

Psalm 44: “Why do you hide your face, o God?!”

D J Human
(UP)

ABSTRACT

Psalm 44: “Why do you hide your face, o God?!”

Since the appearance of Hermann Gunkel’s form critical categories, Psalm 44 has mostly been identified by scholars as the first Communal lament of the Psalter. This genre classification has, since then, been refined, but didn’t change the view on this Volksklage much. Modern research on the psalm can mainly be confined to the issues of the structure, the historical setting (Sitz im Leben) and theology of the poem.

On the structure and historical setting of Psalm 44, a variety of interpretation possibilities are offered. The exegete’s imagination, though, is captured by the enigmatic theological problem posed by the text. This problem reflects the tension between faith in God on the one hand and the reality of life on the other, where the faithful believer is often afflicted, humiliated or injured. Then he experiences God’s absence or hiddenness, despite his own faithfulness to Him.

The literary feature of contrast seems to play a significant role in Psalm 44. In the text strategy of this artistic composed poem, this feature is revealed in the psalm’s language and structure, in order to display the secret and mysterious image and activity of God. This article attempts to illustrate how this literary feature contributes to the understanding of the theological problem experienced by the psalmist.

TRANSLATION

- 1 For the musical director. For the sons of Korah. A Maskil.
- 2 O God, with our ears we have heard, our fathers have told us the deed you did in their days, in the days long ago.
- 3 You, your hand, drove out the nations, but you planted them; you afflicted the peoples, but you let them flourish.
- 4 Truly, not with the sword they took the land into possession, and their arm didn’t bring them deliverance; but, your hand and your arm, and the light of your countenance, for you took favour in them.

- 5 You are my king, my God, who commands the deliverances of Jacob.
- 6 With you we (will) push down our adversaries; in your Name we (will) trample on those who stand up against us.
- 7 Truly, not on my bow will I trust, and my sword will not deliver me
- 8 but you (will) deliver us from our adversaries and those who hate us
you (will) put to shame.
- 9 In God we (will) boast all day long and your Name will we thank for ever.

- 10 But, you have rejected (us) and you've put us to shame;
and you didn't go out with our armies;
- 11 You let us retreat/turn back from the adversary and those who hate us
plundered (us/for themselves);
- 12 You handed us over like sheep for food and among the nations you have scattered us;
- 13 You sold your people for nothing and you gained nothing from their
(sales)price;
- 14 You have made us a reproach for our neighbours -
a scorn and derision to those around us;
- 15 You have made us a proverb among the nations,
a shaking of the head among the peoples.
- 16 All day long my shame is before me,
and the disgrace of my countenance covers me,
- 17 because of the voice of the reproacher and reviler,
because of the glance of the enemy and the avenger.

- 18 All this came upon us, but we didn't forget you,
and we didn't act deceitfully in the covenant (with) you.
- 19 Our heart had not turn back, nor did our footsteps turn aside
from your way,
- 20 but, you crushed us in the place of the jackals,
and you covered us with the shadow of death.
- 21 If we had forgotten the Name of our God,
and (we) stretched our hands out to a foreign God,
- 22 would God not notice that, for He knows the secrets of the heart?

- 23 But, because of you, we are killed all day long,
we are considered as sheep for slaughter.
- 24 Awake! Why do you sleep, o Lord? Wake up! Do not reject us for
ever!
- 25 Why do you hide your face? (Why do you) forget our misery
and our oppression?
- 26 Indeed, our neck is bowed down to the dust, our body adheres to
the earth.
- 27 Arise to help us! Yes, deliver (ransom) us for the sake of your
loyal love.

1 INTRODUCTION

During 1997/8 not only the South African community in general, but also the Old Testament Society in particular was plunged into a state of mourning by the loss of several leading theologians. This situation leaves us wordless and allows for reflection, in order to gain hope for future biblical and Old Testament study. A reading of Psalm 44 might orientate us to understand the contrasts in life, which we have experienced in this regard. We should be newly inspired by the same texts, which served as a source of inspiration to many believers and faithful scholars in the past.

Once called the "swan song"¹ of the Korahite collection, Psalm 44 may be portrayed as a picturesque poem with a variety of impulses, which not only stir the excitement of biblical exposers, but also stimulated composers for bringing about aesthetic experiences through their musical settings². The vibrant and life-related events described by its author(s) in an excellent poetic tongue, makes this psalm a suitable pit stop in your journey through the *Psalter*.

Psalm 44 has been the object of thorough analysis by exegetes. Modern research on the psalm can mainly be confined to the issues of the structure, the historical setting (*Sitz im Leben*) and theology of the poem. On its composition, structure and historical setting, a variety of interpretation possibilities are offered. My imagination, though, is captured by the enigmatic theological problem posed by the text. This problem reflects the tension between faith in God on the one hand and the reality of life on the other, where the faithful believer is often afflicted, humiliated or injured. The believer experiences God's aloofness or hiddenness, despite his own faithfulness to Him. In itself, this Job-like experience seems to spell out a contradiction in faith.

The literary feature of contrast or antithesis plays a significant role in the psalm. On both the formal and semantic levels of the text, contrasts are

used as poetic technique by the psalmist. In the text strategy this feature is revealed in the psalm's language and structure, in order to display the mysterious image and activity of God. My article is therefore an attempt to illustrate how this poetic device is utilised by the psalm's author and how it offers a solution or an interpretation key to the understanding of the theological problem posed by the psalm.

2 BACKGROUND AND DEFINITION

More than any other book in the Hebrew Bible, the *Psalter* is a rich source of the most varied forms of contrasts or antitheses. Several psalms display a relatively pure antithetic structure³, while others only partly show antithetic elements in their structure and content.

The use of contrast or antitheses as a rhetorical-stylistic feature, is well known in Semitic, Greek and Roman literature. Its function becomes very important in the communicative character of a text or any discourse.

Contrast could be defined in more than one way, as Krasovec⁴ and others have illustrated. But, basically this device denotes a "contraposition of opposite concepts, words, phrases, thoughts, structures or structural elements". One could also add to this list metaphors, themes, traditions, persons and their conduct with reference to other people or God, emotions of an individual or a community, attributes of people or God and elements of tension regarding time or space⁵.

The fundamental trait of contrast or antithesis is that two opposing elements exclude each other in relation to a common idea. Two parts of a sentence or larger structural unit like a poem then display a contrast of thought. When implemented as a poetic technique, a contrast or antithesis can create tension between opposites. This can ultimately be defined as polarity.

Several scholars have already noticed contrasts displayed in Psalm 44. On structural and semantic levels of the text, this feature is not elusive⁶. In a literary approach Coetzee⁷ emphasised the encompassing tension which evolves from contradictory elements, such as God's salvation on the one hand and his hiddenness experienced by his people on the other. Also his activity towards his people's enemies seems to display a contrastive character. Loren Crow⁸, who reads the psalm as a unit, argues for the rhetorical power contained in the psalm's trajectory. Contradictory elements, according to him, contribute to convince God to intervene to deliver his people from their present misery.

My contribution is only to hypothesise from a portrait of contrasts, that this literary feature offers an interpretation key to the understanding of the psalm and to the solution of its perplexing theological problem.

3 GENRE, COMPOSITION AND STRUCTURE

3.1 Genre

Since the appearance of Hermann Gunkel's form critical categories, Psalm 44 has mostly been identified by scholars as the first communal lament of the Psalter. This *genre* classification has, since then, been refined, but didn't change the view on this *Volksklage* much. This poem has mostly been described as a communal or national lament⁹, *Volksklagepsalm*¹⁰, *Gebetslied*¹¹, *Gemeindegebet* or simply "a national prayer"¹². All these depictions amount to a communal lament, which tends to be an overarching *genre* description. Since the text contains several *Gattung* elements¹³ like hymnic utterances (vv 2, 8), a confession or promise of praise (v 5), trust (vv 6-8), descriptions of distress (vv 10-17), reasons for the lamenting situation (vv 20, 23), complaint (vv 24-25) and petition or prayer (vv 24-27), a single description of the literary form seems to be tentative and preliminary, although necessary.

Most exegetes are unanimous in allocating verses 10-27 to the literary setting of a national lament. I agree with this. The poet's use of the first person plural, referring to Israel as God's people (vv 5, 13ea) together with the portrayal of the threatening circumstances, makes this decision an easy one. Verses 2-9 though, is more problematic. Zenger describes it both as a *Vertrauenspsalm* (psalm of confidence) and a *Bitt-psalm*¹⁴, while others only identify different form critical elements. Due to Crüsemann's understanding of a thanksgiving song, I would rather choose for the latter. The expression "our fathers have told us" (ספר v 2), the description of God's salvation deeds (vv 2-4) and appearance of the causal ׀ marker in 4d are all indicators which direct my choice. Nevertheless, differences on this issue is not of major importance.

3.2 Composition and Structure

3.2.1 Poetical quality

The text of Psalm 44 is relatively well preserved. It reflects a poetic competence with a close tissue of interrelated *Stichworte* and *Verkettungen*, especially to the Korahite psalms, 42 - 49 and 84 - 85¹⁵. Similarities with other psalms, like 60 and 89, are also evident¹⁶.

Despite the literary feature of contrast, on which the emphasis will fall below, also other poetic and stylistic devices come to the fore. This include several forms of parallelism (vv 2, 3, 6, 10, 16, 23), repetition of keywords¹⁷, word play (vv 3-4, 6 and 8, 19), assonance (vv 2-3) and alliteration (vv 18-19; 24-25), similes (vv 12, 23), inclusion (vv 2 and 9), inversion (v 26)¹⁸, prolepsis (v 3a)¹⁹, rhetorical question and irony (vv 21-22), sarcasm (v 23) and rhyme (14a/b; 15a/b; 16a/b; 18b/19b). Especially the repetition of certain keywords (*Leitworte*) at certain seams in the text, apparently fulfill cohesive and emphatical functions. Here the roots **יָשַׁע** (vv 4, 5, 7) **שָׁם** (vv 6, 9, 21), **זָנַח** (vv 10, 24), **כָּלַם** (vv 10, 16), **חָרַף** (vv 14, 17) **שָׁכַח** (vv 18, 21, 25) and the divine name **אֱלֹהִים** (vv 2, 5, 9, 21, 22) draw special attention. They built the theological thrust of the psalm and underscore the poetic quality of the text.

Metaphorical symbols and images like the vine and wasteland (v 3), sword and bow (vv 4, 7), arm and right hand (v 4), a shining light or rising sun (v 4), goring wild ox (v 6), military leader (v 10), flock of sheep (vv 12, 23), unfaithful shepherd (v 12), merchant (vv 13, 27 ?) and garment (v 16) are utilised to weave the vivid and picturesque scenery into a colourful tapestry.

Noteworthy stylistic characteristics may be the psalmist's affinity to group two *stichoi* together as well as the sudden change from the first person plural in verses 5, 7 and 16 to the first person singular. The identity of the speaker then becomes debatable. Several solutions are offered. Whether it is a **person** like a cultic official, a military leader, the king²⁰ in which these two offices are culminated, or the **community**²¹, is difficult to determine precisely. This feature, however, to change from the first person plural to the singular is in the communal lament not unknown (see Pss 74:12; 83:14). At the seam of a text, like in Psalm 44, this could be applied with the function to personalise a communal experience and to emphasise or intensify feelings like joy, pain, trust, shame or dishonour.

3.2.2 Composition and structure

Our text shows a transparent composition and clear structure²². Ridderbos²³ calls it a staircase-tower ("trappen-toren") or *zikkurat* composition, due to a 10-8-6-4 *stichoi* division. Although exegetes differ on a strophe demarcation²⁴, there are clear syntactic and structural indications for dividing the text between verses 9 and 10, between 17 and 18 as well as between 23 and 24. Without denying the complexity of its redactional history and the growth of this text, I read the text as a literary unit. My demarcation of Psalm 44 in stanzas thus results in the following:

Stanza A (2-9)	Remembrance of salvation history and utterances of trust in God
Strophe 1 (2-4)	Retrospect on God's past faithfulness
Strophe 2 (5-9)	Confession of trust in God's perpetuate faithfulness
Stanza B (10-17)	Present misery: Reproaches because of God's inactivity
Stanza C (18-23)	Reason for distress and protestation of innocence
Stanza D (24-27)	Call on God for help

In hymnic tone the psalm commences in the **first strophe (2-4)** of stanza A (2-9) with a thankful call on God, recognising the deliverance of his people in the *Urzeit* of Israel's existence. This recollection of the past is possible because of the faithful transmission of events by previous generations. With the emphasis on God (caused by the repetition in **פָּעַל פְּעַלֹּת** and the explicit pronoun **אֱתָהּ**) and his strength, the salvation history is traced back to the time period of the Conquest, when God drove out the heathen nations to create room for his own people. He granted them the land as possession, but dispossessed the Canaanites and deviled them. In a contrastive manner, it is clearly spelled out that these former acts of deliverance stemmed from the powerful hand of God and is not the result of their own achievement. He did it, because He took favour in them. His involvement was like the light of the rising sun. With the language and conditional theology of the deuteronomist, God is thus credited by the present generation for what He did. An assumption of the retribution principle vaguely glides in the background.

Because of his saving acts in the past, God could be trusted. Therefore a confession of his divine kingship as "*my King and my God*" (v 5) is appropriate. The change of speaker draws attention to personalise and intensify the confidence experienced by the community.

In the **second strophe (5-9)** of stanza A the present generation thus fully relies on God for his perpetuate faithfulness, now and in the future. Commencing with the pronoun **אֱתָהּ** in verse 5 again, the emphasis remains on God and his strength. A threefold repetition of the root **יָשַׁע** (vv 5, 7, 8), with God as the subject, not only has cohesive power, but stresses His ability to save the present generation from any hostile power. In his Name (v 6) they could push down and trample on their raising adversaries like a goring wild ox. The reason for this confidence is again explicated in a contrastive description. Not their strength causes victory, but it is God who slains the adversaries and puts them to shame. Therefore his Name (v 9)

deserves continuous praise and thanksgiving up to the *Endzeit* of Israel's existence. Past, present and future cannot escape his countenance. The God of the beginning is also the God of the end. This polar description of Him is stylistically confirmed by the *inclusion* formed by the divine Name אלהים in verses 2 and 9.

In juxtaposition and in sharp contrast to stanza A, **stanza B (10-17)** sketches a quite different picture. The conjunction וְאֵי (v 10) introduces this contrastive and surprising description. God's people find themselves in a situation of total disillusionment. Praise is reversed into complaint. God is rebuked and reproached for rejecting and dishonouring them in their present distress, probably a military defeat²⁵. He did not act like the expected (deuteronomistic) God of the battle (Num 10:35; Jos 6:6; 1 Sam 4:3; 2 Sam 5:24; 2 Sam 11:11; Judg 6:14), but turned his back on them. Therefore His countenance seems to be elusive. With nine verbal descriptions, all of which He is the subject, God is blamed for his abasing activity towards his people. Defeat, escape, despoliation, being sold as a worthless sheep to be slaughtered, scorn, derision and mockery became their part. Verses 16-17 thus form the climax and summery of this humiliating experience. Change to the first person singular therefore contributes to this intensifying moments, while repetition of the *Leitbegriffe* זָנַח (vv 10, 24), כָּלַם (vv 10, 16) and חָרַף (vv 14, 17) in this stanza cohesively stresses the dishonour and shame which cover their face like a cloth (v 16). The community's theology and their expectation that God will help them, seems to be *gescheitert*. God of the past is behaving inconsistent in their present situation of misery.

What then is the reason for this state of affairs? God's behaviour is inexplicable and beyond comprehension. His action is in contrast with their earlier confessed trust. In similar lamenting fashion **stanza C (18-23)** reflects the community's reaction to these circumstances. They want to clear their position by protesting their own innocence. On the contrary though, and in strong, honest and in no unclear language, they are keeping God responsible for the violation of his faithfulness²⁶.

Verses 18-20 and 21-23 shows a parallel construction²⁷. Not only is the people's conduct in contrast with the activity of God, but a climactic *Steigerung* in thought can be noticed, starting from 18-20 and proceeding to 21-23²⁸. God's people didn't forget Him, but He has forgotten them; they wanted his protection, but He has crushed them. Not only did He cast the shadow of death on them (עֲלִינוּ), but because of Him (עֲלֵיךָ), they are continuously killed and slaughtered like sheep (v 23)²⁹. Verse 23 therefore builds the climax in a perplexing and tension knitted relationship. He

treated them like He treated the ancestors' enemies from old - a contrastive way of treating his people.

In this stanza the conditional deuteronomistic view that Israel's faithfulness corresponds with God's help and that their infidelity evokes His anger is not met³⁰. This theological thrust is purposefully broken by the psalm, while the retribution principle - like in the case of Job - is also not maintained.

The last stanza, stanza D (24-27), is a prayer where the congregation ultimately calls on God for help. With typical language and expressions of the Old Testament lament, God is asked to intervene in their situation. Imperatives and "why"- questions are typical stylistic characteristics. A fourfold description of His hiddenness is accompanied by four supplications, urging God to make his presence seen. Allusions to the Exodus tradition in verses 25-27 are no coincidence³¹. This *Urzeit* of Israel's existence forms the counter pole of their present distress and reflects the salvation they need.

By recollecting keywords like זָנַח (vv 24, 10) and שָׁכַח (vv 25, 18, 21) in combination with the לָמָּה questions, it is confirmed in the last stanza that the people's basic trouble of God's hiddenness is not uplifted yet. Their prostrating position (v 26) stresses their helplessness and defenselessness. Even though this enigma of God's inactivity is left unanswered and unsolved, the imperatives keep the covenant faith in God alive. חָסַד (v 27), God's covenant love, tends to be a decisive keyword for solving the theological problem in the psalm. This suffering community is laying claim to it. Due to the evident polarity in the text and ultimately in God's conduct, his present unfaithfulness calls for his steadfast love to be reinstated. Although the psalm's problem seems to be open-ended, the polarity is keeping the hope of God's forthcoming intervention alive.

4 ANTITHESES OR CONTRASTS

Psalm 44 is characterised by a sharp contradiction between God's treatment of his people in the past and his handling of their present distressful situation³². This seems to be the main theological thrust in the psalm and is clearly visible in the structure of the poem. Stanza A (2-9) builds a strong contrast to the rest of the stanzas B (10-17), C (18-23) and D (24-27) together. Verse 10 is introduced by the peculiar particle אֲנִי which holds a strong adversative force. Despite this main contrast, several other antitheses and contrastive images are visible in the psalm on stylistic, structural and semantic levels. It is therefore not farfetched to assume that

the poet intentionally could have used this poetical device in order to depict the theological problem of God's hiddenness in the lives of his trustful people.

On the broad structural level of the poem, verses 2-9 and 10-27 seem to breath a different atmosphere. The jubilant, excited and trustful minds of God's people in 2-9 are replaced by harsh reproaches and strong revilements, accompanied by internal (vv 10-27) and external (v 26) expressions of lament. Their praises make room for complaint, while their exclamations become questions. On the one hand, God is making the light of his countenance known, but on the other hand He is hiding his face (v 25). In short, a glorious past of a life with God is inexplicably reversed into a miserable present without Him³³. His former deliverance is substituted by his hiddenness; his activity by inactivity; his nearness by absence and ultimately, his faithfulness by betrayal. From this contradictory behaviour, God appears to be a God of contrasts. His conduct is beyond human comprehension in view of the deuteronomistic theology and his people's expectation of what He is supposed to do.

If contrasts between two obvious contradictory sections in a poem exist, it would be peculiar to assess this poetical feature as an interpreting key for the poem as a whole. But, in Psalm 44, contrasts not only appear externally between the polar sections of the psalm. Internal antithetic elements are also evident within the main polar parts.

In stanza A (2-9) God's treatment of his people in the past is sharply contrasted by his behaviour towards their enemies. He drove the nations out of Canaan, while he planted his own like a vine; He deviled the nations, while he let his own blossom abundantly. Possession and dis-possession reveals a polar relationship (v 3). Word Play between הורשת (v 3) and ירשו (v 4) clearly emphasises God's contradictive action towards Israel and the heathen nations. However, that is not all. In two antithetical formulations, each time introduced by כִּי ... לֹא (Truly not, but...vv 4, 7-8,), human strength is contrasted by God's ability and power to effectuate deliverance. Not their human strength, symbolised by the "sword" and the "bow", brought Israel's salvation, *but* God's "arm" and "right hand" alone. Again the fourfold repetition of the root ישע (vv 4-5, 7-8) depicts God's salvation deeds in this stanza.

It is further striking to see how God is sketched as the deity, taking control of the past, present and future. With בִּימֵי קֶדֶם (v 2) and לְעוֹלָם (v 9), time categories mark the polarity between Elohim as God of the *Urzeit* and God of the *Endzeit*. Whatever wonderous deeds He performed in the past, will He be doing in the future again. Because of those deeds his

Name will be boasted (v 9). Therefore He is confidently depicted as the God of opposite time-dimensions. For the solution of the theological problem in the psalm, this antithetical element is important, because the final urgent pleas in verses 24-27 presume that the tide will turn again. The present hidden God will evolve again into the deity of the past who reveals his countenance in the future.

In the antithetical relationship between 2-9 and 10-27 **contrast-images** are utilised to depict the contrastive series of events regarding the people's severe misery. Repetition of keywords draw the attention to these antithetical aspects. Applicable keywords are פְּנִים (vv 4, 16, 17, 25), כָּל הַיּוֹם (vv 9, 16, 23), בּוֹשׁ (vv 8, 16) and אַחֲרָי (vv 11, 19). In the former days the *light* of God's countenance shined (v 4), while the *shadow* of death is bestowed on them currently (v 20). The risen sun has set. In contrast to the past, Israel's *face* are now covered with shame, while their revilers glance with scornful *faces* at them. Long ago, Israel confidently promised to praise God all day long. But now, shame appears to be their part all day long (v 16). Because of God - his inactivity and his absence - they are killed all day long (v 23). *Praise* and joy are therefore replaced by *lamenting* their shame and death.

In previous times, God had put the enemy to *shame* (v 8). This behaviour again seems to be reversed too. Inexplicably, his *favour* has changed. Where He took favour in his people (v 4b) and deviled the nations earlier (v 3), the opposite happens presently. God rejects Israel, but his people's adversaries enjoy his favour. The fertile ground of the blooming vine (v 3) has been changed into a place of desolation (v 20), where God crushed Israel (v 20). Like an unfaithful shepherd, He *sold* them for nothing, but He is later supplicated to *ransom* them again (v 27).

In stanza C (18-23) Israel is urgently pleading their innocence. Although God let them *turn back* behind the enemy (v 11), their hearts had *not turned* back in their present situation (v 19). They stay faithful to the covenant, but their Lord seems to have left them. Linguistically, the *waw* in וְלֹא שָׁכַחְנוּ (v 18) contains adversative power. Despite all the present misery which had befallen on them, they didn't forget God. He would have noticed their unfaithfulness; He knows the secrets of the heart (v 22). Is it possible for him to forget? The ironical rhetorical question in verse 22 forces for a negative reply. Structurally, this content is confirmed by antitheses in the parallel constructions of stanza C (18-23). Verses 18-19 and 21-22, which argue for the innocence of the people, are contrasted in verses 20 and 23 by God's violation of his covenant faithfulness. Both verses are then introduced by an adversative כִּי. From 20 to 23 a climactic

intensification of this misconduct becomes clear. In 23 God is ultimately held responsible for the killing and slaughtering of his people like worthless sheep.

The people's reproach of not transgressing the Decalogue's first commandment by stretching out their hands to a foreign god (v 21), is ironical. With this utterance, the attention is fully focused on God's conduct. By his inexplicable behaviour God became like a foreign God for them. His identity has changed. This shift of identity is strikingly introduced by a new form of address. He is not anymore approached by the Name Elohim, as was done five times up till now (vv 2, 5, 9, 21, 22), but He is addressed as *Adonai* (v 24a). Is this change in addressing God due to awe or estrangement? The answer is left to the reader of the psalm.

In the last stanza (24-27) God's inactivity is metaphorically depicted by someone who sleeps. With military language He is pleaded to stand up against those who raised against his community. To activate his reaction, He is called on to arise and to wake up. These modes of sleeping (inactivity) and awakening (activity) contains a polarity.

Contrast or antithetical structure offers a rhythm for life. As the sun is destined to dawn again after sunset, or the day has to follow the night; like the eyelid is opened after closure, or awakening follows on deep sleep, such an inevitability is built into the contrastive elements of this poem. In two juxtapositioned antithetical elements, the one element or aspect calls for the other. In this sense, the present misery calls for an upliftment. Knowing that Elohim is the God of Israel's *Urzeit* and *Endzeit*, this community is awaiting his יְהוָה . The hope of God's faithfulness or loving kindness is still alive. As the counterpart of their present experience, this loyalty is called upon by a faithful community who adheres to the God of contrasts.

5 SITZ IM LEBEN

5.1 Historical setting

Innumerable attempts had been made to date the psalm or to determine the historical circumstances behind the text. Solutions to frame a historical setting vary from the time period of the Judges up to the era of the Maccabees³⁴. Although the psalm reflects a strong historical conscience³⁵, with allusions to a military battle or defeat in verses 10-17, 20 and 23, the language is either too vague and poetical formulated or too little for linking it to an exact historical *Sitz im Leben*. In addition to this, the structural contrast between 2-9 and 10-27 guides analysts to detect more than one historical situation behind this multi-layered text³⁶.

Different historical situations must have existed behind 2-9 and 10-27³⁷. Immediately a new debate is opened on the unity and redactional history of the psalm. But, this will not be argued here. Nevertheless must it be stated that a final redaction(s) combined these different pre-existent texts/traditions in a “new situation” to form a “new text”. This complicated process, where texts are edited and/or re-edited in the *Nachwirkungsgeschichte* of a poem, not only blurred the original historical events³⁸, but make an exact date for the psalm almost impossible.

A kaleidoscope of dates ascribed to the psalm’s origin, illustrates the variety of epoch involved. Particularly allusions to a military disaster convince some exegetes to choose for the time of the Judges³⁹, and others for several periods in the history of the Hebrew monarchy⁴⁰; some opt for the exile or shortly thereafter⁴¹, while others choose for Jewish worship during Persian times⁴², or Antiochus III Ochus who defeated the Phoenician Revolt in 345-344 BCE⁴³; even the possibility of 312 BCE after Ptolemy had conquered Jerusalem⁴⁴ is considered. Strong emphasis has also been placed on the era of the Maccabees⁴⁵. But, more doubt has been casted on this time period, since Maccabean defeats are regarded as not so severe as our text requires⁴⁶. According to Jewish tradition (Talmud, Sota 48a), the psalm must have been known by the second century BCE, because Levites daily sang verse 24a up to the time of John Hyrcanus (135-104 BCE).

Beyerlin⁴⁷ and Van Uchelen’s opinions are valid. When its redactional history is taken seriously, one can assume that Psalm 44 was used in a variety of situations from the period of the Monarchy through to the Maccabean era, and beyond. While Kraus⁴⁸ is hesitant to make a “historische Fixierung”, Van Uchelen⁴⁹ is of the opinion that the psalm doesn’t reflect on one single historical event. In this regard Zenger and Beyerlin’s arguments, namely that the psalm’s roots could stem from a pre-exilic period close to the reign of Josiah (vv 2-9) and from an exilic/post-exilic lament (vv 10-27), are convincing. These layers had then been edited and put together either after 721 or the catastrophe of 586/7 BCE.

5.2 Cultic setting

Enough evidence prevails to assign a cultic *Sitz im Leben* to Psalm 44. Being part of the Korahite collection, the psalm must have functioned in the Israelite cult. Apart from the heading, the praise (vv 2, 5, 9) and prayer like (vv 24-27) language, its cultic recital seems undebatable, at least since the Maccabean era when parts of it were daily sung by the Levites.

The identification of the “I” (vv 5, 7, 16) with either the king or priest as cultic official, may be questionable, but should indicate a possible

link to the cult. This connection can further be viewed in conjunction with Craigie's hypothesis of "an inner chiasmic structure with regard to speakers", which was allegedly employed in an antiphonal manner, where a reciprocal recital between the king as liturgist and the congregation took place. Be reminiscent of 2 Chronicles 20, with king Josaphath as cultic leader, these proposals offer resourceful propositions for the psalm's cultic setting.

Both Weiser and Goulder relate Psalm 44 to the cult. Weiser⁵⁰ through his idea of the pre-exilic "Bundesfestkult" and Goulder⁵¹ the Feast of the Tabernacles on the 14th of Bul in Dan during the 8th century. At this autumn festival, he asserts, a recital of the Conquest traditions allegedly took place. This psalm then functioned prominently as a pre-festal lament in that ritual. Both these attempts are fascinating, but they are reconstructions which restrain me from accepting it fully. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that Psalm 44 took a stand in the Israelite cult.

6 THEOLOGICAL FOOTNOTE

Psalm 44 offers no explicit solution to the theological problem posed by the text. This problem could be dealt with in more than one way. Zenger⁵², for example, attempts to solve it on a redactional level of the Korahite collection(s). In this way, Psalms 45-48 tend to answer the call on God in 44. In the same way, Psalm 85:9-11 offer an answer to the supplications in 44:24-27. This solution is more than valid.

According to my proposal, polarity or the functioning of antithetic elements could also be used on an intratextual level, not only as an interpretation key for the psalm, but as a means to anticipate an answer to the community's call for the upliftment of their misery.

7 CONCLUSION

Allow me a final remark and application. Psalm 44 undoubtedly touches on circumstances which every believer are at some or other time of his life confronted with. This regards the perplexing problem of a believer who is not immunised against misery, pain and distress despite his/her perpetuating faith in God. Tension which then rises from the polarity between faith in God on the one hand and the reality of distress on the other, cause many enigmatic questions about life as well as about the identity and activity of God in such circumstances.

For people who experienced the loss of leading Old Testament scholars in South Africa by death during the last year (1997-1998), the

theological thrust of this psalm becomes a fearful reality. Personally, the sudden death of my study leader, friend, colleague and well known expositor of the Psalms, Willem Sterrenberg (Riempies) Prinsloo, was a devastating and miserable experience⁵³. In the spirit of Psalm 44, God must be thanked for the life and work of such a talented and beloved man. But, in the same breath could we pose our lamenting “why”-questions, with the expectation that the loving kindness of the same God will guide the people who will miss him. Have we experienced the hidden face of God during the past year? He will turn his hidden face to shine again for the Old Testament study in South Africa. I attribute this article to my late *Doktorvaters* memory.

NOTES:

- 1 M D Goulder, *The psalms of the sons of Korah*, Sheffield 1982, 98.
- 2 See William Byrd's *Exurge, Domine* (1543-1623), Orlando di Lasso's *Deus, Auribus Nostris* (1530-1594) and Jan Pieterszoon Sweenlink's *We Have Heard the Words* (1562-1621), cf T Wittstruck, *The book of Psalms. An annotated bibliography*, New York 1994, 643.
- 3 See Psalms 1, 2, 3, 5, 30, 31, 32, 34, 35, 58, 59, 73, 82, 89. Recently, G T M Prinsloo, “Polarity as dominant textual strategy in Psalm 8”, *OTE* 8 (1995), 370-387, also illustrated polarity as a dominant textual strategy in Psalm 8.
- 4 J Krasoveč, *Antithetic structure in Biblical Hebrew poetry*, Brill 1984, 3ff.
- 5 Cf J H Coetzee, “The functioning of the elements of tension in Psalm 44”, *Theologia Evangelica* 21/1 (1988a), 2.
- 6 See for example J P M Van der Ploeg, *Psalmen - Deel I*, Roermond 1973, 270, P C Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Waco 1983, 333, K Waaijman, *Psalmen vanuit de ballingschap*, Kampen 1986, 67 and E Zenger, “Psalm 44” in: F L Hossfeld & E Zenger, *Die Psalmen. Psalm 1-50*, Würzburg 1993, 277.
- 7 Coetzee, *op cit*, 1988a, 3-5.
- 8 L D Crow, “The rhetoric of Psalm 44”, *ZAW* 104 (1992), 395, 401.
- 9 Cf M Dahood, *Psalms I (1-50)*. New York 1979, 265, C Westermann, *The Psalms. Structure, Content & Message*, Minneapolis 1980, 43, Craigie, *op cit*, 331 and Coetzee, *op cit*, 1988a, 2. E S Gerstenberger, *Psalms - Part I. With an introduction to cultic poetry*, Grand Rapids 1988, 182, prefers to call it a communal complaint.
- 10 Cf A Deissler, *Die Psalmen*. Düsseldorf 1964, 180 and E Zenger, *Ich will die Morgenrote wecken*, Freiburg 1991, 163, while H Schmidt, *Die Psalmen*. Tübingen 1934, 83, refers to it as a *Volksklagegebet*.
- 11 H J Kraus, *Die Psalmen. BKAT XV/II (60-150)*, Neukirchen 1978, 480.
- 12 Cf C Seybold, *Die Psalmen (HAT I/15)*, Tübingen 1996, 180. C A Briggs & E G Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms I*, Edinburgh 1906, 374, describes Psalm 44 as “a national prayer during the exile”.
- 13 Cf N A Van Uchelen, *Psalmen deel II: 41-80*, Nijkerk 1977, 21.
- 14 See Zenger, *op cit*, 1993, 272.

- 15 Goulder, *op cit*, 86 and Zenger, *op cit*, 1993, 272, elaborate on these relationships thoroughly.
- 16 Cf A F Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, Cambridge 1921, 236.
- 17 They include words like קרב (vv 4,7), צאן (vv 12, 23), שׁכח (vv 18, 21), כלם (vv 10, 16), קרף (vv 14, 15, 17) and זנח (vv 10, 24). P Van der Lugt, *Strofische structuren in de Bijbels-Hebreeuwse poëzie*. Kampen 1980, 261, regards the repetition of keywords for strophe demarcation as important. The formation of inclusion in verses 2-9 and 18-27 effectuates cohesion. E J Kissane, *The Book of Psalms*, Dublin 1953, 191, reflects a similar pattern.
- 18 In order to portray inversion, W G E Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry. A Guide to its techniques*, Sheffield 1984, 127, also sketches gender matched parallelism in verse 14.
- 19 Cf Van der Lugt, *op cit*, 257.
- 20 Cf H Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, Göttingen 1926, 185; Schmidt, *op cit*, 83; W Beyerlin, "Innerbiblische Aktualisierungsversuche-Schichten im 44. Psalm", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 73 (1976), 452; J H Eaton, *Psalms*, London 1967, 121 & J H Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, London 1976, 61; Craigie, *op cit*, 332; Crow, *op cit*, 395, and Zenger, *op cit*, 1993, 271.
- 21 Cf R Kittel, *Die Psalmen, übersetzt und erklärt*, Leipzig 1922, 155.
- 22 Cf Gunkel, *op cit*, 184, and Van der Lugt, *op cit*, 260.
- 23 Cf N H Ridderbos, *De Psalmen. Eerste deel: Psalm 1-41*, Kampen 1962, 42.
- 24 Van der Lugt, *op cit*, 260, gives a summary of opinions regarding the strophe division up to 1980. He is of the opinion that the composition reflects a "zeer gelijkblijvende strofische structuur". Exegetes are nevertheless choosing for a **threefold** (cf B Duhm, *Die Psalmen*, Leipzig 1899, 126; Van der Ploeg, *op cit*, 269; Craigie, *op cit*, 332), **fourfold** (cf Briggs & Briggs, *op cit*, 374; Van Uchelen, *op cit*, 22; Gerstenberger, *op cit*, 1-2) or a **fivefold** (cf Kirkpatrick, *op cit*, 236; Kissane, *op cit*, 191; Eaton, *op cit*, 1967, 121 ff; Rogerson & McKay, *op cit*, 207 ff; Kraus, *op cit*, 480; A Weiser, *Die Psalmen. Erster Teil (1-60)*, Göttingen 1979, 236; Gunkel, *op cit*, 184; Waaijman, *op cit*, 66; Coetzee, *op cit*, 1988a, 2; Crow, *op cit*, 395; Zenger, *op cit*, 1993, 271; Seybold, *op cit*, 180 ff) division.
- 25 It should not be swept out of mind that images and portrayals of a warlike situation, which is alluded in the poem, could have been used poetically by the poet for a later audience. Because the author had dealt with the (deuteronomistic) salvation historical traditions, he could have applied and recontextualised the images of a war situation to express the utmost misery and pain. These initial audience(s) would have known and had been acquainted to these images. But, with this observation, I do not reject an original historical *Sitz im Leben* for the text.
- 26 Some exegetes like W O E Oesterley, *The Psalms - Translated with textcritical and exegetical notes - Volume I*, New York 1939, 245, regard this attitude of the psalmist as "an irreverent approach....without parallel in the Psalter". Kraus, *op cit*, 481, unjustly ascribes to the psalm a "farisäische Selbstgerechtigkeit", which does not fit the honest faith struggle of the community.
- 27 Cf J H Coetzee, "Lyding om u ontwil in Psalm 44 en 69", *Skrif en Kerk* 9/1 (1988b), 3, and Crow, *op cit*, 398, identified a A-A-B // A-A-B pattern in these verses with internal antithetic elements between A and B.

- 28 Verses 18 and 21 are both statements that God's people didn't forget (שָׁכַח) Him or were unfaithful in their covenant relationship with Him; verses 19 and 22 are both introduced with the negative particle אֵל with further protestations of their innocence, while 20 and 23, in contrast to their antecedent verses, both state the severe allegation that God violated his faithfulness. Both final verses commence with the וְ particle which pursue a strong antithetical formulation.
- 29 Coetzee, *op cit*, 1988b, 1, convincingly indicated that the expression in verse 23a is not, as sometimes interpreted, vicarious suffering.
- 30 H Gross, "Geschichtserfahrung in den Psalmen 44 und 77", *Trierer Theologischer Zeitschrift* 80 (1971), 215, is correct when he asserts that the psalm is a correction on the "deuteronomisch-deuteronomistische Geschichtsverständnis". Zenger, *op cit*, 1991, 169, holds a similar viewpoint.
- 31 Cf Zenger, *op cit*, 1991, 170 and *op cit*, 1993, 277.
- 32 Cf Westermann, *op cit*, 1980, 43, and several other exegetes.
- 33 Cf Waaijman, *op cit*, 67.
- 34 Cf Van Uchelen, *op cit*, 22.
- 35 Deissler, *op cit*, 181, points to some salvation historical traditions behind the text, while Beyerlin, *op cit*, 446, illustrates how the psalm actualises different historical events from the timeperiod of the Israelite history.
- 36 Cf Beyerlin, *op cit*, 459, and Zenger, *op cit*, 272.
- 37 The first part (2-9) can be related to the timeperiod of the kings, probably during or after the reign of Josia (cf Beyerlin, *op cit*, 459; Zenger, *op cit*, 1991, 168), while the situation of the second part (10-27) is more disputed. Very broadly it can be attributed to the exilic or post-exilic period after the catastrophe of 586/7. Although the psalm could have been edited after these events, the Maccabean period is too late for the original setting.
- 38 Cf Seybold, *op cit*, 181.
- 39 Cf Waaijman, *op cit*, 63, with regard to verse 2-4.
- 40 This include suggestions for the **Davidic period**, due to similarities between Psalm 60:3-5 and 44:10-15 as well as David's vengeance on the Edomites (2 Sam 8:13-14; 1 Kn 11:15 ff); the impending military attack by the Moabites and Ammonites after **Jehoshaphat** proclaimed a fast and led the people in intercessory prayer (2 Chron 20:4-13) - cf Eaton, *op cit*, 1967, 121; A A Anderson, *The Book of Psalms. Volume I*, London 1972, 336; Rogerson & McKay, *op cit*, 206, and Weiser, *op cit*, 238; during the reign of **Hezekiah in 701 BC** when Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem - cf E Vogt, "Psalmus 44 et tragoedia Ezechiae regis", *VD* 45 (1967), 193 ff); the timeperiod **after the Josiah-reforms** (2 Kn 23:29) - cf Beyerlin, *op cit*, 459; Waaijman, *op cit*, 63, with regard to 44:5-9 and Zenger, *op cit*, 1991, 168, with reference to 44:2-9.
- 41 Representatives of this viewpoint are Kissane, *op cit*, 195; Craigie, *op cit*, 333; Zenger, *op cit*, 1993, 272 for verses 10-27 and Beyerlin, *op cit*, 459. Seybold, *op cit*, 180, links the psalm to the Korahite redaction in the exilic period and the theology of the Danite congregation after 721 and 586 BC.
- 42 Gerstenberger, *op cit*, 186, defends this date and regards other possibilities such as 701 BC (Sennacherib), 345BC (Artaxerxes III) or the Maccabean era for the *Sitz im Leben* as "rather futile".
- 43 Deissler, *op cit*, 181, and H M Parker, "Artaxerxes III Ochus and Psalm 44", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 68 (1978), 152ff.

- 44 Cf M Buttenwieser, *The Psalms*, Chicago 1938, 750.
- 45 In pursuit of the Antiochian Churchfathers and the Reformer, Calvin, people like Duhm, *op cit*, 128; Kittel, *op cit*, 192 and Schmidt, *op cit*, 84, represent this opinion. Duhm relates the psalm to the events of 1 Maccabees 9, while Schmidt also relates the texts of 1 Maccabees 2 and 6.
- 46 See the arguments of Buttenwieser, *op cit*, 750, and Oesterley, *op cit*, 245, while more modern exegetes not really opt for this proposal.
- 47 Beyerlin, *op cit*, 459.
- 48 Kraus, *op cit*, 48.
- 49 Van Uchelen, *op cit*, 22.
- 50 Weiser, *op cit*, 239.
- 51 Goulder, *op cit*, 93.
- 52 Cf Zenger, *op cit*, 1991, 171, and *op cit*, 1993, 273.
- 53 The death of Ferdinand Deist and Hannes Olivier, two distinguished and honoured Old Testament scholars in South Africa, can be viewed in the same way.