

PERSUADING GOD

RHETORICAL STUDIES OF FIRST-PERSON PSALMS

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AJP</i>	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentary Series
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches</i>
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Bible Quarterly</i>
<i>CIQ</i>	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JANES</i>	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JEA</i>	<i>Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i>
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSup</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplements</i>
KJV	King James Version
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society of America Tanakh
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Modern Language Association</i>
<i>ResQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>VTSup</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum, Supplements</i>
<i>WW</i>	<i>Word and World</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

SONGS OF INNOCENCE

A pervasive approach adopted by speakers in the psalms is to assume the mantle of innocence. In contrast to the Mesopotamians who readily confessed faults in their prayers, 'the general stance of the psalmist is that of an innocent sufferer'.¹ In the three psalms in this chapter, the argument for the speaker's worthiness is especially powerful, dominating the content and expression. These speakers treat their innocence not as obvious but as a point in need of articulation and support. Innocence is not a simple quality; these speakers are not as similar to each other as newborn babes. They start from different standpoints relative to God and aim for distinct goals. The speaker in Psalm 44 dramatically accuses God of turning against faithful and innocent followers. The speaker in Psalm 22 makes an elaborate case to re-establish innocence and become God's public champion, while the speaker in Psalm 17 uses claims of innocence to seek apotheosis.

Psalm 44: God's Breach of Covenant

Psalm 44 is a bold challenge to God in the face of military defeat from a speaker who speaks both for himself personally and as a representative of the community. Just as the speaker attributes Israel's previous successes to God rather than to human prowess, so God is fingered as the cause of the community's current failure and humiliation. The speaker's main goal is to persuade God that the community has upheld its end of the covenant through faithful service and righteous behavior even during its current trials and is therefore deserving of rescue. The psalm also aims to persuade the public to maintain their adherence to God.

PSALM 44²

- 1 For the lead player, for the Korahites, a *maskil*.
- 2 God, with our own ears we have heard, our fathers recounted to us a deed that You did in their days, in days of yore.
- 3 You, Your hand dispossessed nations—and You planted them. You smashed peoples and sent them away.

1. Patrick and Diable, 'Persuading the One and Only God to Intervene', p. 21.
2. Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, pp. 154-57

- 4 For not by their sword they took hold of the land, and it was not their arm that made them victorious but Your right hand and Your arm, and the light of Your face when you favored them.
- 5 You are my king, O God. Ordain the victories of Jacob.
- 6 Through You we gore our foes, through Your name we trample those against us.
- 7 For not in my bow do I trust, and my sword will not make me victorious.
- 8 For You rescued us from our foes, and our enemies You put to shame.
- 9 God we praise all day long, and Your name we acclaim for all time Selah
- 10 Yet You neglected and disgraced us and did not sally forth in our ranks.
- 11 You turned us back from the foe and our enemies took their plunder
- 12 You made us like sheep to be eaten and scattered us through the nations.
- 13 You sold Your people for no wealth and set no high price upon them.
- 14 You made us a shame to our neighbors, derision and mockery to those round us
- 15 You made us a byword to the nations, an object of scorn among peoples.
- 16 All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face,
- 17 from the sound of revilers and cursers, from the enemy and the avenger.
- 18 All this befell us, yet we did not forget You, and we did not betray Your pact
- 19 Our heart has not failed, nor have our footsteps strayed from Your path,
- 20 though You thrust us down to the sea monster's place and with death's darkness covered us over
- 21 Had we forgotten the name of God and spread out our palms to an alien god,
- 22 would not God have fathomed it? For He knows the heart's secrets.
- 23 For Your sake we are killed all day long, we are counted as sheep for slaughter.
- 24 Awake, why sleep, O Master! Rouse up, neglect not forever.
- 25 Why do You hide Your face, forget our affliction, our oppression?
- 26 For our neck is bowed to the dust, and our belly clings to the ground.
- 27 Rise as a help to us and redeem us for the sake of your kindness.

Psalm 44 clearly fits the three-part lament structure described in the previous chapter, with an address that establishes the previous relationship between God and the speaker, a lengthy complaint section and a brief proposal for divine action that notably lacks a promise of reciprocal action (see Figure 4.1).

The address (vv. 2-9) lays out the terms of the covenant in quasi-syllogistic form. In the past, the ancestors conquered and possessed the land through God's might, not their own; they deserved continued possession of the land because of their proper humility and attribution to God of due thanks and praise. Now in the present, the speaker, a direct descendant of Jacob, shows the same humility and readiness to thank and praise in the face of renewed military action. If the speaker is a member of the same class as the ancestors and has acted as faithfully as they did to uphold the covenant, then he is justified in fully expecting God to ordain victory in the current situation. But the expectation is not fulfilled.

Title	1	Title
	2	Ancestors credited God
	3	God caused victories
	4	Ancestors credited God
	5	Speaker declares own faith, calls for help
	6	God caused victories
	7	God caused victories
	8	God caused victories
	9	Speaker declares nation's faith
	10	Yet God caused defeat
	11	God caused defeat
	12	God caused defeat
	13	God caused defeat
	14	God caused shame
	15	God caused shame
	16	Speaker is humiliated
	17	Speaker is humiliated
	18	Yet we did not forget God
	19	We did not forget God
	20	despite threat of death
	21	We did not forget God
	22	God would detect straying
	23	We are killed for God's sake
	24	<i>Divine Action: Awake! Rouse!</i>
	25	Why forget, why hide?
	26	We are humiliated
	27	Rise! Redeem us!

Figure 4.1. Structure of Psalm 44

To the contrary. The complaint (vv. 10-17) vividly describes God acting not as defender but as assailant, causing defeat and humiliation. This kind of clash between expectation and reality is the essence of a problem, an urgent rhetorical situation that initiates inquiry and deliberation.³ The

³ As defined in Charney and Neuwirth (*Having your Say*, ch 10), a problem involves the thwarting of a goal, expectation or theory. In addition to reality clashing with expectation (or an observed outcome clashing with an hypothesis), a problem may

complaint, which is half again as long as the address, uses diction, syntax and allusion to heighten the vivid contrast between past victory and current failure. As Loren Crow points out, each verse from v. 10 to v. 15 begins with a second-person singular verb showing God has not simply allowed other nations to defeat Israel, but 'has actively sought to bring about its end'.⁴ As Martin Kessler observes, the phrase כל היום ('all day'), which first designates a period spent in praise of God (v. 9), is transformed to time spent contemplating humiliation (v. 16) and being killed for God's sake (v. 23).⁵ And Dalit Rom-Shiloni notes that the complaint reuses terms referring to Israel and its opponents from the address in a chiasmic and concentric order, showing that God has changed from smashing and displacing other nations for Israel's sake to smashing and displacing Israel itself (see Figure 4.2).⁶

A	v. 3	אומים 'nations', גוים 'peoples'
B	v. 5	יעקב 'Jacob'
C	v. 6	צרינו 'our foes', קמינו 'those against us'
D	v. 8	צרינו 'our foes', שנאינו 'our enemies'
D'	v. 11	צר 'foe', שנאינו 'our enemies'
C'	v. 12	גוים 'the nations'
B'	v. 13	עמך 'Your people'
A'	v. 15	אומים 'nations', גוים 'peoples'

Figure 4.2 *Chiasmic Structure of References in Address and Complaint in Psalm 44*

A striking aspect of the complaint is how forthrightly the speaker rebuts the possibility that the failure is due to the people's or leader's own faults in vv. 18-23. A fair and persuasive rebuttal must identify the source of the claim being disputed, state the claim in a way that source would consider accurate, and provide counter-claims and/or counter-evidence. In Psalm 44, the claim being disputed is no less than the existence of the covenant and its continuation in force by both parties. By alluding to the ancestors and claiming a direct line of transmission from them, the speaker has already established that the covenant exists and has been in force until now.

arise from adopting multiple goals that seemingly cannot be realized simultaneously (such as cheap energy and a clean environment) or from a seemingly intractable obstacle that prevents a goal from being achieved

4 Loren D. Crow, 'The Rhetoric of Psalm 44', *ZAW* 104.3 (1992), pp. 394-401 (397).

5 Martin Kessler, 'Psalm 44', in Janet W. Dyk et al. (eds.), *Unless Someone Guide Me*. (Festschrift Karel A. Deurloo, Maastricht. Shaker, 2001), pp. 193-204 (202).

6 Dalit Rom-Shiloni, 'Psalm 44: The Powers of Protest', *CBQ* 70 (2008), pp. 683-98 (687).

The complaint clearly identifies God as the one whose actions violate the terms of the deal. The rebuttal in vv. 18-23 counters a possible warrant for God's actions, that the people broke the covenant first by forgetting God. As Rom-Shiloni notes, an accusation is not stated directly in the psalm itself, but the use of the verb שכח ('forget') in vv. 18 and 21 alludes to biblical and prophetic accusations of forgetting in Deuteronomy and Jeremiah that would warrant divine wrath.⁷ In Psalm 44, forgetting is denied in a series of four sweeping counterclaims in vv. 18-20: 'yet we did not forget you', 'our heart has not failed', 'we did not betray your pact', 'nor have our feet strayed from your path'. The sequence moves from internalized attitudes to externally observable actions, suggesting the completeness of the people's faith as well as the ease of verifying the claims.

The accusation of forgetting is also denied counterfactually in vv. 21-22, the most dramatic and riskiest appeal of the psalm as a whole. The speaker argues that if the people had forgotten God (אם שכחנו 'Had we forgotten the name of God'), had the people begun worshipping a foreign deity, then God would surely have known about it. Raising a counterfactual possibility is always risky because it allows that the condition could be true. In the current instance, if God had detected apostasy, then all the punishments described so vividly in the complaint would be justified and the speaker's whole premise is undermined. But the speaker does not admit fault. Instead, the point of the counterfactual may be that if God had detected apostasy, he would have *said* something about it. In other words, the speaker may be implying that no prophet and no oracle gave warning that God was displeased with the people's conduct. Coming on top of the outright denials of fault, the counterfactual may force God to admit that the people have in fact been faithful and that no breach of covenant justified their defeat in battle or their current suffering. Instead, as v. 23 emphasizes, faithful Israelites have been and are being slaughtered in God's name.

The appeal for divine action in vv. 24-27 calls for God to undertake a dramatic change in role and revert to being a redeemer. As Kessler has noted, the verses use four imperative verbs of engagement (עורה 'awake' and הקיצה 'rouse' in v. 24; קומה 'rise' and פדנו 'redeem' in v. 27) to bracket, mirror and undo four verbs of withdrawal (תישן 'sleep' and תזנה 'neglect' in v. 24; תשכח 'forget' and תסתיר 'hide' in v. 25). As Loren Crow notes, the withdrawal verbs themselves represent a significant softening of action, considering that until this point God has been hostile rather than dormant.⁸

7. Rom-Shiloni also notes several allusions between Psalm 44 and Psalm 37 (such as a bodily connection between true hearts and steady feet) that add to the persuasiveness.

8. Kessler, 'Psalm 44', p. 200, Crow, 'The Rhetoric of Psalm 44'

This section, in effect, presents two options or two stages, either of which is to be preferred to God's present enmity: God may withdraw to a state of benign neglect or arise in a more merciful and faithful mood. The absence of reciprocal action is entirely fitting for this psalm; promising praise would imply that it was not currently being supplied, undercutting the central thrust of the argument.

Interestingly, Adele Berlin offers a different reading of Psalm 44 in which the speaker argues only for present faithfulness and does not argue that God's initial assault was unjustified.⁹ She groups Psalm 44 along with Psalms 137, 69 and 78 as psalms concerned with the Babylonian exile. While she notes that the lack of references to Jerusalem make it harder to tie this psalm to the exile than the others, she sees Psalm 44 as an effort from Babylon to convince God to bring the exiles home. The main difference between her reading and the one offered here is the interpretation of vv. 18-23. Berlin rightly notes that this section establishes that the community is exhibiting faithfulness in the present, even after suffering at God's hand. She is also right that the section sets up a rationale for God's rescue and redemption that the concluding section explicitly requests. However, Berlin excludes reading it as denial of past failings. She reads the opening of v. 18 בָּאתָנוּ כָּל זֶה ('all this befell us') as turning the topic completely to the present, reading וְלֹא שָׁכַחְנוּךָ as 'yet we do not forget you', translations also used by the *New English Bible* and the *Revised English Bible*.¹⁰ In short, Berlin's reading assumes that the speaker is ready to concede that God's punishment was justified or at least is not contesting the point. She reads the counterfactual in vv. 21-22 as noting how easily the exiles might have turned to other gods while demonstrating their awareness that God's power extends even to Babylon.

Certainly the psalm permits both readings. However, more of the literary and rhetorical elements in the psalm support the reading in which faithfulness extends back to the past as well as forward to the present. The speaker had opportunities to admit fault before asking for rescue—an opportunity taken up in other psalms, such as those treated below in Chapter 6. But the speaker in Psalm 44 made no such move in the address, instead taking steps to heighten the reversal of expectation and to dwell on God's harshness. Similarly, the counterfactual phrasing seems unnecessary if the current situation is simply part of an extended justified punishment. In short, if Psalm 44 does refer to the exile, then the speaker went to great lengths both to hint at and conceal anger at God's actions.

9. Adele Berlin, 'Psalms and the Literature of Exile: Psalms 137, 44, 69, and 78', in Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller (eds.), *Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception* (VTSup. 109, Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 65-86.

10. Berlin, 'Psalms', p. 72.

Psalm 22: From Worm to Champion

As in Psalm 44, the speaker in Psalm 22 takes head-on the challenge of convincing God of his innocence and worthiness for rescue. In this case, however, the speaker's debilitation and despair convince him that God doesn't even recognize him as human, let alone as a partner in the covenant. Thus the speaker must recover this standing with God before the current problem can be broached and a solution proposed.

Accordingly, Psalm 22 can be divided into three sections: the Address (vv. 2-12), Petition (vv. 13-22) and Proposed Action (vv. 23-32) as shown schematically in Figure 4.3.¹¹ In terms of amplitude, the longest sections are the address (11 verses) and the proposal (13 verses) with the complaint taking only seven verses. Though vivid and pathos-laden, the complaint is not the site of the real persuasive work.

PSALM 22¹²

- 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

11. The sectioning follows that of John S. Kselman, "Why have you abandoned me": A Rhetorical Study of Psalm 22', in David Clines, David M. Gunn and Alan J. Hauser (eds.), *Art and Meaning* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), pp. 172-98. Earlier versions of my analysis appeared in Charney, 'Performativity and Persuasion', pp. 247-68 and Charney, 'Maintaining Innocence before a Divine Hearer: Deliberative Rhetoric in Ps. 22, Ps. 17, and Ps. 7', *BibInt* 21 (2013), pp. 33-63.

12. Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, pp. 71-77.

- 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 for ever!
- 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

The speaker takes on a two-fold task in the address, anticipating God's reasons for withholding aid and refuting those reasons. The section is bounded by pleas for a hearing both at its opening (vv. 2-3) and at its closing (v. 12). Thus, the dramatic questions that open the psalm are not in this case a standard rhetorical ploy and do not simply express deep emotion. The question 'Why have you abandoned me?' in fact initiates an inquiry into God's possible doubts, doubts that must be fully dispelled before going on to the complaint.

First, in vv. 4-6, the speaker reminds God of the ancestors who trusted, called in times of trouble and were answered. Although the speaker refers to ancestors as אבותינו (literally 'our fathers'), the speaker does not at this point make an explicit claim to share their faith. Rather, citing the ancestors in this way serves both to remind God of the covenant that should govern their relationship and to anticipate the possible grounds for God's silence. Perhaps God doubts that the speaker is bred from the same stuff as the ancestors.

The speaker accentuates the doubt even further in vv. 7-9 by referring to himself as 'a worm and no man' and as an object of public scorn. As an expression of the speaker's psychological state, the power of this move

Title		Title
	1	Title
	2	Question: Plea for a hearing
	3	Question. Plea for a hearing
	4	Ancestors' worthiness
	5	Ancestors' worthiness
	6	Ancestors' worthiness
	7	Speaker's perceived lack of worth
	8	Opponent's testimony
	9	Opponent's testimony
	10	God's direct knowledge
	11	God's direct knowledge
	12	Plea for intervention
	13	Threat bulls
	14	Threat lions
	15	Speaker's physical disintegration
	16	Speaker's physical disintegration
	17	Threat of cur-like evil-doers
	18	Threat of evil-doers
	19	Threat of evil-doers
	20	<i>Divine Action:</i> Hasten, come near
	21	Save my life
	22	Rescue; answer
	23	<i>Reciprocal Action:</i> Speaker's praise
	24	Fearers/Israelites' praise
	25	Lowly Israelites' rescue
	26	Speaker's praise
	27	Lowly Israelites' praise
	28	Nations' praise
	29	Nations' praise
	30	Netherworld's sleepers' praise
	31	Future generations' praise
	32	Future generations' praise

Figure 4.3. Structure of Psalm 22

is obvious: while the ancestors were spared humiliation, the speaker feels dehumanized. But by overstating the case so dramatically, the speaker also begins to oppose the doubts, inviting God to concede that worms are not prone to psalmistry. Similarly, the opponents' taunting in vv. 8-9 serves simultaneously to express and to undermine the image of unworthiness. The taunt—under certain translations—conveys the sting of humiliation at the same time that it documents the speaker's faith in God through the testimony of external witnesses. This is the effect of the translations by

Kselman, Kraus and the RSV (among others) who treat Ps. 22.9 as a direct quote of the taunters and who take 'גַּל אֶל ה' ('trust/commit to God') as describing the speaker's prior actions.

Ps. 22.9	Alter	Who turns to the LORD, He will set him free. He will save him, for He delights in him.
	NJPS	'Let him commit himself to the LORD, let Him rescue him, let Him save him, for He is pleased with him'.
	Kselman	'He lived for Yahweh—let him deliver him, let him rescue him, if he delights in him'. ¹³
	Kraus	He put it in the hands of Yahweh, let him free him, let him rescue him, for he is obviously well disposed to him! ¹⁴
	RSV	'He committed his cause to the LORD; let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him!'

On this reading, the taunting proves that the speaker has trusted in God openly—so openly that his opponents make fun of him for it.¹⁵ The opponents unwittingly validate the ethos or character of the speaker; he is the type of person to whom God should respond. The mockery even serves a third purpose, raising the threat that God's own reputation is at stake: If God does not reply, if the speaker is not rescued, then God may also be open to the mockery of non-believers.

This reading seems more plausible and coherent within the context than the translations by Alter and the NJPS. Alter treats v. 9 not as a direct quote but as an expression of hope from the speaker. One problem with this option is its sudden impersonality, having the speaker now refer to faithful Israelites in the abstract as 'him'. A second problem is lack of cohesion, leaving v. 9 with no clear relation to the surrounding verses, either forward to v. 10 which describes the speaker's birth or back to the point on taunters in v. 8. The NJPS does treat v. 9 as a direct quote from by-standers but curiously renders it as friendly advice rather than a taunt, even though many descriptions of mocking opponents in the psalms are followed by direct quotes of their taunts.

In the third step, vv. 10-11, the speaker describes his birth, finally declaring his faith explicitly in a way that also thoroughly erases the dehumanization. The vivid image of the speaker's birth re-establishes him as a human being and not a worm. He was literally born and bred as an Israelite, not only connected to the ancestors but also serving God in life-long dedication.

¹³ Kselman, 'Why have you', p. 173.

¹⁴ Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, p. 291.

¹⁵ In 'Persuading the One and Only God to Intervene', Patrick and Diabie interpret reports of taunting this way. After citing Pss. 3.3, 22.9 and 42.4, 11, they comment that 'the citation of the enemies' taunts regarding reliance on YHWH is just one of a number of ways the supplicant makes his reliance known to YHWH' (p. 26).

The description of God acting as mid-wife invites God to recall observing the speaker's birth first-hand and knowing of his dedication. The reference to the mother's רחם ('womb') also appeals metaphorically to God's רחמים, the womanly quality of mercy. It is only after elaborating this argument that the speaker closes the section by repeating the plea for response in v. 12.

In this analysis, then, the entire address of Psalm 22 consists of an extended argument about the speaker's worthiness, with both logical and emotional appeals to God's own past behavior, eye-witness testimony from the speaker's mocking opponents and reminders to God of having directly observed the speaker's birth.

The complaint, the second and briefest section of the psalm in vv. 13-19, describes the speaker's untenable situation, threatened by opponents that seem alien both in species and nationality. The problem is developed as a narrative with the presence of the threatening forms of bulls, dogs and a lion. In face of the threat, the speaker's physical integrity dissolves and congeals, deteriorating to the point of death in vv. 14-16. His weakness allows the enemies to get close enough to count his bones, bind him and divide up his possessions (vv. 17-19). Whether the opponents are native or foreign, the nature of the crisis in Psalm 22 involves isolation and deprivation, physical threat from people and animals, bondage and closeness to death.

The longest section, the proposal, devotes little of its space to spelling out the actions for God to take. The four actions in vv. 20-22 counteract respectively the kinds of harms spelled out in the complaint, isolation, physical debilitation and the threats from human and inhuman enemies. God is asked to אל תרחק ('be not far'), חישא ('hasten' in bringing back physical strength), הצילה ('save') and הושיעני ('deliver' the speaker). The quick succession of imperative verbs amounts to a staccato call for action, which is answered in v. 22.

The weightiest part of the proposal is the speaker's reciprocal action in vv. 23-32. Ellen Davis, who calls this section the 'confession of faith', notes that the 'chief formal peculiarity' of Psalm 22 is that 'nearly a third of the poem stands at the antipodes to lament—the last ten verses of this lament are an extravagant portrayal of the circles of those who offer praise to Israel's God'.¹⁶ In addition to declaring his own praises of God, the speaker directs/predicts praise from widening circles of others, from his immediate family (the 'brothers' in v. 23), to the 'great assembly' (vv. 23-26), to other nations (vv. 28-29), to all mortal creatures and generations yet unborn (vv. 30-32).

The amplitude of this section underscores the speaker's worthiness—more than compensating for the initial doubt and dehumanization in the address. Now the speaker is empowered to persuade others to remain as dedicated to God as he was even in times of despair. The speaker becomes

16. Davis, 'Exploding the Limits', p. 96

God's champion relative to all three types of people described in the address: the ancestors who were answered when they called, the mockers who must return to faith, and the children who are and will be born into the faith. The covenant continues for as long as God responds to loyal followers; those deserving of response are those who carry on with praising, calling and reasserting their claims to be heard.

Psalm 17 Assertions of Godliness

Whereas the speaker in Psalm 22 gradually builds a case for rescue by virtue of God's covenant with Israel, the speaker in Psalm 17 asserts his righteousness from the outset. The occasion is far less dire: this speaker is hemmed in by his rivals, not sunk in degradation; his object is loftier than mere physical well-being. Ultimately, the speaker in Psalm 17 seeks through vindication to raise himself far above his rivals, let alone the common mass of humanity. Rather than inspiring other Israelites, nations and future generations to praise God, his goal is to achieve his own intimate rapport with the divine.

Psalm 17¹⁷

- 1 A David Prayer Hear, O LORD, a just thing Listen well to my song Harken to my guileless prayer.
- 2 From before You my judgment will come, Your eyes behold rightness
- 3 You have probed my heart, come upon me by night, You have tried me, and found no wrong in me I barred my mouth to let nothing pass.
- 4 As for human acts—by the word of Your lips! I have kept from the tracks of the brute.
- 5 Set firm my steps on your pathways, so my feet will not stumble
- 6 I called You, for You will answer me, God. Incline Your ear, O hear my utterance.
- 7 Make Your mercies abound, O rescuer of those who shelter from foes at Your right hand.
- 8 Guard me like the apple of the eye, in the shadow of Your wings conceal me
- 9 from the wicked who have despoiled me, my deadly enemies drawn round me.
- 10 Their fat has covered their heart. With their dewlaps they speak haughty words
- 11 My steps they now hem in, their eyes they cast over the land
- 12 He is like a lion longing for prey, like the king of beasts lying in wait.
- 13 Rise, LORD, head him off, bring him down, save my life from the wicked with Your sword,
- 14 from men, by Your hand [LORD], from men, from those fleeting of portion in life. And Your protected ones—fill their bellies, let their sons be sated, and let them leave what is left for their young.
- 15 As for me, in justice I behold Your face, I take my fill, wide awake, of Your image

Figure 4.4 shows schematically how Psalm 17 can be divided into three sections: the Address (vv. 1-8); the Complaint (vv. 9-12); and Proposals, for Divine Action (vv. 13-14) and Reciprocal Action (v. 15). The address clearly dominates the psalm taking up fully half the verses, in contrast to Psalm 22 in which the address was balanced by the proposal.

	Title	1	Title and Plea for a Hearing
		2	Plea for justice
		3	Speaker's worthiness: God's direct knowledge
		4	Speaker's worthiness: Own behavior
		5	Plea for Support
		6	Plea for Hearing
		7	Plea for Rescue
		8	Plea for Protection
		9	Description of crisis: Surrounding opponents
		10	Threat of opponents
		11	Threat of opponents
		12	Threat of opponents
		13	<i>Divine Action</i> : Hunt down opponents
		14	<i>Divine Action</i> : Nourish mortals
		15	<i>Reciprocal Action</i> : Communion with divine

Figure 4.4 Structure of Psalm 17 as Deliberative Argument

As in Ps. 22.2-12, the address is an extended claim concerning the speaker's worthiness. In Ps. 17.1-8, however, the speaker stands at a much better starting point. Far from being neglected or dehumanized, the speaker in Psalm 17 combines the call for attention with an immediate explicit claim to innocence and uprightness. The speaker has a message to deliver, characterizes it as 'a just thing' and emphasizes that it will be transmitted through 'lips that are without guile'.¹⁸ Accordingly, in v. 2, the speaker already anticipates winning God's approval, because God perceives what is right.

The speaker's claim to being innocent and righteous is supported in two ways in Ps. 17.3-4. First, in v. 3, the speaker reminds God of having found nothing wrong in a previous test of the speaker's mettle.¹⁹ In v. 4, the speaker describes his own behavior, claiming to avoid the ways of evil people. Robert Alter gives v. 4 the form of a public oath: 'As for human acts—by the word of Your lips! I have kept from the tracks of the brute.'

18 In his translation of Ps. 17.3, Alter opts, rightly I believe, to treat the message as what is 'just' rather than God, as some other translators claim.

19. Gert Kwaakel treats this test as hypothetical 'if you examine', 'if you investigate', in his 'According to my Righteousness': *Upright Behaviour as Grounds for Deliverance in Psalms 7, 17, 18, 26, and 44* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 70.

Oaths are especially powerful means of support because of their obvious underlying warrant: God condemns all false swearing and particularly swearing by God's name. By combining a reference to the results of a previous test and a public oath of having avoided evil, the address attempts to convey certainty about the speaker's innocence. Yet this is not the end of the section. The address continues with an unusually lengthy plea for response in vv. 5-8.

The plea for response is notable for its repeated references to God as an embodied figure with lips (v. 4), ears (v. 6), hands (v. 7), eyes and wings (v. 8). Even the phrase 'set firm my steps' in v. 5 uses a verb *תִּמַּךְ* ('grasp') that connotes using hands. Further, in each verse, the speaker's physical features are made to interact with God's: feet being grasped by God's hands, words being heard by God's inclined ear, body being sheltered at God's right hand, concealed by God's wings and guarded like the apple of God's eye. The imagery continually reinforces an identification between the speaker and God—an identification that remains important throughout the rest of the psalm.

The speaker's problem is laid out briefly in vv. 9-12. The first complaint is that the opponents 'despoiled me'. However, unlike Psalm 22, no vivid narrative of damage or deprivation is provided in Psalm 17; this speaker is not portraying himself as weak, deteriorating and suffering. Instead, the problem seems to be that the opponents are a continuing, looming threat.

The most striking aspect of vv. 9-12 is the speaker's description of the opponents as physically gross. First the speaker says *הִלְבֵּמוּ סִגְרוֹ* ('their fat has covered [their heart]'). As Alter remarks about this translation, the heart as the locus of the fat is only implied in v. 10: 'fat over the heart (presumably a token of the offensive prosperity of the wicked) insulates it from perception and feeling'.²⁰ In Alter's translation, the physical grossness carries over into the next verset ('with their dewlaps they speak haughty words'). Alter notes that *פִּימֹו* is

a grammatically archaic form meaning 'their mouth'. Because of the prominent fat image in the first verset, this translation emends that word to *pima-tam* (or, in an undeclined form, simply *pimuh*), a term that refers to folds of fat under the chin.

Next, in v. 12, the enemies are represented in beastly form: 'he is like a lion longing for prey' (*דְּמִינוּ כְּאַרְיֵה יִכְסֹף לַטְרוֹף*) or more literally, 'his form is like a lion...'. This section certainly does describe a threat but the main effect is to depict a stark physical contrast between the enemy and the presumably more attractive human features attributed both to God and to the speaker in the preceding section.

20 A similar reading is provided by Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, p. 244.

The solution that the speaker proposes for God to carry out is laid out in vv. 13-14. In v. 13, God is urged to go on the hunt, armed with a sword, to head off and bring down the beast, leading to the speaker's rescue. Psalm 17.14 seems to open by specifying from whom the speaker is to be rescued with the repeated phrase מִמָּוֹת ('from mortals'). But surprisingly, the speaker goes on to exhort God to three additional actions toward these mortals: 'fill their bellies', 'let their sons be sated' and 'let them leave what is left for their young'. The extensive critical controversy on this verse centers on the identity of the referents. Does 'they' still refer to the enemies mentioned in v. 13? Or is there a shift in v. 14 to refer to a completely different group, perhaps those faithful to God, who have hitherto been absent from the psalm? Both possibilities have attracted scholarly adherents.²¹

Ps 17 14	Kwakkel	from men, by your hand, O YHWH, from men without duration of life; you may fill their belly with their portion among the living and with what you have stored up (for them); may the sons be satisfied, and leave their residue to their children! ²²
	Kraus	May a cruel death at your hand, O Yahweh, a cruel death put an end to their portion in life! What you have put in store for them—(with that) fill their belly, so that their sons may (still) have their fill and bequeath a remainder to their children! ²³
	Alter	from men, by Your hand [LORD], from men, from those fleeting of portion in life And Your protected ones—fill their bellies, let their sons be sated, and let them leave what is left for their young.
	NJPS	from men, O LORD, from men whose share in life is fleeting. But as to Your treasured ones, fill their bellies. Their sons too shall be satisfied, and have something to leave over for their young

Joel LeMon has recently reviewed the possibilities and ends up siding with those such as Kwakkel and Kraus who construe all the referents in the verse as the enemies.²⁴ Translated this way, then, the speaker might seem surprisingly generous, allowing the remnant of the enemies to live and be well. As LeMon notes, however, it is also possible to give an ominous cast to the calls to fill their bellies with צִיָּנָךְ ('what you have in store for them') and

21. A third approach to the verse is offered by Jacob Leveen who substantially emends the text to make the entirety of verse 14 refer to faithful Israelites 'They that are perfect in thy ways will praise thee, O Lord: As for the perfect of this world, their portion is in this life, and for thy saints, thou wilt fill their belly, they will be satisfied with children, and shall leave their substance to their offspring' See 'Textual Problems of Psalm 17', *VT* 11 (1961), pp. 48-54 (52).

22 Kwakkel, *According to my Righteousness*, pp. 80, 95.

23 Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, p. 244.

24. Joel LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form in the Psalms. Exploring Congruent Iconography and Texts* (Fribourg Academic Press, 2010), pp. 62-67.

portray both God and the psalmist in a somewhat vindictive light. Not only are the enemies destroyed but their future generations are also in for it.

The second approach to Ps. 17.14, that provided by Alter and the NJPS, is also shared by Peter Craigie and John Eaton.²⁵ These scholars divide v. 14, with the first part referring to the wicked, and the second to a group of faithful allies who are introduced by translating צַיִן as 'As for Your protected ones' or 'But your treasured ones'. The translation of this key term is uncertain because it is found nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible.²⁶ In the split-verse approach, it is possible to read the first use of מִמֵּתִים ('from men') as referring back to the enemies and the second as referring forward to the faithful allies. The enjambment inevitably leaves hearers pondering the curious proximity of the wicked and the protected faithful ones. Both eat, both have fleeting lives. But the wicked act violently like wild beasts to satisfy their needs, while the faithful Israelites do not. When God acts, the wicked are swept away (at least for the time being) and God's followers go on in life and through future generations.

Regardless of whether the referents are taken to be friends or foes, Ps. 17.14 ends up with an unsavory aroma clinging to the image of God filling up someone's belly immediately after hunting down a beastly prey. The aroma is especially pungent if the ones to be fed are the wicked, those described earlier as lions, themselves longing for prey and depicted in v. 10 as grossly over-fed but still ravenous. Having a belly filled can only be a nauseating punishment, as was stuffing the Israelites with quail in Num. 11.1-34. But even if it is the 'protected ones' who are being fed, the juxtaposition of friends and freshly killed foes makes the outcome of having material needs satisfied into an anti-climax rather than a joyous affirmation.

The ineradicable ambiguity of reference suits the vagueness of the problem laid out in vv. 9-12. The speaker has enemies whom he would like to defeat, but as compared to Psalm 22, the situation is not an urgent life-or-death crisis. What the speaker hungers for is justice, not food, not health, not vindication, not children and not material means to support himself. Accordingly, the way is prepared for the stark contrast of the speaker's renunciation of material reward in v. 15, the concluding verse of the psalm.

Unlike speakers in many other psalms, the speaker does not conclude by promising to praise or sing, to sacrifice or to feast. Instead, with the

25 Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2nd edn, 2005); John H. Eaton, *Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary* (New York: Continuum International, 2005).

26 The same root does appear however in another prominent but much later Judaic context. In the Passover Seder, the word צַפּ is used to refer to a morsel of matzah (the bread of affliction) set aside for dessert. Its use here then retains the paradoxical joining of affliction and reward

appositive אֲנִי ('as for me'), the speaker moves apart from everyone else, whether friend or foe, and abjures material reward: 'As for me, in justice I behold Your face, I take my fill, wide awake, of Your image'. Alter's choice of 'I take my fill' for אֲשַׂבֵּעַ ('I will be satisfied') contrasts especially nicely with the filled bellies in v. 14. For the speaker, sustenance comes from a relationship with God; the verse imagines God and the speaker as close together as intimates and on, as it were, equal footing. All the earlier bodily images culminate here. The speaker's desire is twofold: first, a visible manifestation of justice on the current occasion—which can only confirm the speaker's likeness to God—and second, the promise of an ongoing shared regard with God in the everyday world.

Conclusion

The speakers of the three psalms discussed in this chapter share a common persuasive goal—not to initiate a process of growth or change in themselves, but to instigate a change in God's attitudes and behaviors towards them, and, by extension, towards their communities. The crux of the argument, in each case, is the speaker's character, his or her claim to innocence, or at least worthiness, for God's regard and rescue.

In Aristotle's classical formulation, appeals to the speaker's character or *ethos* are one of the three means of proof for a claim—in addition to *logos*, appealing to rationality and *pathos*, appealing to emotion. In any public forum, the audience constructs a representation of the speaker's character from a variety of clues that the speaker supplies intentionally or unintentionally: physical appearance, explicit self-references, gestures of identification and good will, signs of wisdom, knowledge and practical skill. In Psalms 44, 22 and 17, the speakers make abundant appeals to their personal histories, their relations to the Israelite people, their unbroken faith and good will towards God, and their humility and ethical integrity. Yet it is not these appeals that set these three psalms apart from other first-person psalms. Rather, it is the centrality of the claim of worthiness itself.

A claim of worthiness is an argument at the stasis of value. Is the speaker qualified to receive God's attention or rescue? As outlined in the previous chapter, speakers following the sequence of stases do not argue about whether a thing is good or bad without having first established whether it exists and what kind of thing it is. That is, before assessing the quality of two apples, one first has to acknowledge the presence of two objects and classify both of them as apples rather than an apple and an orange or other round objects. In rhetorical situations, a powerful interlocutor can forestall all efforts at persuasion by simply refusing to acknowledge a speaker's presence. Psalm 8.5 celebrates God's willingness to attend to humanity at all: 'what is man that You should note him, and the human creature that You pay

him heed?" The first-person psalms are premised on an even greater degree of openness—God's willingness to take note of individuals—a premise that must be considered so basic a condition of life that it usually goes unstated.

In the psalms, the basic claims that Israelites have on God are both definitional and value-based: first, that they belong to the people with whom God established a covenant and second that their actions merit good treatment. In both Psalms 44 and 22, the speakers accomplish the first task by identifying themselves explicitly with the ancestors whose claims God honored, with the speaker in Psalm 44 dwelling on this point at length. The speaker in Psalm 17 is confident enough of his standing with God that he by-passes the point altogether, moving immediately to the justice—the value—of his case. In all three psalms, establishing membership in the 'protected class' of Israelites is hardly sufficient.

Value claims build on definition claims because the quality of an item is assessed against others in the same class—apples are compared to apples, not oranges. Value judgments are intrinsically relative, not absolute. The psalms in the next chapter deal with speakers arguing that they are more worthy than their opponents by attempting to raise their own standing and lower their opponents'. In contrast, the speakers in Psalms 44, 22 and 17 argue that they meet or exceed some quality standard, that they are sufficiently worthy for rescue. In Psalm 44, after identifying with the ancestors, the speaker takes pains to argue that the community's current behavior is up to snuff—even after ill-use, they have not forgotten, betrayed or neglected God. In Psalm 22, the speaker brings in several forms of evidence of his own faithfulness to God—the testimony of opponents and God's own witnessing of his commitment since birth. In Psalm 17, the speaker declares himself a spokesman of justice and dares to set his own value far above that of his fellows, even approaching that of God.