Voices

TO READ BIBLICAL POEMS IS to encounter voices. These voices come to us over millennia, from people distant in language, culture, and time. Yet over the centuries, readers of these poems have often remarked that these voices feel familiar, even personal. How do biblical poems accomplish this sense of human connection?

It is a distinctive quality of biblical poems that they appear to be spoken *by* someone. Consider the opening lines of the great love poem of the Bible, the Song of Songs:

> Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,
> for your love is better than wine! (Song 1:2)

A woman's voice commands our attention. The first word, "let him kiss me" foregrounds erotic desire unapologetically as the subject of the text. Notice how the mouth, lovemaking, and wine create a delicious and heady atmosphere charged with sensuality. This voice is vibrant and perhaps audacious. Though her audience in the first line is not yet identified, she appears to be in dialogue from the outset, and we will soon encounter the address and response of the daughters of Jerusalem. In the second line, however, she shifts from speaking about her lover to addressing him directly: "*your* love is better than wine." In poetry, "voice takes place not merely as a presence but as the condition under which that person appears." An encounter with the other happens through voice, made possible by language and by our willingness to listen: "The realization

of expression depends on the *bind*, the implicit tie of intelligibility between speaker and listener that links their efforts."[1]

In the Song of Songs, the entire poem is an exchange of direct discourse: first-person "I" speech predominates, and much of it is directed to a beloved other, to "you."[2] The lovers engage by speaking and by listening to one another. The "I" voice—or the "we" voice in communally voiced texts—can give the impression of being deeply personal. Readers identify with the voices of these poems as they read them, momentarily taking on their perspectives and dispositions. This is different from saying that poems with an "I" offer a straightforward disclosure of a unique, subjective individual who wrote the poem. In biblical poetry, the idiosyncratic dimensions of individual identity tend to be suppressed in favor of a more open, paradigmatic "I"—while the "I" can disclose a character, it can equally belong to anyone who picks up the text.[3]

Throughout the Song, the woman continues to elaborate her desire in intimate and charged acclamations:

> Sustain me with raisins,
> refresh me with apples,
> for I am sick with love.
> His right hand was under my head
> and his left hand embraced me. (Song 2:5–6)

Here, the commands "sustain" and "refresh" are plural forms—to what people is she speaking? It might include her friends; it implicitly includes us, the readers. To her speeches the lover responds, describing his desire in terms of her beauty:

> How beautiful you are, my love,
> how very beautiful.
> Your eyes are doves behind your veil. (Song 4:1)

The poem unfolds through this exchange of dialogue, a give-and-take of lovers' speeches that expands occasionally outward, inviting

other voices. There is no story here, no third-person narration setting the scene, giving us backstory, or even telling us what happens. Instead, the voices of these lovers conjure an atmosphere in which they—and we readers—revel in a rich aesthetic of the body and of language. This lack of story is characteristic of Hebrew poems. Unlike a play, in which the dialogue is in service to a plot, here there is no plot. The dialogue itself is what happens. The poems lead us into a sense of the interior world of the speakers, who are consumed with the emotions of love. The poems are their speech.

EMOTION AND THE BODY

To take a grimmer example, early in the book of Genesis, we encounter a brief poem in the voice of Lamech:

> Adah and Zillah, hear my voice!
> O wives of Lamech, give ear to my word.
> For a man I have killed for my bruise,
> and a boy for my wound.
> Surely Cain was avenged sevenfold,
> but Lamech seventy-sevenfold. (Genesis 4:23–24)

Again, this is first-person speech. The "I" of the poem offers a window into the character's subjectivity by projecting an interior landscape.

The narrative that surrounds, in contrast, is third-person discourse. Its narrator recounts events about people that occur in another place and time:

> Lamech took two wives; the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the second was Zillah. Adah bore Jabal; he was the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock. The name of his brother was Jubal; he was the ancestor of all

> those who play the lyre and the pipe. And Zillah: she bore Tubal-cain, forger of all implements of bronze and iron. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah. (Genesis 4:19–22)

The poetic lines lack that narrative quality. They do not tell a story, and the subject is not given by a narrator. Instead, they give voice to a character. The poem even calls attention to this voiced-ness: "Adah and Zillah, *hear my voice*." Within biblical narrative, poems are now and again inset in this way: they change the pace and tone of the narrative, integrating what are likely older, traditional poems, into the stories. (This is the case, for example, with Moses' and Miriam's songs in Exodus 15; with Deborah's song in Judges 5; and Hannah's in 1 Samuel 2). Note how spare the narrative is: we are given no details at all about the conflicts around which the poem centers or any character's experiences or feelings. The poem, however, fairly explodes with Lamech's sense of indignation and gestures to a character who is both beset by enemies and bent on executing justice for himself. The rising intensity of the lines (from "man" to "boy," from "sevenfold" to "seventy-sevenfold") magnifies his sense of injustice and, perhaps, our sense of his unchecked cruelty. One thing that poems set into the narrative do is offer expansions of psychological and emotional experience and character that we do not otherwise get in biblical narrative.[4]

The voice implies the body. To assert one's voice is to project from the body, and to listen to another's voice is an act of reception. In the Song of Songs, this assertion and reception of bodily selves is a matter of reciprocal desire. In Lamech's poem, too, the voice is a projection of embodiment. It is projected through the verbal summoning of his audience at the beginning of each of the first two lines, each of which ends with a marked emphasis on voice and speech:

> Adah and Zillah, hear my voice!
> O wives of Lamech, give ear to my word. (Genesis 4:23)

"My voice" and "my word" highlight the personal dimension of his speech. This is developed through the evocation of his own body in the second couplet, each line of which ends with a reference to his woundedness at the hand of some anonymous assailant: "for my bruise," "for my wound." The last two couplets offer a building comparison that hinges on the single verb, "was avenged" (*yuqqam*). The voice of the poem is instigated on behalf of the body of the speaker, which becomes the central focus of the poem: four lines in a row end with the first-person suffix *-i* "my". We, with Lamech's wives, are asked to consider the "I" of Lamech's embodied experience. The voice is the intermediary between self and other, between language and the body.[5]

There are many questions we cannot answer about this short poem. Noting that it is framed as a voice, speaking *about* voice, helps us key into some of its dynamics. We do not know why Lamech directs his speech toward his wives, Adah and Zillah, whom he expressly names (directing a speech toward a named woman is uncommon in biblical poetry). We do not know why Lamech refers to himself in the third person (again, uncommon in biblical poetry). But these three names provide a frame of knowability for the center lines of the poem, which by contrast evoke nameless violence: "a man" and "a boy" are the center of the poem, whom he boasts about avenging, while not specifying who they are. We might note the strangeness and distastefulness of these lines, but the text neither enshrines nor explicitly critiques Lamech and leaves such judgments to the reader, who, in light of the narrative context, might understand them to signal the rising tide of human violence that begins with Cain and results in flood. Nevertheless, we can see how the poem uses these strategies of voice to effect an experience. They foreground the personal, bodily experience of the speaker while bolstering his sense of pervasive, anonymous violence that must be contained and controlled. Part of that containment is achieved by the vengeance he boasts of, but its containment is further enacted through the poem's assertion of voice.

In the book of Exodus we encounter quite a different voice: the prophetic voice of Miriam. According to the narrative setting, Miriam's liturgical leadership offers a ritual of victory: "Miriam the prophet, sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. And Miriam sang to them" (Exodus 15:20). The poem (or what remains of it) is just one couplet:

> Sing to Yhwh for he has surely triumphed:
> Horse and rider he has hurled into the sea. (Exodus 15:21)

The lines, though brief, show us several things. The opening word "sing" tells us something about ancient poetry, namely its deep connection to both performance and to music. While culturally the Western literary tradition has tended to characterize poetry as a private, quiet art, the performative dimension is often on display in biblical texts. This suggests that the texts were not only intended for personal consumption but might have been more like scripts that could be re-performed for an audience. The lack of widespread literacy in the ancient world makes this oral/aural dimension all the more salient. If you cannot read, your experience of poetry will be hearing and remembering, reciting or singing. Singing especially shifts the priority of the poem away from the semantic content of the words themselves (which become less distinct in vocal performance) while adding a musical dimension that we cannot recreate (but perhaps we can imagine). We would expect this to contribute to a surplus of meaning not accessible in contemporary practices of private reading—one of the limits I alluded to in the introduction. The performative dimension is not limited to the ancient context, either. In the contemporary world, both the lyricism of popular music and the widespread appeal of spoken word poetry suggest that communal staging of poetry is alive and well. This particular text from Exodus has a place in contemporary Jewish and Christian liturgies, where its performance continues to

be key. Communities, ancient and modern, perform their poems in both speech and song.

Here again, the poem serves as a site of emotional self-presentation: It memorializes a great event with the buoyancy and exhilaration of praise. It invites us to *feel* something, to feel it with Miriam and the Israelites at the edge of the sea, and to feel it with the others who have read, recited, and sung these words over the centuries. These lines do not offer the same sense of individual emotion that we see in the Song and in Lamech's poem. Instead, it is staged as a command to a group of people to a shared embodied experience: "Sing!" The song's ebullience is amplified by the surrounding narrative details of dancing and making music with tambourines. We also detect a kind of self-assertion in the prophet Miriam's voice, who speaks with commanding authority over a group of people. Such acts have gendered dimensions. Women's speech is often censored or overwritten in biblical texts—and, indeed, in other ancient and contemporary contexts, as well.[6] It may be the case that the more elaborate poem of Exodus 15 signals a reappropriation of Miriam's song under male auspices. While this poem preserves a moment of feminine self-assertion without qualifying or commenting on it, a story in the book of Numbers will record the bodily punishment of Miriam for her exercise of prophetic speech.[7] As projections of the body, we expect voices to bear the marks of gendered bodily experience (for further discussion, see "Gender and Voice" later in this chapter).

Already with these three short texts we begin to get a sense of the range of voice and emotion one can encounter in biblical poems. There is no emotion the biblical poets shied away from. The complexity and diversity of human affective experience, in all its beauty and all its ugliness, is on display. We encounter explorations of faithfulness and joy along with base lust for violence and vengeance; soaring hope as well as utter despondency; laughter and joy as well as shame and fear. These ancient voices echo and valorize the full range of human experience. When characters speak in biblical narrative, they often do so in poetry, expanding the emotional

and descriptive qualities of the text. The otherwise hidden dimensions of human psychology are the province of these poems. This is not to make a universal claim about what *all* poetry does or can do (though certainly some have made exactly this claim about poetry in general, that its domain is human emotion).[8] But it is certainly the case for these ancient poems. While the writers of biblical narrative tended to suppress or conceal the dimensions of desire, motivation, turbulent process of thought, and the inner workings of human emotion, the writers of biblical poetry revel in it.[9]

ASCRIPTION AND AUTHORSHIP

Now, a caveat: I have been speaking of Lamech and Miriam as characters. I do so not to suggest they are necessarily fictional but to remind the reader of an obvious but important point: because they are poems, they are composed by poets. Most poems are not spontaneous autobiographical outpourings, but are products of reflection, craft, and technique. The voice that the poem speaks with is not necessarily identical to the voice of the poet, who is of course free to take up and use personae other than their own. The dramatic poetry of Robert Browning (e.g., his famous poem, "My Last Duchess") is one example. A modern example: American poet Lucille Clifton wrote many poems from the perspective and voice of historical and literary characters. Clifton's poems showcase how voice can be a technique to explore a psyche and story beyond one's experience. In "brothers," Clifton's series of eight poems that enact a conversation between Lucifer and God, we hear only Lucifer's voice. This is simply to note that there is not a confusion between the poet and the voice of the poem. We do not mistake the persona of the poem (in this case Lucifer) for a historical person or for the author (in this case Lucille Clifton). Rather, the poem becomes a site of exploration that uses voice as a technique in service to its artistic vision. This modern example offers a parallel for thinking about the evocation of the voices of biblical

characters. So, when I speak of the poem's "voice" I do not mean that we have access to the person and psychology of a historical Lamech or a historical Miriam. I mean that biblical poems are cast as speech, and as such, we encounter them as voices. Because the poet's voice may be different from the poem's voice, there is an inherent multiplicity of voices in any given text (and when we read and re-read them in our own voices, we add yet more layers of multiplicity).

This distinction is especially important because many (though not all) poems in the Bible are ascribed to particular people. Many of the psalms, for example, are associated with the name of David: *ledavid* "of David" is attached to the beginning of seventy-three psalms, some of which further relate the psalm to an event in the narrative of David's life.[10] Other psalms are associated with Asaph, with the "sons of Korah," and a few others with other figures. This reflects the well-known ancient practice of associating important texts with important people. While it is of course possible that some of the psalms do go back to a Davidic pen, as it were, it is not likely that all of them do. Rather, the scribes who curated these ancient texts created powerful associations by gathering texts together under the name of such an iconic figure in biblical tradition.[11]

The resonances of David's story, when they are filtered through the voice of this complex, ultimately tragic hero of the biblical tradition, amplify our reading of the psalms and enrich the traditions about David's character. For example, Psalm 51 includes a brief ascription relating the psalm to the moment in the narrative of David's life "when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone into Bathsheba," a story told in 2 Samuel 12. The text of the poem itself does not point definitively to David—its language speaks in general terms about seeking mercy and purification from sin. But readers (ancient and modern) who are keyed into the narrative about David will fill in details, letting the narrative inform the poem. Lines like these assume fuller

meaning when readers relate them to David's story of adultery and murderous desire:

> Create for me a clean heart, O God,
> a new and right spirit within me. (Psalm 51:10)

The psalm also amplifies the character of David as a pious and penitential figure (not a triumphant king), which is a consistent emphasis in the ascriptions of many psalms relating to David.[12] This enriches the story of his character, who in the narrative of 2 Samuel 12 says in response to Nathan only "I have sinned against the Lord"—not exactly an extravagant or obviously devout show of penitence.

But perhaps more importantly, through these ascriptions David becomes a model for later people who read or pray them and who identify with him, especially during times of crisis or anguish. It is a remarkable quality of the first-person voice of poetry that when readers take up the poem, they assume the voice of the speaker. Their own "I" becomes the voice of the poem.[13] In this way, the poem is not merely the outpourings of an Iron Age king or an ancient poet; rather it is the voice of our own despair. The poem's utterance of the "I" compels us to articulate ourselves in a particular way—as people in need of forgiveness, for example. While the speaker says, "I know my transgressions, / and my sin is ever before me" (Psalm 51:3), the poem never specifies the "transgressions," either David's or our own. The poem remains radically open to the being over-voiced and re-appropriated in new contexts. Every reader who encounters this ancient text is thus positioned to ask questions about their own interiority, a process that requires a kind of reflective distance or even alienation from the experience of the self in the present moment.[14] Questions that arise from this distance in Psalm 51 might include the following: What are my transgressions? What have I done that might be "evil in your (God's) sight"? What wisdom do I need to be taught? How can I receive the gift of a "clean heart"? Psalm 51's voice is a voice of confession,

but many psalms—even those that emphasize dejection—tend to treat misery as the result of enemies or circumstances, and position God as the divine deliverer, as in Psalm 22: "I am a worm and not human, / scorned by mortals, despised by people . . . You drew me from the womb, / entrusted me to my mother's breasts" (Psalm 22:6, 9). To utter such words reorients the self both to the experience of trouble and to the deity. It is part of the magic of such poems that when we read them, their voices become our own.

MULTIPLICITY AND DIALOGUE

Even within the same poem, we often see variations in the texture of voices.[15] Some of this variability in voicing appears to be linked to poetry's performative dimensions. Many psalms, for example, seem to have been composed for and performed in public liturgies and rituals, and they reflect those contexts by including refrains and antiphonal responses between congregation and leader:

> Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
> His steadfast love is eternal!
> Let Israel say,
> "His steadfast love is eternal!"
> Let the house of Aaron say,
> "His steadfast love is eternal!" (Psalm 118:1–3)

This antiphonal dimension is sometimes phrased in a question-answer format, such as in Psalm 24, where nearly the whole psalm is shaped by this call-and-response dimension, which makes it easy to imagine a congregation assembled in public worship reciting a prayer in a ritual context:

> Who may ascend the hill of Yhwh?
> And who may stand in his holy place?

> The clean of hands and pure of heart,
> who has not lifted up his soul to what is false,
> and has not sworn deceitfully . . .
>
> . . .
>
> Who is this King of glory?
> Yhwh of hosts:
> He is the king of glory. (Psalm 24:3–4, 10)

The call-and-response of hymns like this one reveal how the voices of biblical poems are not just the voices of individuals in prayerful self-reflection (though such voices are robustly present). Psalms can also embed multiple voices. In Psalm 10, to take another example, part of the speaker's meditation is on the fickle and confident words of the enemies, which are quoted within the psalm: " 'There is no God' "; "They think in their heart, 'God has forgotten, / he has hidden his face, he will never see it' " (Psalm 10:4, 11). These quoted voices serve as a foil for the speaker's own conviction that God will indeed "see" and will work justice for the oppressed:

> Rise up, Yhwh, lift up your hand!
> Do not forget the oppressed.
> Why does the wicked person renounce God,
> and say in his heart, "You will not investigate"?
> Surely you see trouble and vexation;
> you take note, in order to take action.
> The helpless commit themselves to you;
> you have been the helper of the orphan. (Psalm 10:12–14)

Here, the primary voice evokes the counter-voice of the enemy in order to critique its claim to philosophical superiority. The voice of the enemy denies God and simultaneously addresses God with its denial. It stands in tension with the primary voice's affirmation of God's justice. The intentional use of contrasting voices bolsters the sense that divine care for the marginalized might overcome

even the most recalcitrant and exploitative forces. These examples showcase the multiplicity of voices one might expect to encounter, even within a single poem.

At times, this multiplicity of voices is stretched even further. In the poetry of Job, the tension between voices takes on a much more pronounced and contentious quality. Like the Song of Songs, the great part of the book of Job (3:1–42:6) is cast as a dialogue between characters in a dramatic encounter. Job's voice opens the dialogue with a poem that calls for the annihilation of his day of birth, beckoning the deep darkness of nonbeing, calling for the only peace he can imagine in his state of suffering—the peace of the grave (Job 3:3–26). It is a harrowing poem, in which the imagery repeatedly evokes the extinguishing of light. His three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, offer responses to Job and Job responds to each of them in turn. A fourth character, Elihu, also speaks to Job later in the book, to which Job never responds. Each character speaks with a fairly unique voice. Eliphaz speaks with the voice of an elderly visionary; Elihu's is the voice of youthful confidence. Perhaps the most striking is the virulent Zophar, who fairly explodes with indignation over what he perceives to be Job's inability to understand the most basic dimensions of wisdom:

> Do you not know this from of old,
> when mortals were placed on earth,
> that the rejoicing of the wicked is short-lived,
> and the joy of the godless is momentary? (Job 20:4–5)

The diction and imagery of the poem builds progressively along with Zophar's outrage. The wicked will perish like their own dung (v. 7); they grotesquely hold wickedness under their tongues until they are forced to vomit it up again (vv. 13–15); their fate is to be thrust through by a sword that will come out the other side, covered in bile (v. 25). With this appalling language Zophar's poem

reads like a rant. The poet of this great work has created persuasive, compelling voices that are radically distinct—and has managed to efface his own voice so effectively that it is not always clear whose perspective is favored. The dialogue of the book of Job creates an irreconcilable tension between these voices.[16] Even the voice of God, speaking from the whirlwind at the end of the book (Job 38–41), enters the fray of this densely philosophical debate:

> Is it through your understanding the hawk soars,
> spreads his wings to the south? (Job 39:26)

> Gird up your loins like a man!
> I will ask you, and you will enlighten me.
> Would you even violate my justice,
> condemning me to justify yourself?
> Have you an arm like God?
> And with a voice like his can you thunder? (Job 40:7–9)

These selections from the Yhwh poems gives a small sample of how the Joban poet imagines the divine voice. It is a voice of power and authority, and Job's response to it is one of cowed submission: "Look, I am small. / What can I answer you?" (Job 40:4). And yet, if this were the only voice the poet thought worthwhile, why develop thirty-five chapters of some of the most intriguingly voiced, artfully wrought poetry in the Bible? The poet appears to be playing with the technique of voice. The reader's experience must shift among these various contrasting points of view, with some necessary mix of investment, consideration, and judgment. The process of reading enacts the testing of the philosophical complexity of wisdom, suffering, and submission, and readers are positioned through the process to try, adopt, or reject different voices—and perhaps thereby to find their own.

PROPHETIC VOICING

The prophetic books use voicing in intriguing and multiple ways. Instead of speaking *to* God (as the psalms overwhelmingly do) or as characters *to* other characters (as both the Song of Songs and the book of Job do), prophetic poetry primarily speaks to an audience *as* or *on behalf of God*. It is God's voice. Some biblical traditions figure the divine voice as non-linguistic: it is a sound like thunder—powerful, magnificent, even terrifying in its dimensions.[17] But its linguistic expression, almost without exception, takes the form of poetry. As Robert Alter writes:

> Since poetry is our best human model of intricately rich communication, not only solemn, weighty, and forceful but also densely woven with complex internal connections, meanings, and implications, it makes sense that divine speech should be represented as poetry.[18]

The poetry of Amos offers a good and very famous example of this kind of prophetic voicing:

> I hate, I despise your festivals,
> and I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies.
> If you offer me your burnt offerings
> and grain offerings, I will not accept them . . .
> But let justice roll down like waters,
> and righteousness like a never-failing stream. (Amos 5:21–24, excerpts)

The speaking voice is God's: ("you offer me your burnt offerings"), and the rhetoric is fittingly powerful ("I hate, I despise"). The poem moves inexorably forward on the rising scale of its imagery, which bursts forth like water released from a dam. The voice and imagery of the poem work together to create the

forceful moral condemnation and to make compelling the demand for change.

This is speech oriented toward an audience, which you can see here in the command "seek me":

> For thus says Yhwh to the house of Israel:
> Seek me and live. (Amos 5:4)

There is the expectation that an audience is listening and, as a result of the poem, might respond. Many of the prophetic poems are like this. God urges the people to act or to change their behavior. But interleaved within the divine voice is the prophet's voice. They are inextricable in many poems, the prophet's voice and the divine voice, and so the poems already contain a clear sense that the human mediation of the divine message is necessary, even desirable. This interleaving is visible in Amos 5, where the poem shifts almost immediately from "Seek me" to speaking about God in the third person: "Seek Yhwh and live, / lest he rush like fire the house of Joseph" (Amos 5:6). This is a slippery conflation, where the voice moves from God's voice, to the prophet's, and back again. It allows the poet to invite the audience to admire the power and grandeur of God while also speaking with the conviction of the deity's sense of justice:

> The maker of Pleiades and Orion,
> who turns to morning the deepest darkness
> and darkens day into night,
> who summons the waters of the sea,
> and pours them out on the face of the earth:
> Yhwh is his name . . .
>
> For I know the profusion of your transgressions,
> and the multitude of your sins—
> who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
> and the needy in the gate they push aside. (Amos 5:8, 12)

The voicing of the prophetic texts, in other words, is highly dramatic in that it implies an audience and a shape-shifting speaker, who is at once a preacher, a performer, and an oracle delivering a message from God.

This modulation between the voice of God and the prophet is sometimes so fine that it is nearly impossible to discern with certainty who is speaking. In some texts from Jeremiah, for example, the voice of the prophet mingles almost completely with the voice of the deity. In one of the "confessions" of Jeremiah, there is no clear delineation between the voice of God and the voice of the prophet:

> Because my poor people are crushed, I am crushed.
> I mourn, and dismay seizes me.
> Is there no balm in Gilead?
> Is there no healer there?
> Then why is the health of my poor people not restored?
> Oh that my head were water,
> and my eyes a well of tears,
> that I might weep day and night
> for the slain of my poor people. (Jeremiah 8:21–9:1)

The *HarperCollins Study Bible* offers a subheading, "The Prophet Mourns for the People" in order to clarify the murky voicing of verses 18–22. But the Hebrew text includes no such heading. Sometimes translators offer similar, more subtle clarifications, by adding quotation marks. (Again, there are none in the Hebrew texts.) It is just as compelling to hear this not as the prophet's voice, but as the voice of God. Earlier, in Jeremiah 8:19, Yhwh speaks: "Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?" And the weeping section concludes with the divine voice: "They go from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says Yhwh" (Jeremiah 9:3). The point here is that the prophetic poem blends the prophet's voice with the divine voice. This blending, according to the account of these poems, is not a neutral one—Jeremiah is overcome by the divine voice, such that he does

not fully control his own. Rather, body and voice are subjected to the compulsion of God, which is an experience of agony for the prophet.[19] One has the sense that the deity's grief has fully become the prophet's. The pathos of the prophet—to feel as God feels—is part of the technical plea of the poem.[20] The reader is invited through the poem's voicing to experience the same commingled passion, painful as that may be. Inhabiting the otherness of the divine voice perhaps also accounts for some of the disjointed dimensions of prophetic voice—its "stammering" multiplicity, which can border on incoherence.[21]

Occasionally, voice is specifically thematized by a prophetic text. In the case of Isaiah 15–16, a poem about the nation of Moab, the poem calls attention to its use of voice. The poem's central trope is the weeping of cities:

> She cries out, Heshbon and Elealeh;
> their voice is heard as far as Jahaz. (Isaiah 15:4)

Two Moabite cities, Heshbon and Elealeh, are personified here. Their voice rises and echoes across the breadth of the country of Moab (they are feminized—"she" in Hebrew). This trope of cities as weeping women is well-known from ancient laments. Here, it becomes a central engine for the speaker, who elaborates a sense of pathos for Moab's destruction (or imminent destruction?) by reiterating the weeping of places across the initial four verses of the poem. The voice is imagined as though it is on a journey—having traversed the country "as far as Jahaz." This anticipates the journey of the refugees who are also on a journey—walking "as far as Zoar and Eglath-shelishiyah" (v. 5). In addition to the voicing of the lines, Dibon goes "to weep" (v. 2), Moab "wails" (v. 2), and Moab "cries out" (v. 4). At the same time, the poem is densely saturated with Moabite place-names (Ar, Kir, Dibon, Nebo, Medeba, Heshbon, Elealeh, Jahaz, Zoar, Eglath-shelishiyah, Luhith, Nimrim, Eglaim, Beer-elim, Kir-hareseth, Sibmah). The effect is to bring insistently to mind the geography of destruction. The weeping of these

personified cities merges with the voices of their inhabitants, who mourn. They all "wail" and "weep" (v. 3), and when the "I" voice of the poem emerges in verse 5, it too voices the same cry, even using one of the same verbs, *yiz'aq* "cry out" (also in v. 4):

> My heart for Moab cries out;
> her refugees flee to Zoar,
> to Eglath-shelishiyah. (Isaiah 15:5)

We do not (yet) know who the "I" is—it could be the prophet, it could be God. (Later in the poem it seems to be the divine voice, 15:9, 16:9.) But the voices of the destroyed cities are entwined with the voices of their fleeing inhabitants, which in turn affect the speaker's voice. To hear the voices of suffering bodies, this poem suggests, is to be infected bodily by their pain:

> Therefore my heart throbs for Moab like a harp,
> and my inner being for Kir-hareseth. (Isaiah 16:11)

This is remarkable because Moab is unexceptionally counted among Israel's enemies in biblical texts. In this poem, though, the weeping of the enemy engenders empathy. This is visible through the shift in voicing that takes place in Isaiah 16:3, where the lines now become commands that address an audience:

> Bring counsel.
> Work justice.
> Make your shade like night
> at the height of noon.
> Shelter the outcasts.
> Do not betray the refugees.
> Let the displaced of Moab
> settle among you.
> Be a refuge for them
> before the destroyer. (Isaiah 16:3–4)

The complex merging of voices in this poem (between the cities and their inhabitants; between God and the prophet) is one technique among others. In it, the voice is both emotionally vulnerable and an authority that makes demands on the hearer. Other techniques of the poem include wordplay, soundplay, and creative uses of imagery. As one of its principal techniques, this poem harnesses the voice's capacity to connect the bodies of different people in profoundly affecting ways. Hearing the voice of pain—even of one's enemy—positions the audience as the profoundly addressed, making possible the culminating call for the empathic extension of protection for the vulnerable.

GENDER AND VOICE

The voice, so closely linked to interiority, emotion, and the body, also connects the speaker through discourse to community. It is therefore a key place where identity is cultivated and performed, one dimension of which is gender. The voices of biblical poetry can be gender-neutral (the first-person "I" and "we" voices are particularly malleable and potentially inclusive) but often they are coded for gender. Gender is potentially marked in a variety of ways. Poems are often linked to a particular character (David, Hannah, Miriam, Lamech, Jonah, etc.), and in classical Hebrew, gender is marked grammatically. So, in the Song of Songs, for example, the reader can usually tell when the young woman is addressing the young man, and vice versa.[22] As such the speaking voice is often a gendered figure. Another way to think about gender is to consider how the content of a biblical poem may be characteristically or stereotypically gendered, as in the case of Psalm 131, which I will discuss. Studying voice in biblical poetry might therefore provide glimpses into ancient concepts of gender, which can be surprisingly complex and variable, despite their largely two-sex assumptions. A willingness to encounter those voices, and to take them into ourselves as readers, only adds to this complexity.[23]

The first point to note is that while most biblical poetry is identified with a male speaker (in the case of the Psalms, all the attributed poems are attributed to men), there are poems identified with female speakers. I will start with an exploration of a few of those texts. This exploration of voices as feminine figures is an important first step in thinking about gender in biblical poetry, given the overall androcentrism of the texts. These include the predominantly feminine voice of the Song of Songs, which speaks to a male lover and consistently evokes a world of other women (her mother, her friends):

> I would lead you, I would bring you
> into the house of my mother, she who taught me. (Song 8:2)

She also talks about herself, her voice confident and self-determined: "I am black and beautiful"; "My beloved is mine and I am his"; "Upon my bed at night, I sought him whom I love"; "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem / do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready." Her speech is not contained or qualified by male speech. In fact, the opposite is the case: her voice dominates in the Song, and we occasionally hear the male voice through the quotational authority of hers: She says of him "My lover speaks and says to me . . . " (Song 2:10). A poem attributed to Ruth set into the narrative of the book of Ruth echoes the Song's emphasis on emotional attachment, as Ruth promises her devotion to her mother-in-law (Ruth 1:16–17). This shared theme of devoted love suggests that there may be some normative patterns of the gendered subject in biblical poetry (though, as we shall see momentarily, outpourings of love are not limited to women). That Ruth's devotion is directed to another woman challenges an idea of the thoroughgoing heteronormativity of women's voices in biblical texts. This challenge is issued through the figure of the feminine voice.

Thematically, we might expect women's poetry to be concerned with the domains of the household, the traditional locus

of women's labor in ancient Israel. But no poems survive from ancient Israel that center emphatically on childbearing, midwifery, weaving, baking, household religion, or herbalism, though no doubt such traditions also existed, at least orally.[24] There are a few texts, not explicitly linked with women, whose content or tone may be suggestive of women's culture—whether or not they may have been written by women. A good example of this is Psalm 131, which is short enough to cite in its entirety here:

> O Yhwh, my heart is not high;
> my eyes are not raised;
> I do not walk in greatness
> or in things too wonderful for me.
> Rather, I have calmed
> and quieted my soul.
> Like a sated child on his mother,
> my soul is like the sated child that is on me.
> Hope, O Israel, in Yhwh
> from now on and forever. (Psalm 131:1–3)

The line "my soul is like the sated child that is on me" positions the speaker holding a child, traditionally a domain of women's work. Imagining the child resting "on" the speaker and also sated ("weaned" is a possible reading) is an image that suggests breastfeeding. The line has often been incorrectly translated as something like: "my soul *within me* is like a weaned child." The difference is subtle, but it has profound effect on our perception of the poem's voicing (and on the anthropology of the text, and our understanding of what and where the "soul" is, but that is another matter). A straightforward reading of this psalm could suggest a feminine speaker, though of course people of any gender can hold sleepy children. The voice of the speaker in the poem figures soothing maternal speech, replicating the primordial connection between the crying baby and the calming mother. The reduplicated phrase "like a sated child" || "like the sated child" suggests

the mirroring of a connected parent-child relationship and enacts the comfort it describes. If the voicing is indeed feminine, the discourse of modesty might be a gendered dimension of the text, as it sometimes is in women's poetry (e.g., Anne Bradstreet's "The Author to Her Book").[25] Nevertheless, the speaker goes on to connect her experience to political advocacy and theological authority as the poem ends with a public charge to all Israel to hope in the Lord. The text connects the personal experience of piety with a context of public speech. As we shall see, such public dimensions are common in other poems attributed to women among the biblical texts, troubling a simple dichotomy between male/female and public/private.

One text that troubles such dichotomies is Judges 5, which features the voice of a woman, Deborah, who is a judge, a prophet, and a "mother in Israel." The poem disrupts gendered assumptions, using maternal and domestic imagery in service to political ends. (The Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2 employs some similar strategies as well). The poem is somewhat unusual in Hebrew poetry because of its narrative impulse—it tells of a victory in battle. Both Deborah and Barak sing this poem (Judges 5:1), and the voicing shifts back and forth between first- and third-person speech. The public setting is available from the beginning: It speaks of Israelites (v. 2), then turns to address an imagined audience of "kings" and "princes" (v. 3), then addresses God directly ("Lord, when you went out," v. 4), then addresses passersby (v. 10), and then addresses Deborah herself ("Awake, Awake, O Deborah!" v. 12). The cumulative effect of this voicing that turns its face in many directions is the public summoning of all possible available audiences for the remembrance of a great victory.[26] This poem includes details about women and gender, but in almost every case subverts what we might assume to be gendered conventions. Deborah is called a "a mother in Israel," not because she fulfills a nurturing role in the home, but because of her leadership in turning the fortunes of villagers. The decisive moment of military victory is credited to another woman, Jael, whose killing of Sisera is accomplished by

a brutal act that is erotic and maternal in its overtones, as well as masculine in its performance:

> Water he requested; milk she gave;
> she brought him curds in a lordly bowl.
> She put her hand to the tent peg,
> and her right hand to the workmen's mallet.
> She struck Sisera:
> she crushed his head;
> she shattered and pierced his temple.
> Between her feet
> he sank, he fell, he lay.
> Between her feet he sank, he fell.
> Where he sank, there he fell—destroyed. (Judges 5:25–27)

The setting of the tent and the provision of milk and bed suggest that the poet is playing with signals of femininity and maternal care. But these are implemented as strategies for battle, which is typically gendered male. The phallic violence of the tent peg and the emphasis on Sisera's ultimate position between Jael's "feet" (a common euphemism for genitals in the Hebrew Bible) presents Jael as a sexualized, genderqueer soldier of sorts, though she does not herself have a voice in the poem.[27] More interestingly in terms of voice, this ambiguously gendered character is framed by the speech of other women. The poem ends with a fantasized conversation between Sisera's mother and her ladies. The mother of the slain warrior is imagined looking out the window and wondering out loud why her once-heroic son is so delayed: "Why do his chariots delay in coming? / Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots tarry?" (v. 28). The answer to her question comes from two sources: her wise counselors (marked grammatically as feminine), and "also, she answers her question herself" (v. 29):

> Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?
> A girl or two girls for every man;

> spoil of dyed cloth for Sisera,
> spoil of dyed, embroidered cloth,
> a dyed cloth, double-embroidered, spoil for my neck.
> (Judges 5:30)

Of course, their answers are wrong. And it is through the multiplication of their voiced mistakenness that the poem achieves its ironic effect. The speakers are excessively coded for femininity: motherhood, the traditional ancient Near Eastern trope of the woman watching at the window, and the grammatical marking of the counselors. The speakers also fantasize about a victory that is coded for femininity, since what the (male) warriors might bring back are "girls" (literally "wombs," *rakhamatayim*), and dyed cloth (typically produced by women). The triplicate reproduction of "spoil" and "dyed cloth" exposes the fixation of these voices, who rightly imagine that the battle follows gendered patterns, but in a twist of dramatic irony, wrongly identify the patterns. They do not know their hero has been vanquished in a complete disruption of their gendered expectations, and what goes unspoken is that these women have already become the "spoil" of another army—a fact not lost on the many publics of the poem's addressees.

In quite a different text altogether, the book of Proverbs also includes feminine voices. Here, the context of the male audience is patent: the whole book is addressed to male children ("my son," Proverbs 1:8, etc.), in keeping with the fact that students in the ancient world would generally have been male. The student's choices between the ways of good and of wickedness are personified by two contrasting alluring women, personified "wisdom" and the "strange woman." This kind of binary thinking is characteristic of the book of Proverbs. Both of these women give poetic speeches, which are juxtaposed in Proverbs 7–8. The "strange woman's" speech is sexualized and predatory: "Come, let us be sated with love until morning; / let us delight ourselves with love. / For the man is not at home; / he has gone on a far journey" (Proverbs 7:18–19). The poem foregrounds the sensual character of seduction,

whose voice figures bodily temptation. Personified "wisdom," on the other hand, seems to speak as a disembodied voice, which perhaps contributes to the sense of her authority as well as her spiritual superiority.[28] Like a deity, her voice can be heard but she does not seem to have a physical presence. This feminine voice also seeks out the young men: "Take my instruction instead of silver, / and knowledge rather than choice gold; / for wisdom is better than jewels, / and all that you may desire cannot compare with her" (Proverbs 8:10–11). Her speech develops cosmological imagery, recalling the creation account of Genesis 1:

> Before the mountains had been shaped,
> before the hills, I was brought forth . . .
> When (Yhwh) assigned to the sea its limit,
> so that the waters might not transgress his command;
> when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
> then I was beside him, like a master worker. (Proverbs 8:25–30, excerpts)

Wisdom here is both ancient and closely aligned with the deity. She speaks with divine authority, as a force of life itself. In keeping with the rest of the book of Proverbs, she too addresses her audience as "sons" (Proverbs 8:32). These contrasting women in the book of Proverbs encode virtue and vice in gendered scripts, such that vice is the eroticized feminine, while wisdom is denatured and also powerfully transcendent.

So far, I have considered women's voices in this discussion of gender, because men's voices are so ubiquitous in biblical poetry and women's voices are less familiar to contemporary readers. Of course, men's voices are also gendered. Poems as cultural texts play a role in constructing masculinity, and this certainly factors in our reading and appropriation of them. In "The Song of the Bow," David's poem lamenting the death of Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:19–27), for example, his language celebrates the military exploits of these two men, securing their place as heroes in Israel, despite

that they were defeated and slain. Its repeated refrain is: "How the mighty have fallen!" (2 Samuel 1:19, 25, 27). The voice is a public one that opens with an address to all Israel and calls for rituals of communal mourning. In many ways, this poem's voicing constructs a valiant and violent masculine ideal. At the same time, the voicing shifts in the last lines to a tender reminiscence of a beloved:

> Distress is mine (*li*) for you, my brother Jonathan.
> You were lovely to me (*li*) indeed.
> Your love was wonderous to me (*li*),
> more than the love of women. (2 Samuel 1:26)

These lines echo the sense of deep loyalty and affection we saw in the Song of Songs and in Ruth. As in Ruth, the expression of intimacy does not conform to heteroerotic norms. The repeated *li* "to me" in the three lines underscores the intimacy of the declaration, which stands in some tension with the announced public audience of the mourning ritual. The Song of the Bow valorizes masculine military heroics alongside the language of attachment.[29] Women's voices are not altogether absent from this poem; rather, their voices provide a frame against which the male agents are highlighted: "Tell it not in Gath; / do not report it in the streets of Ashkelon / lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice; / lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult" (2 Samuel 1:20). This refusal of feminine public speech is contrasted with the public mourning of Israel's women: "O Daughters of Israel, weep over Saul / who clothed you in scarlet, / with luxury, / who put ornaments of gold on your clothes" (2 Samuel 1:24). David addresses the women and charges them to raise their voices in public acts of mourning. The voicing becomes even more complex in light of the narrative indication that David taught the song to the Judahites (2 Samuel 1:18) and recorded it in "the book of Jashar," a collection lost to us. The voicing, with its multiple and shifting dimensions of address, public and private conflations, and intense emotional exposure

paradoxically both reinscribes and challenges its own gendered ideals.

In another example of masculine voicing, the prophet Hosea addresses his audience, which is explicitly identified as male: "Hear this, O priests! / Give heed, O house of Israel! / Listen, O house of the king!" (Hosea 5:1). Provocatively gendered language appears throughout the text, elaborating the metaphor that Israel is like the wife of God. Addressing a male audience as women feminizes and shames them:

> Now I will uncover her shame
> in the sight of her lovers,
> and no one shall rescue her from my hand. (Hosea 2:10)

This technique is seen in several prophetic books (also prominently in Ezekiel, for example). In it, the poet draws on a known image of the city-as-woman. This is a meme that can be seen in literature across the ancient Near East. The personification of a male audience as a city-as-woman, imagining her speaking and acting, is a complex way of offering an explanation for the trauma of destruction and exile. As it does so, it has the effect of both shoring up masculine ideals and problematizing the gendered self-conception of the audience.[30] In one of the most striking examples of feminine voicing in the Bible, Lamentations 1–2 takes up this image of the city-as-woman. The personified city herself speaks:

> Look, O Yhwh, and see
> how abject I have become.
> Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
> See, and look
> if there is any pain like my pain,
> which was brought upon me,
> which Yhwh inflicted
> on the day of his fierce anger. (Lamentations 1:11–12)

These are poems that express the grief of the destroyed city of Jerusalem, and outrage against God for the suffering she has endured. These poems use feminine voicing as a counter-testimony to the gendered language of the prophets and implicitly critiques their misogynistic concepts.[31] As a figure, she is presented as the poetic conjuring of a male speaker, who simultaneously speaks about her and for her, and whose voice comes to take full precedence in the third poem: "I am the man who has seen oppression" (Lamentations 3:1). Daughter Zion's voice is full of pathos, but she never quite becomes a full character. While her woeful pleas demand our empathy, she is also a strange figure, her speeches fragmented and disjointed, melded with the voice of the poet. The feminized city is a contested trope in biblical literature, and only in Lamentations is she given a voice of her own.

To talk about voice is different than to talk about authorship. Earlier, I downplayed the significance of authorship in the case of the Davidic psalms, suggesting that the effect of voicing need not have a direct relationship to the text's actual author(s). Certainly, we can almost never be sure about the specific identity of the author of a particular biblical poem. But what about the more general question: Were there women poets? In the case of the Song of Songs, for example, with its style and tenor that differs so markedly from other biblical texts, and which prominently features the voice of a woman, scholars have wondered whether the poetry may be a product of women's culture or a woman poet. It is crucial to take this possibility seriously.[32] The evidence suggests that scribal culture in the ancient world was principally a male domain. But this need not mean that women were not significant producers of culture. There are references to women singing and occasional references to women writing in the ancient world, and in the ancient world as today, "low" forms of cultural creativity—especially in informal and oral traditions—are the paths available to women and those who are otherwise culturally marginalized, who do not have the same access to formal symbolic domains such as writing and

publication.[33] In addition, there is evidence in every era of women and men who transgress culturally specific gendered domains of work. So, to ask the question of authorship reminds us of the very real human voices that spoke, sang, and wrote these ancient poems, and as they did so, variously subscribed to or resisted the norms of their own day. As these issues begin to suggest, to ask about gender and poetic voice implies a host of other questions as well, about literary tradition and production, about social roles in the ancient world, about the possibilities of feminine cultures of literary production (oral and textual), about attribution and authorship, access to education, gendered performance, about the ways that gender shapes material experiences, and about the way that gender informs the reading practices of contemporary audiences. To take voice seriously is to see how this poetic dimension opens onto much larger questions about identity and justice.

PSALM 55: A READING

Psalm 55 employs voice as a central technique, and variations in voice serve as a structuring device for the poem. At the same time, the voices of self and enemy are part of the central subject of the poem. The primary voice laments the verbal betrayal of a friend, and the poem's movements will ultimately provide a vehicle for the healing and confident emergence of the speaker's voice. As the voice shifts in tone, address, and content over the course of the poem, it moves through several different configurations of thought that wrestle in different ways with an experience of trauma. The primary voice directs its speech toward God as "you," in the form of a prayer of desperation:

> Give ear to my prayer, O God;
> do not hide yourself from my plea.
> Listen closely to me and answer me.

I am disturbed in my complaint, and I moan
because of the voice of the enemy,
because of the oppression of the wicked.
For they heap hostility upon me,
and in anger they attack me. (Psalm 55:1–3)

It is a lamenting poem, though it does not use the typical structure of the lament. (For more on this, see chapter 4.) Instead, the poem's voice shifts in the next lines from these generalized statements about the hostility of enemies to a remarkably interior voice, one that vocalizes trauma:

My heart writhes within me,
and the terrors of death fall upon me.
Fear and trembling come over me,
and horror covers me. (Psalm 55:4–5)

In verses 6–8, the voice ceases directly addressing God. The speaker in fact momentarily turns away from *any* potential audience and gazes inward. The voicing of the next lines evokes a kind of dream state:

And I said "Would that I had wings like a dove—
I would fly and I would rest!
Look, I would flee far—
I would lodge in the wilderness.
I would hurry to find a refuge for myself
from raging wind and from the storm." (Psalm 55:6–8)

Note how the first word here is *va'omar* "and I said." With this word, the speaker invokes herself speaking. To describe her own voice is to take a kind of temporal and psychological distance from her own self and bodily experience.[34] Looking at herself speaking, she takes us into her interior monologue, into her mind's eye. This

imagined journey does poetically exactly what she wishes she could do physically: it momentarily relieves her from the unrelieved, unremitting hostility of the enemies. The catalog of their hostility was four long lines of a single thought. Breaking into that catalog is this image of freedom. The dove in flight soars above the violence below, untouchable. The lines create the poetic refuge that the speaker longs for. But it is only temporary. The next lines take us back into the landscape of prayer:

> Confuse, O Lord, and split their tongues.
> For I have seen violence
> and strife in the city.
> By day and by night
> they go about its walls,
> and wickedness and trouble are within it.
> Ruin is within it.
> Destruction and oppression
> do not depart from its squares. (Psalm 55:9–11)

If the wilderness is an imagined place of refuge, the city is imagined as a kind of prison. It is characterized by a seven-fold description of terror. Violence, strife, wickedness, trouble, ruin, destruction, and oppression are all characteristics of the walled city. While the walls of the city and its guards are perhaps intended to create a space of security, here we find a nightmarish personification. Violence and strife are personified as the guards who relentlessly patrol the city walls, redoubling the conditions from which she cannot escape. The speech of enemy is a grounding concern: "I moan / because of the *voice* of the enemy" (vv. 2–3), and the plea is for an intervention into the enemy's speech: "Confuse, O Lord, and split their tongues" (v. 9).

But the next lines contain yet another striking shift in voice. Now a new addressee emerges. Instead of addressing God or herself, she now addresses a friend. An unusual, repeated dwelling on

the betrayal by a friend resurfaces at several points over the course of the poem:

> For it is not an enemy who taunts me—I could bear that—. . .
> But (it is) you, a man my equal,
> a friend, and a confidant.
> Together we kept a sweet secret.
> In the house of God we would walk in the crowd. (Psalm 55:12–14)

> He stretched out his hands against a friend;
> He violated a covenant.
> His words were smoother than butter,
> but war was in his heart. (Psalm 55:20–21)

These resurgent irruptions evoke the open mesh of trauma, as its fragmentary memories periodically overwhelm the forward movement of the poem. The effect is recursive, confusing, even chaotic. This new direction of the voice toward the "You!" of the betrayer speaks with a sense of rage and outcry, very different from the voice of prayer. Yet the poem contains them both. Given this wrenching, interrupting voice of accusation, it is no surprise perhaps that the poem goes on to call down curses upon the friend-turned-enemy:

> May death come upon them!
> May they go down to Sheol alive!
> For evil is in their dwellings and in their core. (Psalm 55:15)

All of these turns within the poem are shifts in the address of the individual voice. But there is an even more decisive shift in voicing later in the poem. At two points, another voice also emerges, who talks not *to* God, but *about* God in the third person:

> God will hear and he will humble them
> —who is enthroned from of old! *Selah*—

because they do not change,
and they do not fear God. (Psalm 55:19)

Cast your burden on the Lord,
and he will sustain you.
He will never allow the righteous to stumble. (Psalm 55:22)

These lines provide a striking contrast to the voice of the supplicant and offer words of traditional wisdom and consolation.[35] The assurance given in these lines is essentially that God's justice and power will ultimately prevail. It sounds like the soothing voice of a religious authority, as if a priest or counselor were offering support and advice to a parishioner. It is possible to posit a performance with actual, separate speakers. Performed in liturgy, one could imagine a choir or liturgist repeating the refrain, "Cast your burden on the Lord, / and he will sustain you," in the midst of a congregation's prayers of desperation and betrayal. Another possibility is to see these words as a form of coercion, in which the speaker's pain is spiritualized and silenced by a voice of authority. Or again, it is also possible to read this as an interior dialogue, a mind in conversation with itself, offering itself known consolations in the midst of its distress. Either way, the different voices of the poem enact a tension between the raw experience of trauma and the voice of theological assurance.

In cases where distinct voices—even marginal ones—stand in tension with more dominant or traditionally acceptable ones, the reader is presented with an invitation to consider how these voices model the unresolved (and perhaps unresolvable) contest of different voices in dialogue. In Psalm 55, the voice of theological tradition is not given pride of place. Instead, the latter half of the poem creates a space for it in the midst of its vulnerable, reiterative complaint. But perhaps through the influence of this voice of theological tradition, the individual voice of the one who prays reemerges at the end with a new sense of confidence in prayer, orienting its speech once again toward

God, renewing its allegiance to the lament form with a statement of faith:

> As for me, I will trust in you. (Psalm 55:23)

The poem does not ask us to abandon outrage over sin and betrayal. Instead, it creates a space for voicing exactly such feelings. It dignifies them with its particulars of betrayal, even as they stand somewhat in tension with the voice of theological tradition. Here, questions about gender and voice take on a particular poignancy. While there is nothing explicitly gendered about this lament, reading with sensitivity to erotic betrayal and to sexual violence makes this a potent text for contemporary readers. As has been well documented, sexual violence is most often perpetrated not by strangers but by intimates. Betrayal by an intimate, a trusted friend, is all the more devastating when the victim cannot perceive a path of escape, as is often the case for minors and for women in abusive partnerships. Not only the emphasis on betrayal by an intimate but also the imagery and language are suggestive of sexual violence. In other biblical texts, the verb *sabab* "to encircle," which I have translated as "they go about its walls" has sinister echoes. It is used to evoke inescapable terror (Psalms 17:11; 31:13; Jeremiah 6:25), violent military attack (Joshua 6; Judges 16; Jeremiah 4:17), and gang rape (Genesis 19; Judges 19). In Song of Songs 5:7 the men who encircle the city walls strike and wound the young woman after removing her clothes. As in the case of the Song, the imagery here in Psalm 55 has echoes that permit this reading of sexual violence, while not explicitly naming it.[36] While I have used the language of binary gender in this reading, the realities of erotic betrayal are equally possible in homoerotic and queer relationships, and this text can lend itself to readings on behalf of victims and those who are marginalized across a broad spectrum.

Poems like this can give voice to intimate betrayals that are not always accepted or even believed by communities. The betrayal by one "in the house of the Lord" might even be read in light of the

clergy sexual abuse crisis. The voices of this poem move from individual trauma to public outcry by virtue of the multiplicity of voices. Here, the more metaphorical sense of "voice," as in "finding one's voice," is particularly appropriate. Poems like this can help readers identify and give voice to their suffering, and to do so with the confidence that God hears the voices of victims and will sustain them.

In another sense, the community created by the poem moves powerfully through time—it has been read and it has given voice to many hearers and readers and reciters over the centuries. As contemporary poet Lousie Glück writes, in her poem "October":

> *you are not alone,*
> the poem said,
> in the dark tunnel.

The "I" of the lament poem is capable of giving words to our situations, which can serve as a kind of reassurance that we are not alone. In our situations of distress, our own unique "dark tunnel," we are not the first to need or to speak such voices. Glück is a contemporary North American poet, but the idea that the poem speaks for us, as well as assures us that we are in the company of others, is an ancient once. Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 296–373 CE), in his letter to Marcellinus, remarks about the psalms that they can uniquely help readers find their own voices: "he recognizes [the Psalms] as being his own words. And the one who hears is deeply moved, as though he himself were speaking, and is affected by the words of the songs, as if they were his own songs."[37] For Athanasius, the psalms are a mirror for the soul, which is also what gives them their practical benefit. He sees these voices as useful because they give templates and actions for prayer. On Psalm 55 he writes, after listing many lament psalms and their possible uses, "and if the foes who afflict you hurl insults and the seeming friends, rising up, level accusations at you, and you are grieved in your meditation for a while, nevertheless you also are able to be consoled, praising God and speaking the words of Psalm [55]."[38]

To say that poetry is a mirror to the soul implies a larger recognition about the first-person voice, which is that it invites a particular kind of encounter. As the poem's "I" first mirrors and then becomes the reader's "I" through the habits of reading, the contexts of its creation (who wrote it, and why, and in what situation—questions at the fore in historical-critical biblical scholarship of the last two centuries) become less urgent. The first-person voice so prominent in biblical poetry does not point to a fixed reference, a specific person, but creates the conditions for a moment of encounter and identity. Through this encounter, in which we listen to and recognize the other, the poem becomes a way for readers to find themselves not alone, but in a community of voices.

ESSENTIALS OF BIBLICAL STUDIES

An Invitation to Biblical Poetry

Elaine T. James

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