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Performativity and Persuasion in the Hebrew Book of Psalms: A Rhetorical Analysis of Psalms 116 and 22

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Davida H. Charney

Recently, scholars have argued that oral poetry helped lay the groundwork for the development of rhetorical theory and practice in archaic Greece. I propose that oral poetry played a similar role in archaic Israel. First, I describe the ritual and rhetorical contexts in which psalms were composed and performed in ancient Israel. Second, I analyze two psalms (Ps 22 and Ps 116) to show that treating the psalms as deliberative argument posed by Israelites to God can explain otherwise perplexing problems in interpretation and translation. Finally, I argue that positing an active locus for rhetoric in ancient Israelite culture raises interesting cross-cultural comparisons with ancient Athens regarding the striving for social status and public influence.

It is well accepted in rhetorical studies that the emergence of democratic forms of decision making in ancient Athens lent such high social value to the skill of persuasive argument that, by the fourth century BCE, theories of rhetoric were explicit enough to be taught in academies by such figures as Isocrates, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It is not as widely recognized, however, that rhetorical discourse in poetic form played an important role much earlier in archaic Greece in laying the social and cultural underpinnings for democratic governance.

As Bruno Gentili and Jeffrey Walker have argued, poets in archaic Greece enjoyed a high social profile for recitations at private and public events, such as symposia, sporting events, funerals, state occasions, and other ceremonies. In many cases, the poems were explicitly persuasive, especially at symposia where the ostensible goal was to seduce a love interest. With their usual competitive spirit, Athenians used public and private occasions to hone their critical and persuasive skills. The most persuasive and eloquent poems were preserved and diffused by memorization, notes, and transcripts to serve simultaneously for future entertainment and as models for other authors. The fame and monetary rewards

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conferred on poets laid the pattern for the power and prestige to be gained by effective public speakers. While forms of legislative and deliberative discourse were available in the archaic period, Walker argues that it was the easily memorized and repeated poetry that modeled wisdom and eloquence and served as the basis for later epideictic arguments in prose.

The case for the public, performative, and civic quality of poetry in Greece raises the question of whether poetry played a similar role in other ancient cultures. In this article, I will argue that oral public poetry—in the form of the psalms—may have been equally dynamic in Jerusalem of the fourth and fifth centuries BCE. The psalmists were poets and musicians who worked in guilds to compose songs for use in the Temple in Jerusalem and perhaps other shrines. Some of the 150 poems in the Book of Psalms are straightforward hymns of praise, clearly the expressions of a religious cultic assembly. But over a third of the psalms convey first-person expressions of thanksgiving, petition, or lament from individuals caught in the trials of daily life: aging or sickness, imprisonment, threats from neighborhood bullies and slanders from gossips, chicanery in business, or loss of faith in God's abiding presence. The psalms can be seen as arguments posed to God by Israelites, sometimes as individuals and sometimes as a community, over the continuation of their covenantal relationship. By composing, preserving, and adding to the Book of Psalms over several centuries, the psalmists used argument to foster the social and cultural cohesiveness of the Israelite community.

It is not surprising that neither rhetoricians nor Biblicists have viewed the psalms in this way, given the modern habit of viewing poetry as fundamentally lyrical—an attitude that Gentili and Walker are at pains to challenge in the case of archaic Greek poetry. In a similar move for the psalms, Harold Fisch notes, "[t]he 'I' of the Psalms stands at a great distance from the autonomous ego that figures so largely in the European poetry of the nineteenth century and earlier" (113). Israelite texts started to be codified in writing during roughly the same time period as rhetorical texts in ancient Greece, with records dating from about the fifth century BCE (Sarna). Yet, as Margaret Zulick noted in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* in 1992, the Hebrew Bible "remains somewhat removed from the center of critical inquiry in rhetoric and communications theory today" (125). It was not until the late 1990s, after George Kennedy opened the door to comparative studies of rhetorical practices in ancient cultures (*Comparative*), that studies of the Hebrew Bible and early Judaic sources such as the Talmud, have begun appearing with some frequency in rhetorical and communications journals (e.g., Frank, Katz, Zulick) and edited collections (e.g., Lipson and Binkley).

Within Biblical Studies, successive theological and critical approaches to the psalms over the past two hundred years, all growing out of the German scholarly tradition, have somehow eddied around rhetorical concepts without ever lighting on a thorough-going rhetorical standpoint. In the nineteenth century, scholars adopted a "biographical-psychological and individual author-centered approach" toward the speakers of the psalms, focusing on "the individual psalmist's inner

feelings and his psychological and religious condition" (Bosma, "Part 1," 186). The most influential scholars of the early twentieth century, Hermann Gunkel, Sigmund Mowinckel, and Claus Westermann and their followers in the form-critical school, rejected the notion that the psalms were the outpourings of specific historical individuals. These scholars produced taxonomies of the psalms according to speaker (individual or community) and purpose or *Sitz-im-Leben*, a specific ritual, festival, communal, or personal occasion for which a particular psalm or psalms could have been composed. In order to re-focus attention on genre and purpose, these scholars treated the speaker as a non-distinct functionary, such as a king or prayer leader, enacting a role for an assembled congregation.

Claus Westermann, who called attention to the compilation process for the Book of Psalms, recognized that canonization loosened a given psalm from its original historical and ritual context; once placed within a sequence that became fixed in writing, a psalm accrued different interpretive possibilities (Bosma, "Part 2"). Thus, just as George Kennedy ("Classical Rhetoric") describes a gradual process of "literaturization" for classical Greek texts that diminished their rhetoricity, the psalms came to be viewed less as public oral performances tied to specific historical events than as portions of a literary text or as prayers for private meditation.

Over the past forty years, Biblical scholars have applied what they term "rhetorical criticism" to the Psalms. However, as Matthew Schlimm and Susan Gillingham note in recent reviews, these efforts have largely been confined to identifying the structural units of the various sub-genres and analyzing their verse structure, syntax, and prosody. What these approaches lack is attention to the rhetorical situation as a whole: the speaker's effort to persuade a specific hearer, namely God, to take action within particular historical circumstances. According to Schlimm, few Biblicists have attempted "Aristotelian" analyses of the psalms because "unlike the Greco-Roman world, there exists no extant handbook on Hebrew rhetoric from the biblical period or any time preceding it." (249) Two scholars who do seriously consider rhetoric in relation to the Hebrew Bible are Dale Patrick and Yehoshua Gitay (who studied with George Kennedy). Two other scholars, Patricia Tull and Carleen Mandolfo, investigate the roles of speaker and hearer in the psalms; however, both apply a narrowly Bakhtinian rather than a broader rhetorical perspective.

The recent surge of interest in the Judaic tradition of argumentation (e.g., Frank, Handelman, Katz) has laid the groundwork for a fresh look at the rhetoric of the psalms because arguing with God has a much more prominent place in Jewish than in Christian theology.

Biblical Representations of Argument

The narrative of the Hebrew Bible includes several prominent episodes of debate. Great figures including Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, and Job are celebrated for arguing with God. David Frank writes that "[t]he God of the Hebrew Bible is,

by nature, argumentative,'' and goes so far as to say that ''[a]gonistic speech is the beginning of Jewish theology'' (73). Apart from argumentative dialogue, contentiousness is a recurrent theme in the narrative. In fact, the very name ''Children of Israel'' links Jews to the patriarch Jacob who fought to a draw in a divine wrestling match (Genesis 32:24–32) and was renamed Yisra-el, which can be translated as ''will fight God'' or ''God will fight.'' Further, the Israelite tribes, whose forty years of wandering complainingly through the Sinai takes up most of the Torah, overwhelmed Moses with their disputes to such an extent that he had to set up echelons of elders in what amounted to municipal and superior courts. The importance of argument in Judaic culture is even more evident in the practices of the Rabbinic sages who wrote the Mishnah and Talmud at the beginning of the Common Era (CE). These rabbis prized their free-wheeling deliberative hermeneutics so much that they even declared divine intervention out of bounds.[1]

Apart from positive depictions of arguing, the Hebrew Bible is also suffused with language about language. In her investigation of Biblical terms for argument, Margaret Zulick (''Active Force'') concedes that Hebrew has no active, transitive, value-neutral verb meaning ''to persuade.'' However, she found an abundance of words in the Bible for speech, eloquence, argument, and persuasion (legal and theistic) as well as terms for ''active'' listening. In Zulick's analysis, the lack of a transitive verb ''to persuade'' may reflect an epistemology in which persuasion is determined not by the speaker but by the hearer; being persuaded is ''an independent motion of the will on the part of the hearer,'' who may in part be susceptible to influence by a speaker (378). The hearer's final say in whether he or she is persuaded is noted by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca in their distinction between persuasion and conviction; speakers may succeed at convincing without persuading the hearer to act.

Despite their status as intricately wrought poetry, the psalms are, if anything, even more highly focused on persuasion than the rest of the Bible. The psalms are suffused with terms connected to the speech organs, the varieties of vocal utterances, and the goals of speech (Table 1). Herbert Levine notes that psalmists show a ''heightened awareness of their own acts of expression,'' using a ''striking number of [named speech acts]'' at their beginning and end. The data in Table 1 suggest that, on average, over six separate verses of a psalm contain terms for speech acts. Considering that the psalms are relatively short poems (averaging about 16 verses), this is a remarkably high concentration.

Beyond their frequent use of language terminology, numerous psalms clearly serve an epideictic purpose, to praise God and God's works. A large set of individual, first-person psalms of lament and thanksgiving display a problem–solution

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[1]This is the upshot of the famous Talmudic story of the ''Oven of Achnai,'' in which rabbis arguing over whether a particular oven is ritually kosher reject various forms of miraculous intervention on the behalf of the one holdout. A vote of rabbis takes precedence even over a heavenly voice because, according to Deut 30:12, the law ''is not in heaven'' but for human interpretation. See Menachem Fisch (78–88) for a thorough analysis.

Table 1 Frequencies of Language-Related Words in Psalms. Word Counts Include Variants (e.g., Tense, Number, Verbal/Nominal/Adjectival Forms)

Category	Word list	Verses with term	Percentage of verses per psalm
Speech Organs	Ear, lips, mouth, tongue, voice	170	1.1
Speech Acts	Answer, ask, bless, boast, call, chasten, complaint, cry, curse, declare, despise, exalt, extol, groan, honor, inquire, language, loathe, magnify, mention, mock, name, noise, plea, praise, proclaim, say/said, scorn, shout, sing, speak, tell/told, word	984	6.6
Hearing	Attend, hear, heed, listen	232	1.6
Sound	Aloud, mute, dumb, silent	18	0.1

structure characteristic of deliberative argument. Through a rhetorical analysis of two of these psalms (Ps 116 and Ps 22), I will illustrate how psalmists develop well-supported claims intended to move God to action.

The argumentative qualities of the psalms can only be appreciated by understanding the religious/cultic context in which they were composed and sung in the Temple in Jerusalem and other shrines. The dating of Psalms is a matter of controversy, in part because the singing of psalms is not mentioned in any descriptions of ritual practices in the Torah. In Jewish tradition, the psalms are attributed to King David and his son King Solomon who built the First Temple in Jerusalem early in the first milennium BCE. The Biblical Book of Chronicles credits King David with organizing guilds of poets and singers. The Book of Chronicles, however, was written long after the First Temple was built.

Based on similarities between the geneologies listed in the Book of Chronicles and Greek genealogies, Gary Knoppers argues that the earliest likely date for the composition of Chronicles was around 400 BCE, some time after the building of the Second Temple, which is normally dated to the late fifth century BCE. This dating is consistent with textual evidence of connections between Chronicles and the prophetic books of Ezra and Nehemiah. By crediting David with writing psalms and organizing guilds, the Chronicler may have been trying to give as prestigious a lineage as possible to groups that had formed in his own time period. It is plausible, then, that at least some psalms were composed and preserved before Chronicles. Textual evidence suggests that the Book of Psalms was built up over time as newer sub-collections of psalms were added onto older ones. According to Nahum Sarna et al. in the 2007 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, the full content and present ordering of the Book of Psalms was canonized ''well before the beginning of the second century B.C.E.'' (668).

The sketch of the ritual context of the psalms that follows accords with this early dating and takes at face value the Temple practices described in the Torah and in Chronicles. It is intended as background for the setting and activities referred to in the text of the psalms rather than as an argument supporting this dating itself.

The Ritual Context of the Psalms

The Biblical Book of Chronicles describes Levites performing music, singing, and even dancing to accompany the processions of priests and the ritual offerings and animal sacrifices (the ''cultic'' rituals) that the priests performed. The priests, designated as Kohanim, were members of the tribe of Levi who descended from Aaron, the first high priest and the brother of Moses. Apart from singing, the other Levites assisted the Kohanim and performed duties such as maintaining and guarding the Temple (for a fuller description, see Yadin). On any given day, priests chose lots for assignments to various tasks, bathed and changed into special linen clothing, used special silver or gold utensils, and dealt with the sacrificial animals (cattle, flocks, or birds), as well as wine, incense, cakes, and oils.

Sacrifices were designated for specific times of the day, week, month, and year, including observances for the Sabbath, new moons, and festivals. The major events at the Temple were the daily burnt offerings of cattle, one each morning and evening. Between these offerings were other ritual events including obligatory and voluntary sacrifices. The obligatory rituals were for expiating sins or regaining a state of ritual purity. The voluntary rituals were for giving thanks, making petitions, fulfilling a vow (*ne-der*), or earning good will.

Apart from the most solemn events, such as the annual communal expiation of sins on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, sacrifices were not arcane spectacles but familiar occurrences in which every family might regularly participate. The voluntary offerings, known as *sh'lamim,* probably provided a practical means for following the ritual laws regarding the butchering of livestock for food. The dietary laws of *kashrut* forbid the consumption of blood; an animal's blood, considered its life-force, has to be dedicated back to God. So in preparation for any occasion on which a family group planned to dine on lamb, goat, or beef, the owner of the animal came to a shrine and helped to slaughter the animal (Milgrom and Lerner). In exchange for a cut of the meat, the local priest dashed the blood against the altar, disposed of the unkosher portions, and incinerated some of the fat into smoke, the pleasing aroma of which was God's part of the exchange.

The voluntary offerings are the most plausible occasions for which psalms expressing laments, petitions, and thanks would have been composed and performed. There were many altars around the country where ritual practices, such as *sh'lamim,* probably took place. These occasions were accompanied by festive meals. The most complete narrative in the Hebrew Bible of an individual using a psalm to mark a personal triumph is the song of Hannah, the mother of the Prophet Samuel (I Samuel 1:1–2:10). At an annual family visit to sacrifice at the shrine

at Shiloh, the then-barren Hannah prays for a son and vows to dedicate him to God. After the child is weaned, she travels to the shrine at Shiloh to leave him with the priests, makes a sacrifice to fulfill her vow, and sings a psalm of thanksgiving.

The Rhetorical Situations of the Psalms

The psalms were categorized into genres by Hermann Gunkel, with modifications by Mowinckel, Westermann, and others. Gunkel divides the psalms by type of speaker (communal and individual) and by purpose (hymn, praise, lament, thanksgiving, petition, liturgy). The communal psalms, many employing the first-person plural, include about thirty-four hymns, some thematically associated with Zion, some focused on the image of God as king, as well as eight psalms of communal lament and three psalms of communal thanksgiving. The individual psalms, employing the first-person singular, include about forty-five laments and another thirteen thanksgivings. Gunkel also has smaller categories for royal psalms, wisdom psalms, liturgies, and miscellaneous. Among current Biblicists, Walter Brueggemann (drawing on Westermann) seems most open to the notion that the psalmists interacted with ordinary Israelites to prepare for religious rituals and portrays the individual laments as representing the "serious experience of members of the community" ("Costly," 58).

The psalms serve several important rhetorical purposes. First, the act of praising God itself testifies to the continued faithfulness necessary to maintain the covenant between God and the Jewish people. Second, a public declaration of thanks is part of the act of fulfilling a vow. Third, the psalms testify to the purity of motives and attitudes of the people performing the sacrifices. God heeds the humble in spirit (e.g., Isaiah 57:15; Is 66:2) and rejects sacrifices made in mechanistic fashion by people with the wrong attitude (e.g., Is 1:11–17).

If ancient Israelites had had a "primitive" theology—if they believed that animal sacrifice was sufficient to appease God, then the psalms would not exist. At best, they would be merely decorative. Instead, as Mowinckel notes (II: 20–25), the psalmists often portray God as giving greater significance to the psalms than to the sacrifice itself (e.g., Ps 40, Ps 50, Ps 69). It is only in a society that believes that God is amenable to argument (although equally capable of responding with silence and distance) that psalms would need to be as persuasive as they are.

In the rhetorical situation of the psalms, God is the primary audience. The speaker in a typical lament seeks a response from or a closer connection to God; the sought-for connection is due because the speaker is faithful and innocent, or has repented of sins. Only a small number of psalms refer to the speaker's sins (e.g., Ps 25, Ps 38, Ps 51, Ps 143); presumably, an Israelite admitting guilt would expiate it by making a sin-offering that was not commemorated in poetry. In contrast to contemporaneous psalms in the Ancient Near East, most of the psalms, especially the individual laments, are a form of protest; it is incumbent on God to take action to reestablish the accustomed bond (Patrick and Diable). In addition

to direct address of God, many psalms directly or indirectly address the assembly, and, in some cases, the speaker engages in explicit self-address. In an important sense, the psalms always involve a form of self-persuasion for the ostensible speaker. A person who works out the reasons for God to take action necessarily rehearses the community's core beliefs and standards of behavior. Jean Nienkamp has argued for a similar effect of public argument in Athens, noting that for Isocrates, "there is a causal connection between internal rhetoric and ethical, wise behavior" (20).

A Humbling Experience: The Rhetoric of Psalm 116

The performative quality of the psalms is illustrated clearly in Psalm 116 (see Table 2). With its explicit mention of a thanks offering (v 17) and paying vows (v 14, v18), this psalm seems to have been part of an offering for fulfilling a *ne-der*, "vow." The speaker carries out the vow by describing the activities involved in the sacrifice—perhaps at the same time that they are enacted. The public nature of this

Table 2   Psalm 116 (tr. Robert Alter)[a]

1	I love the LORD, for He has heard my voice, my supplications.
2	For He has inclined His ear to me when in my days I called.
3	The cords of death encircled me—the straits of Sheol found me—distress and sorrow did I find.
4	And in the name of the LORD I called. "LORD, pray, save my life."
5	Gracious the LORD and just, and our God shows mercy.
6	The LORD protects the simple. I plunged down, but me He did rescue.
7	Return, my being, to your calm, for the LORD has requited you.
8	For You freed me from death, my eyes from tears, my foot from slipping.
9	I shall walk before the LORD in the lands of the living.
10	I trusted, though I did speak—Oh, I was sorely afflicted—
11	I in my rashness said, "All humankind is false."
12	What can I give back to the LORD for all He requited to me?
13	The cup of rescue I lift and in the name of the LORD I call.
14	My vows to the LORD I shall pay in the sight of all His people.
15	Precious [Grievous] in the eyes of the LORD is the death of His faithful ones.
16	I beseech You, LORD, for I am Your servant. I am Your servant, Your handmaiden's son. You have loosed my bonds.
17	To You I shall offer a thanksgiving sacrifice and in the name of the LORD I shall call.
18	My vows to the LORD I shall pay in the sight of all His people,
19	in the courts of the house of the LORD, in the midst of Jerusalem. Hallelujah!

[a]Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are from Robert Alter's *The Book of Psalms*. Alter chose wording that is more literal and closer to the syntax of the Hebrew than other authorized translations. Excerpted from *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary by Robert Alter*. © 2007 Robert Alter. Used with permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

activity is emphasized by the repeated mention of the setting "before all God's people" (v 14, v 18).

It seems natural to suppose that this psalm was composed by an individual for his own use or by a poet on his behalf.[2] Some scholars, however, argue explicitly against these possibilities. Michael Goulder, for example, ridicules the notion that an ordinary individual could have composed Psalm 116 because of "the embarrassment of how the psalm came to be in the psalter—'Excuse me, sir, that was a beautiful prayer you made: do you think we could have a copy for the Temple collection?'" (175). Goulder is equally scornful of the idea that a psalmist took part in "a hack job," composing such a psalm on commission: "'Berekiah, do you think you could do us a thanksgiving psalm suitable for recovery from sickness, childbirth, prison, libel, etc.? About 20 verses'" (175). Instead, Goulder insists that Ps 116 concerns the survival of the community and expresses only a national voice, raised at a public festival such as Passover.

Biblicists identify certain verses in Psalm 116 as extremely problematic. One puzzle, identified by Michael Barré among others, arises in vv 10–11 in which the speaker seems to recant from a denunciation of humankind as untrustworthy liars.

Another puzzle arises in v 15 with its problematic first word, *yakar*. In all other instances in the Hebrew Bible, the term *yakar* means "precious," "dear," or "costly." On its face, then, v 15 seems to express a positive attitude toward martyrdom, an attitude that manifestly contradicts the life-affirming tenets of Judaism. The Jewish Publication Society (JPS) follows late rabbinic tradition in rendering the word as "grievous," a translation that is also used in some Jewish prayerbooks. In the *midrash* (exegesis) justifying this translation, the medieval rabbinic commentator Rashi identifies a series of Biblical persons who had done righteous deeds for God (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David); it was grievous for God that they would die. Christian and secular commentators also find the use of the term *yakar* problematic in this context. According to Barré, Ps 116:15 has "taxed the ingenuity of exegetes for centuries" (61). Barré is so stumped that his solution is to change the remainder of the verse so that *yakar* makes sense. Barré claims that the phrase *ha-mav-ta* "the death" is actually a corruption of the Aramaic word *he-man-u-tah* "faith." In his translation, the line reads "Precious in the eyes of YHWH is the faithfulness of His pious ones" (72). Barré's changes allow him to construct quite an elegant symmetric translation but only at the cost of ignoring the accepted wording of the verse.

Another puzzle in Psalm 116 is the repetition of the phrase "your servant" in v 16. Why would anyone identify himself with as vague a phrase as "your servant your hand maiden's son?" Who is the hand maiden?

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[2]I refer to the psalmists in the masculine because women in the tribe of Levi did not carry out priestly functions. I will also refer to the speakers of the psalms in the masculine because none of the first-person psalms use feminine verb forms.

The problems raised by Ps 116 can be resolved much more naturally than Barré or the rabbis suggest by adopting a rhetorical perspective and viewing the situation described in the psalm as realistic rather than allegorical. An Israelite man comes to the Temple after having escaped an actual imprisonment; his shackles were literally opened up. The circumstances of the imprisonment are left unspecified: he may have been captured in a battle with foreign enemies like the Philistines and held for ransom or he may have been arrested for a crime and facing a death penalty. In any case, while in prison, he made some kind of vow, "God, if you save my skin, I will pay you back." Now he comes to the Temple to make good, by making a thanksgiving sacrifice, or *zevakh todah* (sometimes referred to as *korban todah*). The psalm is unequivocally a celebration of God's response to a particular petition by a survivor. A close reading of Ps 116 suggests not only that it was composed for a sponsor, but also that the psalmist composer may have intended to persuade not only God but also the speaker.

Ps 116 has traditionally been divided into two main sections vv 1–9 and vv 10–19. The analysis in Table 3 follows Michael Barré's thorough structural analysis, but assigns different functions to the parts.

The direct addressee in the psalm is God; clearly some of the concern of the speaker is to perform the ritual in an acceptable way, so that God will consider the vow fulfilled and the speaker worthy of continued good will. Vows are taken very seriously in the Torah. Not only do the Ten Commandments prohibit futile vows, but long passages (e.g., Num 30: 2–14) are devoted to the irrevocability of vow, including those by single, married, divorced, or widowed women. A second audience is the public, supportive family members and friends as well as those Israelites assembled in the vicinity, there out of curiosity or awaiting their own turn to complete a ritual. In Ps 116, a crowd is required; the vows must be fulfilled *neg-da-na l'khol a-mo*, "before all God's people" (v 14, v 18). Assuming that Psalm 116 was composed by a Levitical poet for an individual to recite, it may well have been designed to persuade the speaker as well, to put him/her into the right frame of mind. The reading that follows emphasizes signs that the speaker's ethos undergoes a transformation.

Table 3   Psalm 116: Overall Structure

1–2	Appeal to ethos
3–4	Narrative of the crisis
5–6	Praise of God
7–9	Narrative of the rescue
10–11	Appeal to ethos
12–14	Fulfillment of the vow I
15–16	Appeal to ethos
17–19	Fulfillment of the vow II

The speaker actually starts out in v 1 sounding rather presumptuous. A more literal translation than Alter's of v 1 would be "I really love it that God listens to my voice," with the speaker asserting that God regularly or habitually listens to his voice. This fairly boastful attitude meets a corrective in vv 5–6. In v 5, the speaker praises God for being generous to the simple, presumably meaning people like himself. As Booij notes, however, the Hebrew term for "simple," *p'ta-yim,* is reserved for the foolish or simple-minded. So the speaker's praise ends up being self-deprecating. Then in v 6, the speaker admits to having been brought low or abased. The first section ends in vv 7–9 with a narrative of the crisis from which the speaker has escaped.

More concessions are made in vv 10–11, where the speaker insists on having maintained faith throughout the crisis—a claim that would only be necessary if he had spoken out (i.e., complained) in a way that seemed faithless. The speaker goes on in v 11 to admit to blurting out a hasty charge that every human being is false. Clearly the accusation is something for the speaker to own up to and make up for. In this particular rhetorical situation, recanting the charge might be necessary because of the present company, the priests, family members, and the community. The unstated implication is: Not everyone is false. Perhaps some of the people present intervened by paying a ransom or arguing for the speaker's release. Combined with the repetition of the phrase "before all God's people" in the second section, vv 10–11 serve to reaffirm the interdependence of the individual and the community.

This acknowledgment is an appropriate lead-in to the second section, the public and performative section of the psalm. Describing God's graciousness (vv 5–9) is not sufficient—the speaker still has to ask how to recompense God and has to perform the recompense in public by offering the sacrifice, pouring the wine, and proclaiming God's deeds, by singing the psalm. Calling to God can take place anywhere: from prison (v 4) or in public (v 16). It's returning to the public forum in Jerusalem and testifying that fulfills the vow.

In Ps 116:12–19, the speaker makes a declaration to fulfill the vow, a declaration that must take place in public, with a repetition of the phrase regarding addressing the assembly. In v 14 and v 18, the speaker refers to the assembly both times as *a-mo* "his (God's) nation," rather than "your" or "our" nation. This more impersonal form of address perhaps reflects that he had come to feel estranged and betrayed by the community.

Verses 116:12–19 constitute the performative part of the psalm. In Table 4, the two problematic verses, vv 15–16, can be seen as fitting in the center of a tightly structured frame.

Verse 12 and v 19 serve as a pair of outer brackets: v 12 zooms in on the scene to ask what actions will be performed and v 19 pulls back out to the wider setting. Between the brackets, two specific actions are described, raising the cup (v 13) and sacrificing the animal (v 17). In each case, the action is accompanied by invoking the name of God and making the fulfillment declaration.

Table 4 Psalm 116: Structure of vv 12–19

12	Rhetorical Question: What must I do?
13	Ritual action (cup) and invocation of God
14	Declaration of fulfillment of vow before the nation
15	Ethical concession
16	Invocation and self-identification
17	Ritual action (Todah sacrifice) and invocation of God
18	Declaration of fulfillment of vow before the nation
19	Setting of action in Temple in Jerusalem

At this point, the most puzzling verse, v 15, can be addressed. Its location at the center of the performative section suggests that it makes a crucial point, a value claim: "Precious in the eyes of God is the death of His faithful ones." This claim can only further diminish the status of the speaker. The speaker has made no explicit claim to faithfulness (as some first-person speakers do in other psalms) and has not died, but survived! Ultimately, then, the center of the psalm is a concession that completes the transformation of the speaker from boastful to humble. This verse might also serve to reduce any hard feelings among the listeners. The public audience might well include the families of those who did not survive, who were not ransomed, or did not escape whatever battle or crisis led to imprisonment. From this perspective, v 15 can be read this way: "the unlucky ones I left behind who paid with their lives are worth even more to God than any amount I can repay through an offering." The verse might even provide an incentive to the survivor to make as big an offering as possible to make up for his inadequacy.

At this point, the speaker comes to the fulfillment of the vow in v 16, which consists of the direct invocation of God, linked to an identification of the speaker, and followed by a concise summary of the favor God bestowed on him: opening the shackles.

A puzzle in v 16 is the vague self-identification "I am your servant, your servant the son of your maid-servant" with the strange reoccurence of the phrase "your servant." This verse is the only one in the Hebrew Bible in which the phrase "your maid-servant" is part of a male speaker's self-reference, "the son of your maid-servant." The usual naming formula uses the father's name rather than the mother's. Only one other self-reference in the Hebrew Bible uses a phrase describing a parent as a servant—in I Samuel 17:58, King Saul directly asks David, "Whose son are you?" and David replies saying "I am the son of your man-servant Jesse the Bethlehemite." So the repetition of the phrase "your servant" in Ps 116:16 might be explained by assuming that the second instance was meant to be replaced with the speaker's and parent's actual names: "I am your servant Jacob, son of your maid-servant Rebecca" or even "I am your servant, Jacob son of Rebecca." The impersonal identification "your servant" could be serving

as place-holders that would be filled by specific names during the actual ritual. If so, the repetition in this verse underscores the performative quality of the psalm.

A remaining aspect of the puzzle is the reference to a maternal maid-servant rather than a paternal man-servant. In an effort to save the ascription of the psalm to King David, the eleventh century rabbinic commentator Rashi goes so far as to identify the maid-servant as David's ancestress Ruth but does not explain why she would need to be invoked. Mayer Gruber relates the use of maid-servant to the laws in Leviticus determining the tribal identity of the child of a Canaanite bond-woman; metaphorically, Gruber argues, the speaker is invoking the principle of matrilineal descent and declares that "he was born a servant and will continue to be a servant of God as long as he lives, unless God Almighty, whose chattel he is, shall release him from that service. The psalmist thus indicates that he is not a fly-by-night devotee of God" (442). This explanation certainly fits with the speaker's moves toward humility, but it seems strange for a speaker to relate himself to an unnamed Canaanite bondwoman.

I propose a more realistic explanation that draws on Jewish liturgy. The one liturgical context in which a person is traditionally identified with the matronymic formula "[given name] son/daughter of [mother's name]" is when making a prayer on behalf of someone who is sick. Identifying a person with reference to his/her mother may have been considered more definite. It may also be a way to evoke God's merciful aspect; the Hebrew word for "mercy" is related to *re-chem,* the word for "womb." The prayer for the sick is related to a ceremony called *birkat ha-gomel* in which a person gives public thanks for being redeemed after having safely crossed the sea or the desert, after illness, and after release from prison (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 219:1.) In current practice, this ceremony occurs during the Torah service, in which custom dictates calling up a person using the patronymic formula. I have not found any evidence of the redemption blessing occurring in other contexts in which the person might be identified with the matronymic. Anecdotally, however, I can report observing congregations in Israel regularly reciting a prayer during the Torah service calling on God to strengthen and rescue the kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. The prayer identified him using the matronymic as *Gilad ben Avivah.* The continued public performance of both the prayer for the sick and the prayer for redemption suggests that the matronymic may have been customary for public occasions of thanksgiving.

This analysis suggests that psalms take account of the particulars of an individual case, one in which the individual arrives feeling over-confident of his own merits and bearing some animosity toward others in the community. The main effect of Psalm 116 is to cultivate in both speaker and hearers a characteristically Judaic sense of humility; life-or-death decisions are to be ascribed to God, not to the inherent merits or skills of the individual. A vow can only be fulfilled at a communal gathering, so the speaker must admit to being in—and must be readmitted to—an assembly of the faithful. The psalm is not so particular that

it can only be used in one case; a large guild of psalmists might well find this psalm fits numerous cases with major or minor modifications.

An Extended Claim of Worthiness: The Rhetoric of Psalm 22

A useful contrast to Psalm 116 is Psalm 22 (see Table 5). Whereas Ps 116 is categorized as a thanksgiving psalm, Ps 22 is categorized as an individual lament.[3] Biblical scholars generally treat these as completely separate genres and rarely consider them together. Clearly, however, there are close similarities. Both psalms include a description of a dire situation in which the speaker cried out to God and was answered; both describe a public ceremony in which the speaker explicitly fulfills his vows in public.

A very thorough structural analysis and commentary on Psalm 22 is provided by John Kselman and is quite representative of the interpretations of other Biblical scholars (see also Menn and Mandolfo).[4] Kselman divides Ps 22 into three sections: vv 1–12, vv 13–22, and vv 23–32. He sees vv 2–3 laying out a theme of separation along a vertical cosmological axis (developed further in v 4) as well as a horizontal historical axis (further developed in vv 5–6 and vv 10–11). The reminder of God's trustworthy presence in the past, both to the psalmist as a child and to his ancestors (vv 4–6 and vv 10–11), "makes his absence in the present all the more poignant" (186). His lament being met only by mockery in v 7, "the psalmist experiences a profound sense of dehumanization" (185). Kselman takes the appeal to God in v 12 as a boundary marker to the first section.

The second section (vv 13–22) describes the crisis in which the psalmist is surrounded by enemies and dangers. Kselman sees vv 15–16 as the "low point" of the psalm "where the poet confronts not the saving and rescuing, but the death-dealing God: "to the dust of death *you* bring me down" (187, emphasis original). Just as the first section ended with a plea in v 12, this section ends with an appeal to God in v 20–22, in which "the mood changes in a positive hopeful direction" ending in v 22 when God finally answers the lament.

Kselman sees the third section (vv 23–32) as the recovery from alienation, the replenishing of the cosmological and historical axes, space and time, with God's presence. Not only is the psalmist now capable of praising, but he invites all others, present and future to do so as well.

I accept Kselman's structural breakdown but propose different purposes for the sections (Table 6). A major difference between Ps 116 and Ps 22 stems from

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[3]Mowinckel (v 1, 226) treats Ps 22 as a national lament voiced by a king or leader and sees it as very similar to Babylonian royal psalms that describe an intimate relation between the king and the national god.

[4]Mandolfo provides a rather unconvincing reading of Ps 22 in which the positive references to God (vv 4–6, 23–32) are attributed to a "dialogic voice" other than the speaker. Mandolfo posits this dialogic voice only to enable a Bakhtinian reading of many of the psalms, rather than considering the variety of stances a speaker can take in the course of a sustained argument.

Table 5   Psalm 22

1	To the lead player, on *ayeleth hashahar*, a David psalm.
2	My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Far from my rescue are the words that I roar.
3	My God, I cry out by day and You do not answer, by night—no stillness for me.
4	And You, the Holy One—enthroned in Israel's praise.
5	In You did our fathers trust, they trusted and You set them free.
6	To you they cried out, and escaped, in You they trusted and were not put to shame.
7	But I am a worm, and no man, a disgrace among men, by the people reviled.
8	All who see me do mock me—they curl their lips, they shake their head.
9	Who turns to the LORD, He will set him free. He will save him, for He delights in him.
10	For You drew me out from the womb, made me safe at my mother's breasts.
11	Upon You I was cast from birth; from my mother's belly You were my God.
12	Do not be far from me, for distress is near, for there is none to help.
13	Brawny bulls surrounded me, the mighty of Bashan encompassed me.
14	They gaped with their mouths against me—a ravening roaring lion.
15	Like water I spilled out, all my limbs fell apart. My heart was like wax, melting within my chest.
16	My palate turned dry as a shard and my tongue was annealed to my jaw; and to death's dust did You thrust me.
17	For the curs came all around me, a pack of the evil encircled me, they bound my hands and my feet.
18	They counted out all my bones. It is they who looked, who stared at me.
19	They shared out my garments among them and cast lots for my clothes.
20	But you, O LORD, be not far. My strength, to my aid O hasten.
21	Save from the sword my life; from the cur's power my person.
22	Rescue me from the lion's mouth. And from the horns of the ram You answered me.
23	Let me tell Your name to my brothers, in the assembly let me praise You.
24	Fearers of the Lord, O praise Him! All the seed of Jacob revere Him! And be afraid of Him, all Israel's seed!
25	For He has not spurned nor has despised the affliction of the lowly, and has not hidden His face from him; when he cried to Him, He heard.
26	For You—my praise in the great assembly. My vows I fulfill before those who fear Him.
27	The lowly shall eat and be sated. Those who seek Him will praise the LORD. May you be of good cheer forever!
28	All the far ends of earth will remember and return to the LORD. All the clans of the nations will bow down before You.
29	For the LORD's is the kingship—and He rules over the nations.
30	Yes to Him will bow down all the netherworld's sleepers. Before Him will kneel all who go down to the dust whose life is undone.
31	My seed will serve Him. It will be told to generations to come.
32	They will proclaim His bounty to a people aborning, for He has done.

Table 6   Psalm 22: Overall Structure

1	Title
2–3	Issue: Question
4–6	Enthymeme: Speaker's worthiness
7–9	Backing I: External Testimony
10–11	Backing II: God's knowledge
12	Plea
13–19	Problem: Narrative of Crisis
20–22	Solution: Plea for Rescue
23–27	Reciprocal Action: Local
28–32	Reciprocal Action: Global

the initial state of the speaker. The speaker in Ps 22 has none of the confidence of the speaker in Ps 116 in gaining God's attention and response. Instead, the speaker has been in crisis for so long that he feels completely abandoned and seeks for a reason. In my analysis, the opening verses spark a potent and well-supported argument to persuade God to reply. The question in v 2, "Why have you abandoned me?" is not simply "rhetorical" but points to the missing part of an enthymeme. In vv 4–6, the speaker reminds God that he has a history of responding to and rescuing generations of Israelites who trusted and called to him. The speaker has cried out to God for rescue, but God seems to have abandoned him (vv 2–3).

The speaker seeks a reason for the lack of response. Perhaps the hearer, God, doubts that the speaker has the fundamental qualities of the ancestors, such as their trust. In Toulmin's terms, the speaker believes that the unspoken warrant (I trust in God) requires backing. The trust of the ancestors is stressed in vv 5–6, with the same root *btkh* "trust" appearing no fewer than three times. Yet, far from asserting his own trust by comparing himself to *a-vo-tey-nu* "our fathers," the speaker in vv 7–9 further reduces his own standing, referring to himself as "a worm, not a man," as an object of public scorn.

This self-abasement is surprising. The speaker in Ps 116 needed to be brought down a peg, but the speaker in Ps 22 is already far from arrogance. I argue that the narrative of humiliation in vv 7–9 serves another purpose: as testimonial evidence of his trust in God. It is important here to point out that Alter is unique in giving a straight, rather than sarcastic reading to v 9. Other commentators treat v 9 as direct reported speech from the opponents in v 8, delivering a mocking taunt:

- "He lived for Yahweh—let him deliver him, let him rescue him, if he delights in him." (Kselman, 173)
- "Let him commit himself to the LORD; let Him rescue him, let Him save him, for He is pleased with him." (*JPS*, 1435)

- "All who see me will mock me, will open the lip, wag the head: 'Rely on Lord; He will deliver him, He will rescue him for He delights in him.'" (Goldberg, 69)
- "The ancestors' confidence in a God who delivered is now parodied in the taunt of the enemies (v. 9): 'Appeal to the LORD; let (God) deliver him, if/since he delights in him'." (Davis, 97)

The taunts serve as evidence: the speaker has trusted in God so openly that his opponents make fun of him for it. The taunts provide backing for the unstated warrant that the speaker has trusted in God, just like the ancestors. The mockery even raises a threat to God's reputation: if such a worthy speaker is not rescued, then God is also open to the mockery of non-believers.

An additional form of backing is provided in vv 10–11: the speaker was literally born and bred as a faithful Israelite. As in Ps 116, the speaker refers to his mother as part of an act of self-identification. But in Ps 22:11, the reference comes in the form of vivid imagery of God on the scene acting as a midwife for the new-born infant, invoking the image of the womb *re-chem* with its connotation of mercy.

In this analysis, then, the first section of Ps 22 consists of an extended argument about the worthiness of the speaker, rather than a series of mood pictures. It is only after elaborating this argument supported with appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos that the speaker repeats his plea for response in v 12.

The second section of the psalm, vv 13–19, vividly describes the seriousness of the threats from opponents that seem alien both in species and nationality. The bull, dog, and lion might represent actual wild animals. Or, as Othmar Keel suggests, the animals connect human opponents to demons and foreign powers of neighboring cultures, such as Assyria, Mesopotamia, and Babylonia. In any case, the crisis in Psalm 116 involves deprivation, physical threat, bondage, and closeness to death. It ends with another plea and, finally, a response.

In several ways, the third section, vv 20–32, resembles the performative section of Ps 116. In both, the speaker makes a declaration to fulfill the vow and, in both, the declaration must take place in public, with a repetition of a phrase regarding addressing the assembly. Whereas the speaker in Ps 116 referred to the assembly as *a-mo* "his (God's) nation," the speaker in Ps 22 refers to the public in v 23 as *e-khay* "my brothers." The term may refer to family members who are present at the ritual as well as those who, like the speaker, are descendants ("the seed") of Jacob/Israel. He addresses the group directly as *yir-ei Adonay* "those who fear Yhwh" (v 24) and as *y're-av* "those who fear him (God)" (v 26). These more expressive forms of address are appropriate for a speaker who has explicitly connected himself to this community from birth (vv 10–11). The speaker exhorts the hearers to praise God because each harm that befell him was resolved: God attends to those who have been humiliated, answers when they call, feeds the deprived, and lifts the hearts of the downcast. The psalm closes by widening the audience still further to those who are not descendants of Israel and do not presently fear God, to all nations, and all mortals. These verses may be intended to resolve the

alien threat raised by bulls, lions, and dogs in vv 13–22. The closing verses imagine the speaker's own children and future generations ("seed") continuing to praise God. The reference echoes the arguments in the first section: the ancestors who were answered when they call and the children who are born into the faith. The covenant continues for as long as God responds to the faithful; those deserving of response are those who carry on with praising, calling, and reasserting their claims to be heard.

Conclusion

This analysis of Ps 116 and Ps 22 illustrates the performative and persuasive qualities of the Hebrew psalms. In both psalms, the speaker attempts to elicit God's response (to respond to crisis and, subsequently, to accept the public fulfillment of a vow) by establishing the appropriate ethos as an innocent and worthy member of children of Israel. This rhetorical situation is also the basis for four other psalms: Ps 13 and Ps 54, in which worthiness is assumed and Ps 7 and Ps 17 in which the speakers actually challenge God to test their innocence. In a larger project in progress, I identify several other rhetorical situations ancient speakers might have taken vis-á-vis God and the rest of the community, each of which underlies a handful of psalms. These stances include: maintaining the status quo, establishing the right of redress, denouncing others, appealing to God's self-interest, acting as a model for others, and convincing one's self.

Seeing the Hebrew psalms as arguments has important implications for rhetorical studies that can only be sketched here. First, it underscores the need to examine and compare the rhetoric of other ancient cultures, including their poetic discourse. While I would not characterize the psalmists as rhetorical theorists, they are clearly drawing on an epistemology that resembles that of ancient Greeks: that stakeholders can be persuaded by claims supported by appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos. In contrast to Susan Handelman's analysis in *Slayers of Moses,* it seems to me that ancient Hebrew rhetoric differs most from that of Athens in the status of the speaker and the forums in which persuasive discourse was welcomed. The civic polity of Athens specified that decisions on an increasingly wide array of issues were based on arguments among peers and determined by vote among peers. The competitive advantage sought by Athenians probably drove the effort to explicate and disseminate theories of persuasion. Argument was just one of the many ways that individual Athenians sought power and influence.

In Jerusalem, by contrast, God is the ultimate arbiter. By enabling Israelites to engage in argument, the Levitical priests who composed the psalms foster the social and cultural cohesiveness of the Israelite community, though the psalmists themselves remain anonymous, standing behind or standing in for the individuals who experience crisis.

Second, then, the persuasive quality of the psalms highlights important aspects of Jewish theology. One of these is stated explicitly in the psalms themselves:

God enters into discussion even with the lowly and humiliated. When Israelites address God, they assume that they have met the preconditions for argument that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca describe so powerfully in *The New Rhetoric*:

> There are beings with whom any contact may seem superfluous or undesirable. There are some one cannot be bothered to talk to. There are others with whom one does not wish to discuss things, but to whom one merely gives orders. To engage in argument, a person must attach some importance to gaining the adherence of his interlocutor, to securing his assent, his mental cooperation. It is, accordingly, sometimes a valued honor to be a person with whom another will enter into discussion. (15–16)

It may seem presumptuousness of humans to challenge God but, as Harold Fisch puts it, "the challenge is itself made possible only by the having been fashioned by a creator God in such a way as to be able to ask such questions" (32). Sacred Hebrew texts like the psalms do not seek to suppress expression of doubt or anxiety or anger over injustice. Instead, as in Ps 22, the psalms present a way for Israelites to argue with God about the injustice of the suffering of the faithful, about God's own apparent lapses in upholding the Covenant.

The psalms also point to aspects of Israelite notions of justice. Apart from the dialogues with God described in the Hebrew Bible, no textual evidence of God's responses to the psalms is available. It seems likely that the speakers of the psalms looked to the evidence of subsequent events to decide whether God found their rhetoric to be effective—or effective enough, to warrant the desired disposition. In some cases, it seems likely that Israelites on different sides of a dispute might all have offered psalms, in which case the result will seem just to at least one party.

Whatever the empirical outcome, the effort of persuasion always affects the speaker and the community. This notion corresponds to what Walter Brueggemann calls "the Jewish refusal of silence," a theological stance which he sees in play in all the lament psalms ("Voice," 22). He argues that voicing a plea is what enables an angry or traumatized speaker, finally, to be capable of praise. In this sense, the psalms are acts of self-persuasion. Margaret Zulick ("Agon") makes a similar point about the needs of the community to persuade itself: "what such a community needs to renew itself is not the suppression of difference but an expression of it in some dramatistic or polyphonic form, drawing heteroglossia into a state of dialogue, of internal awareness, and reinstating a language from which an emergent future can be culled" (141).

Many questions remain unanswered about the rhetoric of the psalms, including the array of claims advanced and the types of evidence offered. More broadly, the psalms promise to provide insights into the Israelite notions of exigency, causality, and agency. The argumentation in the psalms may provide clues to the emergence of the sophisticated rules of argument adopted by the rabbis in the Talmudic period.

Finally, the broadest implication of the rhetoricity of the psalms for rhetorical studies is to encourage a resurgence of interest in the rhetoric of religion as a rational enterprise rather than one that is inherently authoritarian or pietistic.

Acknowledgments

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