Vulnerability and Narrative Ethics in Ps 107
From Poetic Line to Psalmic "History" and Narrative Identity Formation

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1. Introduction

How can communities bring experiences of crisis and deliverance into the space of worship? How does prayer function as a medium for articulating vulnerability, constructing collective memories, and initiating ethical discourse? Psalm 107 addresses these questions uniquely and powerfully. The opening psalm of the fifth book of the Psalter (Pss 107–150) marks a new beginning – linguistically, theologically, and liturgically.[1] Its hymn-like structure and discursive engagement with collective memories of the past offer a vivid poetic reflection on human vulnerability.

The psalm's extended narratives – wandering in the wilderness (vv. 4–9), imprisonment (vv. 10–16), foolishness or self-inflicted suffering (vv. 17–22), and shipwreck (vv. 23–32) – are remarkable literary phenomena: Though these are stories, they unfold in a poetic register traditionally reserved for laments, thanksgivings, and hymns.[2] Their regular rhythm, vivid metaphors, and refrain structure point to a liturgical usage that transforms communal memory into a shared theological and ethical practice. The polyphonic and narrato-poetical design of the psalm has led to debates about its unity. However, following recent scholarship,[3] this essay approaches the Masoretic text of Psalm 107 as a coherent composition.

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1 Erich Zenger, "The Composition and Theology of the Fifth Book of Psalms, Psalms 107–145," *JSOT* 80 (1998): 77–102; Ps 107 marks a unit (Pss 107-150) that celebrates the community's restoration to the land and the sovereignty of God over them, insofar the community found a conception for existence and identity that transcended traditional concepts of nationhood. See Nancy L. de Claissé-Walford, "The Meta-Narrative of the Psalter," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 363–377.

2 James W. Watts, "Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative," JSOTS 139 (1992); Robert E. Wallace, *The Narrative Effect of Book IV of the Hebrew Psalter*, StBL 112 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007); Tod Linafelt, "Poetry and Biblical Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna N. Fewell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 84–95; for a recent overview, see Brent A. Strawn, "Too Tall a Tale, Or: Do The Psalms Really Tell 'Stories'?" *World & World* 43 (2023): 321–332.

3 Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III: 101–150*, AB 17A (New York: Yale University Press, 1970), 78–91; Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150*, HThKAT (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2008), 101–102.; recently John Kartje, *Wisdom Epistemology in the Psalter: A Study of Psalms 1,*

Historical psalms[4] like Psalm 107 challenge recipients alike to reflect not only on what happened (history) but also on how it is remembered (reception) and how it is told (rhetoric). The hermeneutical interplay between history, memory, and narrative identity formation is not merely a philosophical concern – it becomes both politically and spiritually formative through the speech practices of a remembering community. "[T]he world enacted by these Psalms of recital is intergenerational, covenantally shaped, morally serious, dialogically open, and politically demanding."[5] Secondly, the liturgical use of the psalms in worship over the centuries gives their ethical lesson a performative dimension[6] and sketches models of good life:

> To pray a psalm may well involve more than praise or petition; it may commit the worshiper to act in certain ways. Praying psalms with such ethical content may therefore be compared to making a vow or taking an oath, which are public commitments made before human witnesses and before God.[7]

Thirdly, the ethical ideals of the Psalter could be more closely defined through the terminology it uses in order to "paint an attractive portrait of the righteous and a negative picture of the wicked"[8] (cf. for Pss 1; 37:35; 52:6–7; 75:10; 112:4).

Psalm 107 can thus be seen as a liturgical site where vulnerability is narrated and interpreted theologically. The paradigmatic narratives of the psalm are arranged around the tropes of the "wondrous deeds" (נִפְלָאוֹת) of YHWH (vv. 8; 15; 21; 24; 31) that certain phenomena are "unclaimed" and "outside the range" of average human experiences.[9] The meaning associated with the category of נִפְלָאוֹת "wondrous deeds" of YHWH appears rather fluid throughout the Psalter.[10] These terms form an integral part of praise and are reminders of extreme, life-threatening situations that have been overcome with the help of

73, 90, and 107, BZAW 472 (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2014), 146–148; Johannes Bremer, "Die Armentheologie als eine Grundlinie einer Theologie des Psalters," *HeBAI* 5 (2016): 350–390.

4 Traditionally, Pss 78; 105; 106 and 136 are interpreted as "historical recital" in Old Testament scholarship. For an overview, see Walter Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment: Psalms, Modernity, and the Making of History* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

5 Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment*, 21.

6 Dorothea Erbele-Küster, *Lesen als Akt des Betens: Eine Rezeptionsästhetik der Psalmen*, WMANT 87 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001).

7 Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 77; Jaco W. Gericke, "What Is Good? Meta-Ethical Assumptions in the Psalms Concerning the Relation between Divinity and Morality," in *Psalmody and Poetry in Old Testament Ethics*, ed. Dirk J. Human, LHB 572 (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 14–45. Cf. Dorothea Erbele-Küster, "Poetics and Ethics," Canon & Culture 10 (2016): 39–55; cf. Dorothea Erbele-Küster, *Verführung zum Guten: Biblisch-theologische Erkundungen zwischen Ethik und Ästhetik,* Theologische Interventionen 3 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2019), 89–105.

8 Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 139.

9 Joachim G. Conrad, "פלא," in *ThWAT* 6, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1989), 570–583.

10 See on this term Pss 9:2; 26:7; 40:6; 71:17; 72:18; 75:2; 78:4.11.32; 86:10; 96:3; 98:1; 105:2.5; 106:7.22; 111:4; 119:18.27; 131:1; 136:4; 139:14; 145:5.

YHWH. However, the portrayed narratives about the vulnerable aspects of human existence in Psalm 107 are correlated to "the language of the poor/needy",[11] which takes shape in multifaceted terminology (vv. 10; 17 and 41) and reflects on the inefficacy of human power to deliver amid oppression and distress. In other words, these commemorative narratives in vv. 4–32 lead to a meta-narrative in vv. 33–41, that shows YHWH as a master of life and death and emphasises YHWH's sovereign, universal and transformative power, which changes nature and history against all human efforts.[12]

This psalm is not merely a historical or literary artefact; it is a living text that continues to speak into contemporary contexts of fragility, trauma, and hope. Its vivid depictions of existential threat and divine rescue resonate with pastoral situations where people search for meaning in suffering, for orientation in crisis, and for a language of faith amidst life's unpredictability. The refrain highlighting the "wondrous deeds" (נִפְלָאוֹת) of YHWH (vv. 8, 15, 21, 31) provides theological grounding for a liturgy that remembers and anticipates transformation – both personal and communal.

From a practical-theological perspective, Psalm 107 challenges worshipers not only to recall Israel's canonical past but to identify with the vulnerable figures within these paradigmatic narratives. The psalm's narrato-poetic structure holds space for a plurality of voices and experiences, allowing individuals and communities to locate their own struggles within a broader theological framework.

Psalm 107 offers insight into the identity-construction of Israel's post-exilic community, framing vulnerability as a theological and anthropological point of departure. In her theological anthropology, Heike Springhart differentiates between *ontological (fundamental)* and *situated (contextual) vulnerability*.[13] *Ontological vulnerability* is a human condition, it means the fragility of human

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[11] The "language of the poor" plays a significant role in the Psalter and particularly in the fifth book of the Psalms (cf. for W. Dennis Tucker, *Constructing and Deconstructing Power in Psalms 107–150,* SBL 19 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 176. There is a broad discussion in Old Testament Research about the identity of the "poor" on the horizon of the Psalter, see Norbert Lohfink, "Von der 'Anawim-Partei' zur 'Kirche der Armen': Die bibelwissenschaftliche Ahnentafel eines Hauptbegriffs der 'Theologie der Befreiung,'" *Biblica* 67 (1986): 153–76; cf. Rainer Albertz, *Religionsgeschichte Israels in alttestamentlicher Zeit. Vol. 2, Vom Exil bis zu den Makkabäern,* GAT 8/2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 569. Recently Johannes Bremer investigated the "theology of the poor" on the horizon of the Psalter against the background of socio-economic developments in the Persian province Yəhūd: Johannes Bremer, *Wo Gott sich auf die Armen einlässt: Der sozio-ökonomische Hintergrund der achämenidischen Provinz "Yəhūd" und seine Implikationen für die Armentheologie des Psalters,* BBB 174 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 319. Cf. for Bremer, "Armentheologie," 350–390.

[12] Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150*, 109.

[13] Heike Springhart, "Exploring Life's Vulnerability: Vulnerability in Vitality," in *Exploring Vulnerability*, ed. Heike Springhart and Günter Thomas (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 13–35; cf. Andrea Bieler, *Verletzliches Leben: Horizonte einer Theologie der Seelsorge* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 23–43.

existence, equally shared by all humans. In comparison, *situated vulnerability* addresses the various realisations of vulnerability shaped by multiple social, cultural and ecological factors that may increase or decrease the degree of vulnerability.[14] At this point, Heike Springhart presents the thesis that the complementarity of ontological and situated vulnerability opens up a realistic anthropological approach for inclusion. In other words, the inherent mutuality of ontological and situated vulnerability may imply the inclusion of various vulnerable groups on the grounds of shared vulnerability. In this sense, the multidimensional interconnectedness of human existence in its anthropological, social and political forms is directed towards the concept of *"ethical vulnerability"* that opens up reflection not only on the nature of vulnerability but also on the responsibilities owed to those who are vulnerable, who bear these responsibilities, and how they are best fulfilled. Hence, the sensitivity of a group towards this "ethical vulnerability" may promote an essential openness, trust and susceptibility to connect to God, to the world and to other people. Consequently, the focusing on the complementarity of ontological and situated vulnerability can lead to a public discourse in which both fundamental and marginalised perspectives on need and wounding can be articulated and reflected, fostering participation for all.[15]

This leads to three guiding questions:

1. Firstly, which aspects of vulnerability could be differentiated in the narrato-poetic contexts of Psalm 107?
2. Secondly, do the narratives of Psalm 107 represent the landmarks of Israel's canonical history, or are they open for a rather universalistic horizon?
3. Thirdly, are there any ethical claims associated with the "language of the poor" in Psalm 107?

In this way, the psalm becomes a site of what might be called *ethical vulnerability* – a shared space where memory, liturgy, and ethical awareness meet. The poetic structure and intertextual allusions of Psalm 107 foster a "co-authored"[16] communal narrative that is not closed off by history but remains open to new appropriations. These commemorative narratives do not impose ethical norms in a prescriptive way; rather, they evoke moral imagination, allowing worshipers to inhabit stories of need, trust, and transformation. According to these hermeneutic considerations, Psalm 107 will serve as an example for exploring the narrative ethics relating to ontological and situated vulnerability.

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14 Springhart, "Exploring Life's Vulnerability," 18. Cf. for Bieler, *Verletzliches Leben*, 47-61.

15 Heike Springhart, "Inklusion und Vulnerabilität – systematisch-theologische Überlegungen," in *Inklusion denken: Theologisch, biblisch, ökumenisch, praktisch*, ed. Michaela Geiger and Stracke-Bartholmai (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2018), 33–43.

16 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 150; Cf. for Elizabeth Purcell, "Narrative Ethics and Vulnerability: Kristeva and Ricoeur on Interdependence," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 21 (2013): 53.

This paper puts forward the thesis that the commemorative narratives of Psalm 107 expand traditional concepts of nationhood beyond the canonical history of Israel and express YHWH's care and deliverance for all troubled human beings because of shared vulnerability.

2. Commemorative Narratives and the Discursive (Re)Construction of Israel's Identity

In the exegetical tradition, the narratives and images of Psalm 107 have long been related to Israel alone.[17] Those who were saved by YHWH in v. 2 and who are gathered in v. 3 are presented as the "redeemed of YHWH" (גְּאוּלֵי יְהוָה):

> Let the redeemed of YHWH tell, those he redeemed (גְּאָלָם) out of the hand of the oppressor (מִיַּד־צָר)
> And from the lands (וּמֵאֲרָצוֹת קִבְּצָם) he gathered them, from the rising (מִמִּזְרָח) and the setting (וּמִמַּעֲרָב), from north (מִצָּפוֹן) and from the sea (וּמִיָּם). (vv. 2–3)

The term of releasing/redemption (גָּאַל)[18] is mostly related to Israel, since Israel has been released and redeemed by God in many situations and was addressed as the "released" (cf. for Isa 35:9; 51:20; 62:12; 63:4). It is reminiscent of the Exodus Narrative (Ex 6:6; 15:13; Pss 77:16; 78:35; 106:10) and becomes in due course a technical term for the redemption from exile, namely for the return of the diaspora (Isa 41:14; 43:1; 49:26; 62:12 etc.).[19]

In addition to it, the גְּאוּלֵי יְהוָה "redeemed of YHWH" are identified through the keyword connections of יָדָה "praise" (in vv. 8; 15; 21; 31) with the undefined groups from the four strophes. At this point, a narrative gap arises regarding the identity of the gathered groups: do these groups refer exclusively to Israelites or to Israelites and other nations as well?

Before we turn to these narratives, it should be noted that the recurring poetic structures of the psalm refer to "children of humanity" (בְּנֵי אָדָם in vv. 8; 15; 21; 31). "Children of humanity" in the Psalms are always related to humanity as a

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17 Cf. Dahood, *Psalms III*, 81; Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen,* HAT I,15 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 427; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150*, 100. Differently by Joachim Vette, "Sie alle sollen dem Herrn danken für seine Huld" – Aufforderung zum Lob an die "Erlösten des Herrn" Psalm 107, in *Das Buch der Psalmen 90–151*, ed. Manfred Oeming and Joachim Vette (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2016), 109; cf. Caroline Ziethe, *Auf seinen Namen werden die Völker hoffen: Die matthäische Rezeption der Schriften Israels zur Begründung des universalen Heils,* BZNT 233 (Boston/Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 137–147, whereby the outlines of a universal perspective emerge.

18 The verb originally means "pay redemption price" for dispossessed relative or property of relative, resp. "redeem" (Lev 25:25.33.48.49; Ruth 3:13; 4:4.6).

19 The participle form גֹּאֵל ("Redeemer") even becomes a title of YHWH in Isa 41:14; 44:6.24; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7.26; 54:5,8; 59:20; 60:16; 63:16) cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150*, 103.

whole,[20] therefore, this term opens up a universalistic horizon. According to this horizon the repeated appeals represent vulnerability as ontological (fundamental), as an inherent part of the *conditio humana* beyond the canonical history of Israel. On the contrary, the further narratives of Psalm 107 (vv. 4–9; 10–16; 17–22) are connected to the situative contexts of vulnerability and contain historical allusions to Israel's past and depict the dramatic consequences of unethical decision-making processes of a group (apart from the narrative about a shipwreck in vv. 23–32). I shall now analyse and characterise the four distinct narratives of the psalm which I have identified above.

2.1 First (Foundational) Narrative: Wandering in the Wilderness

The first vulnerable group wanders in a harsh environment and faces two impediments: one external and one internal. *Externally*, the members of this group wander without orientation (תָּעָה)[21] in v. 4, *internally*, they are hungry and thirsty (רְעֵבִים גַּם־צְמֵאִים).[22] In v. 5. "staggering" is often interpreted as a life-threatening consequence of a conscious decision, as deviation from YHWH and his commandments.[23] YHWH can also lead whole peoples or parts of his people astray (Isa 30:28; cf. for Ps 107:40) but he can lead them on a straight road as well (Ps 107:7). The concrete bodily and sensory experiences of this staggering are expressed in the image of the parched throat/stormy soul (נַפְשָׁם שִׁקְּצָה) and of the hungry throat (וְנַפְשָׁם רְעֵבָה). Additionally, the נֶפֶשׁ "throat, vital self" is portrayed here as weak, powerless and despondent (עָטַף hitp.).[24] The basic meaning of this description refers to the neediness of a human being or a group; yet in wisdom contexts, this state will be a sign and consequence of distance from YHWH, namely rebelliousness and inertia. The word רָעֵב both in the singular and the plural form of the noun, describes the group of the hungry and its synonyms such as "oppressed" (Isa 58:6), "impoverished unemployed" (Isa 58:7), "naked" (Isa 58:7; Ez 18:7.16; Job 22:6; 24:10), "prisoners" (Ps 146:7) and "bowed" (Isa 58:10) who all belong to the circle of the personae miserae.

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[20] Cf. for Pss 11:4; 12:2.9; 14:2; 21:11; 31:20; 33:13; 36:8; 45:3; 49:3; 53:3; 57:5; 58:2; 62:10; 66:5; 89:48; 90:3; 115:16; 145:12. See on this topic Vette, "Sie alle sollen dem Herrn danken," 110. Furthermore, אָדָם is used as a generic term for humanity and as a collective gender-noun in the Old Testament: Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 12.

[21] The rich semantic field of the verb תָּעָה "wander, stagger, tremble, to be on the wrong track" includes physical, social and existential aspects as well, cf. for Gen 21:14; 37:15; Song 1:7.

[22] The nouns occur as correlatives in Isa 49:10; 65:13; Prov 25:21 (cf. for Isa 29:8; 32:6; Job 5:5).

[23] Prov 21:16; cf. for 10:17; 12:26; Pss 58:4; 95:10; Job 12:24; Sir 3:24.

[24] עָטַף mostly occurs in the context of רוּחַ (Pss 77:4; 142:4; 143:4) and just rarely in the context of נֶפֶשׁ as in Ps 107:5 (cf. for Jonah 2:8; Lam 2:12).

First, the word-pair of "wilderness and wasteland" (בַּמִּדְבָּר בִּישִׁימוֹן) stands in the tradition of the Exodus[25] and includes allusions to the book of Isaiah (Isa 53:6; 49:10; 42:16; 48:17; 58:11; cf. for Isa 43:19–20). On the other hand, finding a city (without using an article) in v. 7 does not fit into the paradigmatic narratives of Israel: in the pragmatics of the poetic discourse, is usually not *a* city (Ps 107:7), but *the* city (namely Zion) addressed.[26]

The narrator places the group in the wilderness, a location associated with alienation and vulnerability. From this perspective, the group is a wandering and vulnerable people, exposed and enclosed. Yet, the narrative also portrayes the community as a witness to divine action that rescues the vulnerable group and brings it to a secure place (v. 7). In the mirror of this dynamic, the first narrative (wilderness) is the foundational narrative, the primary story giving reason for the community's existence (raison d'être) and serves to differentiate the group (the community) from all other groups. Being a distinctive community with a distinctive foundational narrative means interest in a distinctive hermeneutical strategy which is the canonical history of Israel. In other words, vulnerability is depicted here as situated, as rooted in the founding history of a group.

2.2 Second Narrative: Rebellion, Misery and Darkness of Captivity

This perspective broadens in the second narrative. Sitting in darkness combined with the image of prison is well known from Isa 42:6, and 49:9. The linking of "imprisonment" with "misery" (עָנִי) in v. 10b indicates that this imprisonment in darkness has a much more complex significance: The word עָנִי refers to the state of the miserable that "cries to heaven".[27] The noun "[...] signals the severity of suffering which always has social implications."[28]

In the Psalms, the situative factors of misery are always embedded into a multi-causal context, but the semantic field of עָנָה II. "miserable" encompasses the following problematic fields: Situations where violence is exercised (Pss 10:2.9; 35:10; 37:14; 140:3); and narratives in which justice is endangered (Pss 14:6; 18:28; 82:3). People could be threatened by tribulation and oppression (Pss 34:7; 74:21; 86:1), and the state of misery could evoke the multiple dynamics of shame as well (Pss 69; 70). Furthermore, the *persona misera* of the complaining "I" could be further intensified by references to traumatic wounds (Ps 88:6, 16) and woundings (Ps 109:22).

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25 Cf. for Ex 16:1-3.10.14.32; 17:1; 18:5; Deut 32:10; Pss 68:8; 78:40; 106:14; 107:4.
26 Vette, "Sie alle sollen dem Herrn danken," 108.
27 Pss 5:3; 18:7.42; 22:25; 28:2; 30:3; 31:23; 72:12; 88:14; 119:4.
28 Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "עָנָה II," ThWAT 6:257.

Therefore, the spectrum of meaning oscillates between a social-material understanding and a spiritual-religious connotation, that is, the relationship to YHWH is always implied. Johannes Bremer denotes psalms with an orientation toward the "theology of the poor" that express a differentiated understanding of poverty:

> It appears that the term עָנִי in the psalms in 8 of 11 passages (except for Pss 22:25; 107:10.41) is used to describe the situation of the prayer itself. [...] It should be noted that except for Pss 22:25; 107:10.41 both the verb form of ענה II. and the noun עָנִי accentuates the theology of the poor as a self-characterization of the prayer or as a self-description of his/her situation itself and that does not imply a social and material meaning of "poverty" at any point.[29]

Furthermore, Bremer does not elaborate on the situational manifestations of misery in vv. 10-16 and investigates poverty on an ontological level (vv. 33-43). However, misery is depicted in Psalm 107:10 as a consequence of an inverted inner attitude, as a consequence of disobedience to God's words (אִמְרֵי), as stumbling (כָּשַׁל). This scene evokes physical, cognitive and emotional aspects as well[30] and represents misery as a structural dimension of sin. Misery means here the risk to be harmed and oppressed because of the endangering and life-threatening decisions of the community itself. Vulnerability is presented in this narrative as a correlate of violence: this also implies that the members of the group were involved in bringing about the disaster, the proneness to disobedience and sin is something that resides in all of them. The group inflicts harm, and consequently, it suffers from harm.

Furthermore, the verb מָרָה (hif.) "to behave stubborn or rebellious" occurs in deuteronomistic literature, especially in historical reviews (Dtn 9:7.24; 31:27). The pre-exilic prophecy takes up this motif, nevertheless with a special accent: not the people but the leaders themselves were rebellious against God (Num 20:24; 27:14) and failed (Num 20:12). In the post-exilic period this term turns up mainly in the historical psalms (Ps 78 and Ps 106) and in Nehemiah's prayer of repentance (Neh 9:26). It describes the disobedience of the fathers' generation (Ps 78:8) at the time of the wandering in the desert (Pss 78:17.40; 106:7.33) and the conquest of the land (Pss 78:56; 106:43; Neh 9:26). The indirect disregard of God is reflected in the despise (נָאַץ) of his will, that is discernible in his ethical counsel (עֵצָה). God's reaction to this rebellion will be described as a procedural narrative (vv. 11–12): El, the Most High, humbled (כָּנַע)[31]

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[29] Bremer, *Wo Gott sich auf die Armen einlässt,* 320 (Translation N.M. Emphasis in original.).

[30] Isa 3:8; 5:27; 8:15; 28:13; 31:3; 35:3; 40:30; 59:10; 59:14; 63:13; Pss 9:4; 27:2; 31:10; 64:9; 105:37; 109:24; cf. for Isa 25:5; Ps 81:14. The original meaning of the verb is "wobbling or stumbling", which precedes a fall (Pss 27:2; 31:11; 64:9; 109:24, cf. for Lam 1:14; 5:13; Jes 63:13; Isa 59:10.14; Neh 4:4).

[31] Israel's exposition to the humiliation of God is only rarely expressed (Ps 106:42; cf. for 2Chr 13:18; 28:19) whereby not only physical processes but also cognitive, social and emotional aspects are included.

the hearts (לִבִּים)[32] of the people through hardship/sorrow/pain (עָמָל),[33] so that they had to stumble without help (v. 12).

This dynamic unfolds on a universalistic horizon: the breaking of the gates and bolts in v. 16 again recalls Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 45:2), where Cyrus breaks the bronze doors and iron bars of Babylon to bring its power to an end. This redeeming act from the imperial domination has consequences not just for Israel but for the nations as well. Additionally, the intertextual reference, namely the word-pair "darkness and the shadow of death" (חֹשֶׁךְ וְצַלְמָוֶת) in v. 10 occurs outside Psalm 107:10 only in Job 10:21 as the "land without recourse, the world of dead". Alongside the foundational narrative, the psalm's intertextual network expands step by step, transcending the canonical history of Israel.

2.3 Third Narrative: Oppression and Foolishness

The following narrative, namely rescue from foolishness addresses the group as אֱוִלִים. Fools are "[…] people who follow not the path of life that is 'wisdom' and the commandments of YHWH."[34] As Zenger points out, foolishness is "[…] not only a narrowly intellectual, but an ethical concept: someone who walks heedlessly toward death and destroys health, reputation, household, in short, his whole self."[35]

This foolishness implies not only careless speech (Prov 10:8.14.21; 12:16; 14:3.9) but multiple transgressions (פֶּשַׁע Pl.!) in relation to God and to the community, and this way can lead to unpredictable consequences (Isa 24:20; Job 8:4; Ps 39:9). The breach of the law (פֶּשַׁע) is expressed in iniquities (עֲוֹנֹתֵיהֶם) that cause human suffering in many Psalms.[36] To sum up, the foolishness of the people is described here as a consequence of socially irresponsible deeds respectively unethical decision-making processes.

Additionally, the term תָּעַב mostly implies objects that are abominable for an individual or a group. On the one hand, the reluctance to eat (תָּעַב) and the danger of death refer to the Exodus Narrative (cf. for Num 21:5). On the other, severely ill people are also not able to take nourishment (Job 33:20 cf. for Ps

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[32] Heart can be understood here as pars pro toto, but perhaps it is meant as well, that humiliation has a strong impact on the cognitive-emotional centre of the person that can evoke penance and inversion.

[33] עָמָל occurs most frequently in wisdom literature, and it is typical for the later language level of the Old Testament. In the psalms, it is mostly found in the semantic field of אָוֶן and mainly refers to the afflictions that people bring upon other people (cf. for Ps 55:11).

[34] Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150*, 107.

[35] Ebd.

[36] Cf. for Pss 18:24; 25:11; 31:10; 32:2.5; 36:3; 38:4.19; 39:12; 40:13; 49:5; 51:4.7.11; 59:5; 65:3; 69:28; 78:38; 79:8; 85:3; 89:33; 90:8; 103:3,10.43; 109:14; 130:3.8.

102:5). This avoiding behaviour implies religious and ethical aspects as well.[37] This description of vulnerability is related to the opportunity of human self-endangerment therefore and an expression of sin. Vulnerability is seen here in relationship to the hamartiological aspects of sin, an aspect which is so far rarely discussed in Old Testament scholarship.[38] As the systematic theologian Heike Springhart points out:

> Human beings are not only vulnerable with regard to potential violations through other people and other circumstances, they are also vulnerable with regard to their own actions. In other words: Human beings are in danger to become an agent of vulnerability. Following the distinction of ontological and situated vulnerability, I argue for a notion of sin that is related to the ontological dimension of humanity. This means that sin is not reducible to morals and to sinful deeds, but that sin describes the separation of God and humankind.[39]

Human beings are vulnerable not only to harm from others and external circumstances but also to the consequences of their own actions, making them potential agents of vulnerability themselves. This narrative implies that it is not in human nature to overcome its own proneness to sin and vulnerability. The process of healing begins when YHWH sends his word (v. 20), which calls people out of their pit (cf. for Pss 88:4–7; 130:1) near the gates of death (Job 38:17). However, as in the second strophe, there is no deliverance to a final, safe destination here. Different from the two preceding strophes, the closing line of this strophe (v. 22) contains an exhortation to the cultic and symbolic acts of a festival in which the "healing" of this deadly foolishness/sickness is to be celebrated as a restoration to life with sacrifice (זֶבַח), thanksgiving (תּוֹדָה) and "shouts of joy" (רִנָּה). The act of sacrifice and the anticipated integrity of the community functions as a resilience narrative about the horrible, abominable experiences in vv. 17–18. This loud ringing cry is always addressed to God, whereby the rejoicing of the worshipper refers to God's deeds (Pss 47:2; 81:2; 98:4; 105:43; 107:22; 145:7; 149:3, cf. for Isa 12:6).[40] The multitude of subjects rejoicing with regard to these references is striking: The celebration of God's deeds is by no means reserved to a certain group but takes place universally (cf. for Isa 44:23; 49:13; 55:11).

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37 Cf. for Dtn 7:26; 23:8; 1Kgs 21:26; 1Chr 21:6; Job 9:31; 15:16; 19:19; 30:10; 5:7; 14:1; 53:2; Pss 106:40; 119:163; Isa 14:19; 49:7; Ezek 16:25; 16:52; Am 5:10; Mi 3:9. The expression is used only in Ps 107:18 with regard to food.

38 An exception is the article of Andreas Schüle, "All Flesh: Imperfection and Incompleteness in Old Testament Anthropology," in *Exploring Vulnerability*, ed. Heike Springhart and Günter Thomas (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 83–92, whereby the author conceptualises vulnerability not only as a mark of the creation of God but as a correlate of violence, which is inherent to "all flesh." From a current perspective, it can be described as a genetic predisposition for which individuals and groups are not responsible, but which has a significant effect on their actions and life, consequently, it should be part of a realistic anthropology.

39 Springhart, "Exploring Life's Vulnerability," 29.

40 It is different from Pss 17:1; 61:2; 88:3; 106,44; 119:169; 142:7 cf. for 1Kgs 8:28; 2Chr 6:19; 1Kgs 22:36; Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:12, where the term of רִנָּה stands in the context of plaintive cries.

2.4 Fourth Narrative: Shipwreck and the Crisis of Wisdom

The final scenario is much longer than the preceding ones and presents the most fully developed narrative of the psalm. It is noticeable that the transparency of this strophe regarding the redemption of Israel is not immediately apparent. The appropriateness of יָם lies partly in the fact that the non-seafaring Israelites load the sea with mythical significance, which is evident from the intensifying sequence of nouns to describe the sea as "great waters" (v. 23b: בְּמַיִם רַבִּים),[41] "deeps" (v. 24b: מְצוּלָה), "primal floods, waters of chaos" (v. 26: תְּהֹמוֹת).[42] This strophe reflects inter alia the narrato-poetological context of the Psalm of Jonah in Jonah 1–2. The rescue is narrated as an epiphany or theophany: v. 26 describes the upwelling and downwelling of the sea parallel to the journey of the sea travellers, who are lifted up to heaven and pulled down again into the abyss.[43] From a biblical point of view, earthquakes and storms at sea represent two sides of the same coin - the dissolution of the cosmic order set since the beginning of the world (cf. for Ps 46:3-7; 1Sam 14:15). The external upheaval is accompanied by the internal shock (מוּג hitp.) of the travellers which manifests in fear and panic. In Psalm 107:26, it is not always clear whether what is meant here is the dissolution of the cosmic order or the shocked reactions of the seafarer (cf. for Nah 2:7; 1Sam 14:15; Josh 2:9.24; Isa 14:31; Jer 49:23; Ezek 21:20; Isa 64:6). However, the נֶפֶשׁ of sea travellers is seized by panic (cf. for Ezek 21:20).[44] Their "staggering" (חָגַג) and "tottering" (נוּעַ) do not merely describe the swaying of a drunkard (cf. for Isa 24:20; 29:9) but a typical reaction of people to a theophany (Ex 20:18; Isa 7:2; 19:1) or to a catastrophe (Isa 24:19; 29:9; Lam 4:14) and to a drought (Am 4:9, cf. for 8:12). The strophe begins with the astonishment of the seafarers (and those who hear this story in v. 32) about the wondrous works (נִפְלָאוֹת) of YHWH whose power both causes the storm at sea and stops it again (v. 25 and 29) leading to the crisis of wisdom: "and all their wisdom dissolved" (בָּלַע hithpael).[45] In short: in this strophe, vulnerability is constitutive of human existence, and this approach denies any casual understanding of suffering, consequently, the experience of contingency leads to a crisis of wisdom.

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41 Cf. for Pss 77:20; 93:4; 144:7. In other contexts, this image suggests the threatening power of foreign people (cf. for Isa 17:13; 23:3).

42 Cf. for Ex 15:5; Neh 9:11; Job 41:23; Pss 68:23; 69:3.16; 88:7; Jonah 2:4; Mic 7:19; Zech 1:8; 10:11.

43 An echo of this scene can be found in the description of the earthquake in Am 9:5, where the quake is compared to the swelling and ebbing of the Nile (cf. for Job 30:22).

44 In Ezek 21:20, the heart (לֵב) of the people is affected by strong emotions. This does not only mean a part of the human being, on the contrary, it should be emphasized that the whole body is sized by fear and panic.

45 Figurative expression for an overwhelming experience under extreme circumstances (cf. for Ps 69:16). The term mostly occurs in contexts in which an innocent, righteous person is threatened and jeopardized.

After God's miraculous intervention (v. 29), the natural processes would be again transparent to the sensory perception and emotional movements of the sea travellers (v. 29–30). The destination of the journey is "a desired haven" (מְחוֹז חֶפְצָם), a hapax legomenon that is not part of the genuine, well-known Israelite topography. However, v. 32 concludes with an exhortation to exalt (רוּם polel) and praise (הָלַל) YHWH in the "assembly of the people" (בִּקְהַל־עָם) and "in the session of elders" (בְּמוֹשַׁב זְקֵנִים). Walter Beyerlin suggests that the phrase should be understood in light of Sir 6:32–37 as a quasi-institutional locus of wisdom teaching by the "old people" that is, "[…] those who are wise with the experience of years"[46] (cf. for also Job 29:7–8; Ps 105:22). This rescue narrative leads to a public discourse (v. 32) where catastrophic experiences of a vulnerable group can be articulated and reflected, fostering participation based on the fragility of human existence.

2.5 Narrative Ethics of Common Vulnerability

The narrative in vv. 33–43, which takes up earlier vocabulary in a new sense,[47] represents a sapiential meditation on YHWH's working in nature and history, namely on the inconsistent sequence of human prosperity, power and existential trouble.[48]

The meta-narrative presents timeless statements about the perpetual and re-creative power of YHWH. This section precisely shows that not a single narrative stands in the centre of canonical history, such as the return from the exile, but the elevation of the Almighty is important. The motif of the starving people opens a perspective on texts from Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 41:18–19; 43:19; 48:21). The narrative presentation of the differences between the created and re-created worlds points to the qualitative gap between what the people are and what they are about to experience as YHWH's redeeming acts in history. The vulnerable creation of YHWH awaits completion and healing.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the term Israel (or another typical designation for Israel) does not occur throughout the whole psalm. In addition, the above-mentioned narratives are not exclusively related to Israel. Accordingly, the Targum does not assign every strophe to Israel alone: the first strophe is addressed here to the whole house of Israel; the second to Zedekiah and to

46 Walter Beyerlin, *Werden und Wesen des 107. Psalms,* BZAW 153 (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1979), 93.

47 Cf. especially v. 33: "desert" (vv.4 and 35) as well as "thirsty" (vv. 5 and 9); v. 34: "wickedness" (vv. 26 and 39); v. 36: "hungry" (vv. 5 and 9) and "inhabited town" (vv. 4 and 7); v. 40: "track" (vv. 4 and 7); v. 41: "misery" (vv. 10 and 17).

48 It is evident from the context that YHWH is the acting (grammatical) subject although he is never explicitly named.

the leaders of Israel, the third to Hezekiah and the fourth to the seafarers in the Book of Jonah, that is to people from all nations.[49]

Vv. 40–41 describe the anticipated situation of the nobles (נְדִיבִים) and the needy (אֶבְיוֹן): YHWH pours contempt on the nobles (v. 40a) and let them wander in the desert without a way (v. 40b); in contrast to it, he lifts the needy up from misery (v. 41a) and makes his clans like flocks (v. 41b). This pictorial history expresses here a reversal of social structures.[50] The last two verses of the fifth strophe (vv. 33–41) are in a final position and are distinguished from the previous verses because the narrative of vv. 36–39 is interrupted by a participle form (שֹׂגֵב) in v. 40. According to Erich Zenger אֶבְיוֹן can be seen here as a paradigmatic character:[51] the term emphasises the neediness of the poor, namely a struggle with a deficiency that a person cannot remedy by his/her own efforts.[52] Among the opponents of אֶבְיוֹן are the nobles (1Sam 2:8), the oppressors (Ps 72:4), the violent (Job 5:15), the sinners (Pss 37:14; 82:4), and the wicked (Prov 30:14; Jer 20:13). The characterisation of power in the final strophe stands apart both in form and tenor from the previous four. Noble persons mostly have a generous character in the Old Testament (cf. for Isa 32:8; cf. for Pss 51:14; 110:3), however, the image of "nobles" in Psalm 107 appears to refer to persons of position and power with a negative connotation. In Job 12:21, the נְדִיבִים are mentioned in conjunction with "kings", "nations", and "people of earth", thus clearly connecting the נְדִיבִים with rulers and persons of power.[53] The use of the verbal root תָּעָה (Hif.) in v. 40b suggests that the נְדִיבִים may be those who wandered in the desert (v. 4a) and found no dwelling place (v. 4b). According to vv. 7–8, these descriptions are reversed by YHWH's saving action. In vv. 42–43 Psalm 107 introduces a group of the so-called יְשָׁרִים "righteous" that appears just in Psalms 49:15; 111:1; 112:2 and 140:14. The "righteous" are pleased about the social reversals of YHWH, described in vv. 33–41. The inversion of social structures, observed for Psalm 107, is a motif characteristic for the Passover Hallel (Pss 146–150), more closely in Psalms 146; 147 and 149.[54]

On the one hand, vulnerability is presented here as the unavoidable human condition (vv. 33; 39), whereby the wickedness (רָעָה) of the inhabitants is also part of this ontological vulnerability (v. 34). According to that, wickedness implies not only the ruination of a community but self-endangerment as well. However, an understanding of sin that is correlated to vulnerability also

49 Ziethe, *Auf seinen Namen,* 145.

50 Cf. for Johannes Bremer, "Ps 107 als programmatischer 'Armenpsalm' des 5. Psalmenbuches Ps 107–150," in *Jahrbuch der Philosophisch-Theologischen Hochschule SVD St. Augustin: 4. Armut und Gerechtigkeit*, ed. Ulin A. Polykarp, Clemens Dölken, and Patrick C. Höring (Sankt Ottilien: EOS, 2016), 31: the author even calls this transformation a "revolutionary motif."

51 Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150*, 109.

52 Bremer, "Armentheologie," 322.

53 Tucker, *Constructing and Deconstructing Power,* 66–67.

54 Bremer, "Ps 107," 34.

sharpens sensitivity to powers of sin and structural dimensions of sin that become real in the form of oppression (עֹצֶר), misery (רָעָה) and grief (יָגוֹן), unsatisfactory conditions which people can inflict on other people at any time and in any system (v. 39). The term יָגוֹן "grief, affliction, sorrow and pain" has its special place in the lament (cf. for Gen 42:38; 44:31; Esth 9:22; Pss 13:3; 31:11; 116:3; Isa 35:10; 51:11; Jer 8:18; 20:18; 31:13; 45:3; Ezek 23:33) and it means not a discrete physical or psychological pain but a basic attitude towards life, engendered by man-made traumata and the fragility of human existence.

3. Conclusion

Situated vulnerability takes shape in various contexts in Psalm 107 - in the wilderness and wasteland as a journey accompanied by famine, drought and disorientation (vv. 4-9); continued in the darkness of captivity and misery (vv. 10-16) which is followed by a narrative about the foolishness of people (vv. 17-22) and culminates in a shipwreck (vv. 23-32). In the first narrative (vv. 4-9), the question of the causes of vulnerability remains open; however, the metaphor of way refers to human decisions that can increase the probability of its manifestations. The second (vv. 10-16) and third (vv. 17-22) narratives claim that disobedience to God and rebellion can evoke experiences of vulnerability that are constitutive of human existence. These contexts of situated vulnerability are permeated by the "language of the poor" (vv.10, 17, 41) that sheds light on man-made disasters and on oppressive and diminishing structures of power and formulates the need to struggle with them. The fourth scenario (vv. 23-32) denies any causal understanding of human suffering and results in the crisis of wisdom. This is supplemented by the repeated appeals (vv. 8.15.21.31) and the closing strophe (vv. 33-39) of the psalm that represents vulnerability as ontological, as an inherent part of the *conditio humana*, a shared human condition. Consequently, the narratives of the psalm serve as paradigmatic representations for the identity formation of the post-exilic community of Israel and, through their gaps (Leerstellen), can evoke identification processes beyond the canonical history of Israel. The psalm reflects an interest in the foundational myths of the group that determine identity: Who are we, and when and how did we come into being? In other words, what memory landscapes do we hold as a marker of this identity? The psalm reinforces a shared national past, or more correctly, different national pasts, around which different subgroups likely rallied. Commemorating and/or praying the psalm plays an important role not just for the identity formation of the group but its ethical decision-making processes as well, as it evokes a sense of belonging to specific vulnerable groups (e.g. the wanderers, the imprisoned, the poor and the righteous etc.) and add emotional significance to this affiliation (vv. 5; 12; 18; 27; 30; 42). Furthermore,

it confirms common values (vv. 7; 42; 43), encourages joint actions (praising, sacrificing, telling stories, gathering, etc.), and offers a view on the past that justifies these attitudes and activities. Not only can group membership be revised or the meaning given to social categories be modified (vv. 33–41), but identity constructions also need to be adapted as social, political, or economic contexts change, and the identity of the collective may be challenged and endangered by rival groups (v. 2).

Who is wise? - ends Psalm 107. This conclusion shows that the psalm is not only a hymn but a wisdom psalm with historical lessons spelt out for ethical considerations. The last line of the psalm is an open-ended question referring to the mercies (חַסְדֵי) of YHWH explicated in the five preceding narratives: Who is wise and does heed these and understand the mercies of YHWH? The plural form of חֶסֶד - that stands in inclusion with the preceding narratives - argues for the reading and application of the psalm as a poetic discourse through the lens of ontological (shared) vulnerability (vv. 33-39) that opens a universal perspective for the ingroup and outgroup-relations of the postexilic community of Israel.

The wise person has learnt that experiences of vulnerability can serve as the basis for an apprehension of our commonality. Reading the psalm is a process, it is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating narratives and moving along from there. From the subsequent commemoration of these narratives, a transformation process can emerge, rethinking and reframing the international connections of Israel to other people: Is the vulnerability of others also our own? The circle of the *we* can be expanded via gaps and fragmentary narrative structures, and this collective identity formation process remembers and confronts the experience of *common vulnerability*. Furthermore, on the level of recipients two questions concerning the concept of shared vulnerability emerge: If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless, as some might fear? Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another?[55]

In this sense, the commemorative narratives of Psalm 107 can support processes of resourceful imagination and reconciliation. These poetical discourses are couched as prayers that express faith in God, who provides shelter for those who are most vulnerable. Psalm 107 can be a powerful resource since it opens up spaces in which communities can borrow images in order to express their own afflictions and criticise structural inequities and, at the same time, develop a language of hope that leads to a vertical dialogue with YHWH and to a horizontal proclamation before the other nations, respectively children of humanity.

[55] See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso, 2004), 19–49.