessibility depends on their reality, affective, relational and personal aspects.

- The overwhelming majority of responses (66%) to 4.2 indicate that the respondents derive great personal benefit from the Psalms (option A). Less than half that number, that is 28%, stated that they derive some personal benefit from the Psalms (option B), with only 3% claiming that they derived little personal benefit from the same (option C). Only one respondent did not derive any personal benefit from the Psalms (option D), with another marking option E, ‘I don’t know’, and yet another claiming that he derived no benefit whatsoever from any part of the Bible under option F, ‘Other (Please specify)’.

- Most people who responded to 4.3 stated that what appealed to them most about the Psalms is their personal nature, the comfort, hope and guidance that they received from them, their reality, applicability to life and the fact that they provide us with material with which we can enhance our personal relationship with God.

- Similarly, most respondents claimed that the most off-putting aspect about the Psalms (4.4) was the imprecatory, vindictive nature of some of them and their relation to kings of olden days and times past.

Interestingly, 63% of the respondents were women, 36% male and 1% of undisclosed gender.

b The use of imagery as a vehicle for emotional candour and the appropriation of the Psalms

Returning to the ‘I’ Psalms, their emotional/affective and personal/relational aspects are often conveyed by means of figures of speech, which are often dependent on simile and metaphor for their functionality. Furthermore, our access to and application of these Psalms are also metaphorically dependent as we appropriate their meaning/theology by means of identification with the general condition/situation in which the ‘I’ finds herself or himself. Their communicative strategy is thus largely image-inary and metaphorical. Metaphorical communication and interpretation require relation-al thinking – something that women seem to be good at in general.

A lot of this imagery is dependent on what Jung calls images of the collective unconscious. Women, according to Jung, relate better to the unconscious than do men.

One may therefore say that the emotional aspect of the ‘I’ Psalms and the deep personal nature of the psalmist’s relationship with God, which profoundly influence and inform the theology of these Psalms, are intensely ‘feminine’ or, at least, based
on women-friendly principles and ways of communication – if one permits the stereotype.

The above brings me to the identity of the individual in the ‘I’ Psalms.


A number of interrelated issues unite themselves around the identity of the ‘I’:

- For whom were the Individual Psalms written and to whom does the ‘I’ refer? (i.e., who is the individual suppliant?)
- By whom were these Psalms performed?
- By whom were they written?

It seems obvious that a single person may not be the answer to all three, that is, that person X may have performed a Psalm for person Y and that this Psalm may have been written by yet another person, Z – not to mention the person/s who finally edited a particular Psalm or collection of Psalms. Unfortunately, the scope of a paper such as this one prevents me from going into detail concerning the complex interrelation of X, Y, Z and the others who may have contributed to the way in which we find the Psalter today. In keeping with the overall aim of this paper, I prefer to focus on these questions as related to the place of women in the theology of the Psalms in general and the specific topic of the present section in particular.

When related to female cultic participation and female authorship, these questions translate as follows:

- Could the individual suppliant have been a woman?
- Could women have performed these Individual Psalms?
- Could women have written at least some of the Psalms?

I shall propose answers to this set of questions in subsections 4.1-4.3 below, using Croft’s categorisation of the ‘I’ Psalms as an organising principle once again. I will also be utilising related intertextual material to assist me in my considerations.

1 Women as individual suppliants

According to Croft (1987), the Individual Psalms may be placed in three broad categories reflective of the individual suppliant’s identity as king, private person and minister of the cult. The last is divided into three subcategories: cultic prophet, wisdom teacher and temple singer. It would seem that the second and third of these categories, and particularly the second, would provide me with the information I seek in this subsection.

The Book of Leviticus makes it clear that Israelites could or had to appear before the Lord many times apart from the three mandatory occasions provided by the major annual festivals, in order to present peace sacrifices, burnt offerings, sin
offerings and the like. A particular occasion for women to appear before the Lord occurred after the birth of their children. Leviticus 12 is devoted entirely to this important event.¹

¹And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, ²Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a woman have conceived seed, and born a man child: then she shall be unclean seven days; according to the days of the separation for her infirmity shall she be unclean. ³And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. ⁴And she shall then continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying be fulfilled. ⁵But if she bear a maid child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her separation: and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying threescore and six days.

⁶And when the days of her purifying are fulfilled, for a son, or for a daughter, she shall bring a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon, or a turtledove, for a sin offering, unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, unto the priest: ⁷Who shall offer it before the LORD, and make an atonement for her; and she shall be cleansed from the issue of her blood. This is the law for her that hath born a male or a female. ⁸And if she be not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons; the one for the burnt offering, and the other for a sin offering: and the priest shall make an atonement for her, and she shall be clean.

Another, far less pleasant event had to do with a husband’s jealousy and the suspected infidelity of his wife. Prescriptions for dealing with this matter are provided in a chilling section of Numbers, namely 5:11-30.

We also find, according to Hannah’s example in 1 Samuel 1, that women could accompany their husbands at high festival times³ and that they could pray and receive prophetic words from a priest/cult official that would transform their lives. The entire situation surrounding Hannah’s plea and Eli’s prophetic response in 1 Samuel 1 finds direct parallels with the structure of a typical Lament Psalm, such as Psalm 22, in which a transformation occurs that moves the suppliant from gloom to praise or, as Brueggemann (1984:9-10, 19-23) put it, from disorientation to reorientation. In certain cases the transformation is facilitated by the reception of an

¹ This rite is related to the purification rites women had to undergo after menstruation (Lv 15:19-33), and the dedication of firstlings (Ex 13:1, 12-16). See also the purification rites for bodily discharges other than menstruation and those for skin diseases in Lv 13-15. These too were occasions for cultic participation.
² All direct quotation of the Bible are taken from The King James Version (1769, Cambridge: Cambridge) unless otherwise stated.
³ The commandment to appear before the Lord at such times was specifically given to males. See Ex 23:14-19, especially v 17: Three times in the year all thy males shall appear before the Lord GOD (my italics).
oracle from a cult official. Figure 2 tabulates the structural similarity of 1 Samuel 1 and Psalm 22 according to the pattern of a typical Lament Psalm:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRUCTURE OF A TYPICAL LAMENT PSALM</th>
<th>I SAMUEL 1</th>
<th>PSALM 22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Introduction</td>
<td>Appeal</td>
<td>Appeal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Introduction</td>
<td>Hannah weeps as Peninah taunts her because of her barrenness (v 7)</td>
<td>The Psalmist complains of being forsaken (v 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Body</td>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>Situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Body</td>
<td>Hannah is constantly taunted as the Lord has shut up her womb (vv 6-7). [She is also accused by Eli of being drunk, vv 13d, 14]</td>
<td>The psalmist cries constantly but God does not hear (v 2). The Psalmist’s adversaries taunt her/him (vv 7-8. See also vv 12-18).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Conclusion (POINT OF TRANSFOR-</td>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>Assurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MATION)</td>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>Assurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Conclusion (POINT OF TRANSFOR-</td>
<td>‘Then Eli answered and said, Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him. And she said, Let thine handmaid find grace in thy sight. So the woman went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad’ (vv 17-18).</td>
<td>The psalmist exuberantly declares that God has heard her/him (v 24). [It is possible to see vv 26-31 as an oracular utterance.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Conclusion (POINT OF TRANSFOR-</td>
<td>Praise</td>
<td>Praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MATION)</td>
<td>Praise</td>
<td>Praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Conclusion (POINT OF TRANSFOR-</td>
<td>Hannah worships God with her husband and Peninah in the morning (v 19). See also the exuberant song of praise when Samuel is born in 1 Samuel 2:1-10.</td>
<td>The Psalmist praises God (vv 22-23, 25-31).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Conclusion (POINT OF TRANSFOR-</td>
<td>Vows</td>
<td>Vows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MATION)</td>
<td>Vows</td>
<td>Vows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Conclusion (POINT OF TRANSFOR-</td>
<td>Hannah vows to give the boy child back to the Lord as a Nazarite (this is part of her petition, v 11).</td>
<td>The Psalmist declares that s/he will pay her/his vows before those that fear God (v 25b).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Structural parallels between I Samuel 1 and Psalm 22 against the structure of a typical Lament Psalm

Hannah’s example leads me to conclude that women were just as entitled to complain before the Lord and receive prophetic intervention, as were the men.
For me, this indicates that they too could participate in the services of the cult in a far more positive way than is signified by the previous references to Leviticus and Numbers. The early dating of many of these Psalms a la Johnson (The Cultic Prophet and Israel’s Psalmody, 1979) further suggests that some of these Psalms may have been performed for female suppliants. The same factors also suggest that there may have been Psalms written specifically for women, and that these were either ‘lost’ as part of the androcentric bias of the monarchical era and/or were excluded from the Psalter as we have it today.

2 The possibility of female performers of individual Psalms

Whilst the preceding examples refer to individual women’s cultic participation in the sense of receiving cultic service, we also find various references to individual women or groups of women providing some sort of cultic service to God or their fellow Israelites. These include the women who played timbrels in the triumphal procession of Psalm 68 (v 25) and those who were encouraged to praise the Lord in Psalm 148:12 (see also fig 1a, col 3). We also find reference to female temple singers in various post-exilic works: Ezra 2:65, Nehemiah 7:67 and 2 Chronicles 25:5. These women are clearly associated with the pre-exilic and exilic cult (Bird 1983:273), which suggests that women could well have been responsible for performing various Psalms during the first temple period too – even though there does not seem to be any direct witness to that. Be that as it may, the interrelation between form-content-context and intertextual witness suggests that these women would have influenced the theology of the Psalms – however indirectly – and that there is, therefore, a place for women in the same from this perspective.

The same conclusion may be drawn from the existence of three other types of female functionaries: the professional mourners or ‘keening women’, the prophetesses and the wise women. I should like to discuss them in the ensuing subsection, which concludes my section on ‘The identity of the “I”, the cultic participation of women and the possibility of female authorship for some of the Psalms’.

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One might object that there are no ‘I’ Psalms with a specifically female perspective, and that most of them relate to war and the lawsuit. However, there are direct phraseological and sentimental parallels between the war/law suit imagery between the Psalms and Hannah’s victory song in 1 Samuel 2:10. See e.g. v 1 ‘My heart rejoiceth in the LORD, mine horn is exalted in the LORD: my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation’, ‘The bows of the mighty men are broken’ (v 4a), ‘He raiseth up the poor out of the dust’ (v 8a), ‘He will keep the feet of his saints, and the wicked shall be silent in darkness’ (v 9a-b), and v 10; ‘The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; out of heaven shall he thunder upon them: the LORD shall judge the ends of the earth; and he shall give strength unto his king, and exalt the horn of his anointed.’
3 The possibility of female authorship for some of the Psalms

In this subsection, I would like to contend that women might have influenced the theology of the Psalms far more directly than is suggested by the preceding subsections (D.a-b).

In the first instance, it seems likely that the Temple Singers not only performed certain Psalms but that they also wrote a number of them (see Brenner 1985:50 and also the activities of the Asaphites and Korahites in this regard as per 1 Chr 15:19; 25:1; Pss 50; 73-83 and Pss 42; 44-49; 84-88. See also the prophetic capabilities of some of these singers in 2 Chr 20:14-17). Thus, women could have been responsible for some of the ‘I’ Psalms in which the individual suppliant is a member of the Temple Singers, who form a subcategory of Croft’s ‘Cultic Ministers’.

Secondly, women are also found amongst the other two professions forming the category of ‘Cultic Ministers’, namely, prophetesses and wise women. Both professions are well attested to throughout the Hebrew Testament and it would seem that gender did not affect either their credibility or authority. (See, e.g., the fact that Josiah seeks counsel from Huldah [2 Ki 22:14-20 = 2 Chr 34:22-28] – who is attached to the Jerusalem temple – in the time when both Jeremiah and Zephaniah were practising prophets; and Joab deliberately seeks the assistance of the Wise Woman of Tekoa in 2 Sm 14). Even so, references to women practitioners are few and far between and we do not find entire books that record the work of prophetesses and/or wise women. This is a perplexing phenomenon that may be accounted for by the exclusion of such works at the hand of later editors (see Bird 1983:273). Be that as it may, four prophetesses and two wise women come to mind. These are: Miriam (Ex 15 and Nm 12), Deborah (Jdg 4 and 5), Huldah (see references to her above) and Noadiah (Neh 6:14) as prophetesses and the unnamed wise woman of Tekoa (see reference to her above) and Abel-Beth-Maacah (2 Sm 20:14-22). Intertextual attestations indicate that prophetesses, particularly Miriam and Deborah, were well capable of writing songs such as those found in the Psalms, and that they were just as skilled as their male counterparts in bringing prophetic enlightenment to particular situations. This makes it plausible that women authored some of the ‘prophetic Psalms’ or those categorised as belonging to the Cultic Prophets. If Johnson (1979) is correct, and most Psalms are indicative of the ‘Prophetic Style’, which he repeatedly associates with the song of Deborah, then female authorship becomes all the more probable. Similarly, the wise women advisors to whom I have referred certainly had all the linguistic and persuasive skills (see Brenner 1985:36-38) to compose the type of wisdom poetry that we find in Psalms and Proverbs. There is thus no reason to doubt that women may have composed some of the Wisdom Psalms or those belonging to Wisdom Teachers that we find in the Ancient Hebrew Psalter.

Thirdly, many if not most of the ‘I’ Psalms are lamentations. Women played a very active part in lamentation as professional mourners. See, for example, the
‘wise’ or skilled keening women of Jeremiah 9:17. They are directly related to the lamentation that goes up for Zion (Jr 9:17-22, my italics in v 19):

Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Consider ye, and call for the mourning women, that they may come; and send for cunning women, that they may come: 18 And let them make haste, and take up a wailing for us, that our eyes may run down with tears, and our eyelids gush out with waters. 19 For a voice of wailing is heard out of Zion, How are we spoiled! We are greatly confounded, because we have forsaken the land, because our dwellings have cast us out. 20 Yet hear the word of the LORD, O ye women, and let your ear receive the word of his mouth, and teach your daughters wailing, and every one her neighbour lamentation. 21 For death is come up into our windows, and is entered into our palaces, to cut off the children from without, and the young men from the streets. 22 Speak, Thus saith the LORD, Even the carcases of men shall fall as dung upon the open field, and none shall gather them.

Such women are also mentioned in Ezekiel 32:16 and 2 Chronicles 35:25. The latter passage is quite indicative, as it speaks of written lamentations associated with female mourners:

And Jeremiah lamented for Josiah: and all the singing men and the singing women spake of Josiah in their lamentations to this day, and made them an ordinance in Israel: and, behold, they are written in the lamentations.

To what extent such laments were similar to the Lament Psalms is not clear to me at present and would require further investigation. However, the lament associated with the keening women in Jeremiah 9:19 appears highly reminiscent of the Lament Psalms, for example Psalm 44:38-43.

Given all the above, it seems quite possible that the ‘wisdom’ or skills of these keening women were involved in the composition of some Lament Psalms. Whether we still have these Psalms in our Book, however, is another matter altogether.

- Finally, we may seek female authors amongst women who wrote war poetry; most notably Deborah (Jdg 5) and Judith (Judith 16) of the Apocryphal literature as well as those who welcomed war heroes home in song (see e.g 1 Sm 18:6-7). They clearly could write victory and battle poetry! It is therefore possible that women wrote some of the victory verses that we find in the ancient Hebrew Psalter.

In summary, then, female authorship of certain Psalms/Psalm types is more than possible; to me, it is highly probable.

I should now like to summarise Part II of this research project and conclude on Parts I and II.
E SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION(S)

We have seen in the preceding sections that:

- Even though many of the (Individual) Psalms are Royal, the individual suppliant often identify with the poor and needy, some of the poorest of which were the Israelite widows. Even though this identification is largely figurative, the inter-relation of form-content-context and intertext makes this identification real and gives women a place in the theology of the Psalms. The same applies to the Psalms of the Private Person, where the terms poor, needy and so forth may have actual life-reference in terms of the Individual suppliant belonging to the categories of the socio-economically destitute in Israel.

- ‘I’ Psalms contain the overwhelming majority of female imagery (as per Part I) and that this imagery is largely positive towards women.

- The bulk of positive female imagery, particularly that which refers to God as Mother, Mother Hen, Midwife and Nurse, is found in the Royal Psalms contrary to the expectation of the researcher.

- The Psalmists’ candour relates to the emotional and relational aspects of life with which women are traditionally most in tune. It also makes the Psalms very real and accessible to women and men, lending them a high degree of life application, as the questionnaire results indicate.

- The theology of the Psalms is largely contained in their imagery (see Grogan 2001:72-73). The latter is a composite of various forms of figurative language that requires high levels of relational skill for its interpretation. We also relate to the Psalms on a figurative level as we identify with the psalmist’s experience, condition or point of view. This makes the Psalms’ mode of communication ‘feminine’ in that it makes use of imagery that requires relational interpretation and figurative application.

- The interrelation of form-content-context and intertext makes it highly probable that:
  - Some of the Individual Psalms were written for women.
  - Women performed some of the Psalms in service of God and others.
  - Women wrote some of the (Individual) Psalms.

  This means that women may have had a far more direct influence on the theology of the Psalms than previously imagined.

  Returning to Part I, we find that female imagery in the Psalms – to which three images were added in Part II (61:4; 27:10 and 116:16, fig 1a) – may be deemed positive towards Western women today, primarily because of the positive value of the Divine identification with ordinary and disenfranchised women. This identification is more than figurative; it is engrained in the theology of the Psalms and the entire Hebrew Testament as God is hailed as the God of the poor, the disenfranchised, the fatherless and the widow.
Given all the above, I therefore conclude that there is a place for women in the theology of the Psalms.

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