

The Spirituality of Psalm 131¹

Kees Waaijman, O.Carm., Ph.D.
Titus Brandsma Institut
Radboud University Nijmegen

Together with psalm 117, 133 and 134, psalm 131 is one of the four shortest psalms of the Psalter and is very much praised for its beauty, its profound piety, its simplicity and its humility. The image of a mother with her child contributes to no small extent to its fame. It is an image which moves and melts the heart of many an exegete.²

Psalm 131 is included in a collection of 15 psalms, which stylistically (their diminutive size and their repetitive technique), content-wise (their relationship to Jerusalem and Israel) and editorially (the superscription of Psalms of Ascent) display certain coherence.³ Psalm 131 conforms to this framework. It appears likely that the one who speaks in this psalm is a pilgrim who, standing before the countenance of Wezer, testifies to her way of life (vv.1-2). As a result of this, the wider community of faith is exhorted to adopt a fundamental attitude of 'waiting' (v.3). It goes without saying that no single consensus exists in relation to the general setting of this psalm.

The construction of psalm 131 is reasonably clear even though opinions do still differ on this point⁴. The psalm consists of two parts. The first part (verses 1 and 2) forms a diptych in which the one who speaks (the 'I' of the psalm) testifies strongly (by means of three negations) that she has managed to refrain from a way of life which is displeasing to Wezer (v.1), and by means of a powerful image, swears and affirms that she stands unconditionally open before Wezer (v.2). The second part of the psalm (v.3) exhorts Israel to adopt this stance of 'waiting'. The name 'Wezer' resounds in the first colon of both parts.⁵

¹ Translated from the original Dutch text by Susan Verkerk.

²For some voices where romantic tones are not absent, see F. Hossfeld & E. Zenger, *Psalmen 101-150*, Freiburg i. Br. 2008, 600.

³Ibid., 391-407.

⁴Despite all of the proposed changes which over time have been made, our interpretation, like Zenger, is based on the Masoretic text, *ibid.*, 596-600.

⁵For this construction see M. Girard, *Les Psaumes découverts. De la structure au sens. Psaumes 101-150*, Québec 1994, 366-368. Otherwise see E. Zenger, in: F. Hossfeld & Zenger, *Psalmen 101-150*, o.c., 600-601.

To a large extent, this short psalm is defined by the image of a mother with her child (v2cd). This image functions in two ways. First and foremost it locates the pilgrim within the perspective of a mother who, together with her weaned child, stands before the countenance of Wezer (v2b). Consequently, the pilgrim applies this general metaphor (of a mother with her child) to herself (v2c). In this way, the general metaphor becomes at once truly concrete and personal: the 'I' that speaks in the psalm is a real mother of a real child. This real and concrete nurturing relationship (which follows the general metaphor) provides a second way of reading the relationship between 'myself' and 'my soul' – but with the eye focused continuously on the relationship to Wezer. How this proves to be the case, together with the arguments for this and what it all means, will unfold in the interpretation, which follows. Because we assume (together with others) that this way of reading psalm 131 is plausible, we believe that the 'I' of the psalm is a woman and therefore when we speak of this person we will use the feminine form of the personal pronoun 'she' and 'her'.

The interpretation, which we are attempting here, directs itself to the spirituality of the psalm. Thus we focus on the events of divine-human relationship, which the psalms so eloquently and powerfully express. Focusing on the spirituality of the psalm is not a luxury. One of the challenges of interpreting psalm 131 is that one can get too easily lost in the imagery of the mother with her child and make this image, rather than God, the focus. As a result, the relationship with Wezer, which the psalm so emphatically stresses in the opening line of v1a, can be too easily lost with the danger that at the end of the psalm the 'mother' becomes God and the 'I' of the psalm takes centre stage. When read in this way, then even the summons to 'wait, Israel, on Wezer' (v.3a) seems to leave a sense of something unfinished, something left hanging in mid-air. The task is therefore to carefully pursue the relationship between Wezer and I-and-my-soul. This interpretation follows the text of the psalm word for word and in doing so hopes to bring to light the spirituality, which lies within, waiting to be discovered. Therefore, we attend very carefully to the way in which we construct our interpretation and do not lose sight of the divine-human relationship, which lies at the very heart of this psalm.

Psalm 131
Song of Ascent
Of David

1. Wezer, my heart is not raised up,
my eyes are not proud,
I do not involve myself in great things
or matters which are beyond me.
2. If I had not levelled and stilled my soul...
Like a loved and nurtured child with his mother,
so is my soul like the loved and nurtured child within me.
3. Wait Israel for Wezer,
from now on and forevermore.

Wezer

Immediately, with the first word of the psalm, the pilgrim addresses God directly with the name 'Wezer'⁶. This is the one and only time in the 15 Psalms of Ascent that a psalm opens with the divine name. However, in the psalter as a whole this is not unusual. Eighteen psalms begin with the name Wezer. Sometimes this form of address ushers in a lament (psalms 3,6,7,38,88,102,141,143), sometimes an acknowledgment (psalms 8,93,97,99), sometimes an expression of trust and confidence (psalms 21,23,27) and sometimes the supplicant presents herself in her innocence (psalm 139) before the face of Wezer (psalm 15). This also seems to be the intention of psalm 131. The pilgrim places herself in the presence of God and by doing so exposes herself to the influence of his countenance.

The psalms open 12 times with the address 'Mighty One' and once again we see a variety of forms: entreaty (psalms 54,63,70,79), call and proclamation (psalms 44,50,60,82,94), confidence (psalm 46) and benediction (psalms 67,72).

⁶YHWH is the 3rd person singular imperfect of the verb hayah which means "being there, making one's Presence felt." Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality, Forms, Foundations, Methods*, Peeters, 2002, 64. Wezer (Wees-er) is the Dutch translation of YHWH. Rather than use the English translation of Wezer (Be-er: be-there) in this text, the translator has opted to retain the Dutch translation of the Name.

Forty of the psalms therefore open with a direct form of address to God as 'Wezer' or 'Mighty One'. As a consequence of this two things happen, both of which resound through the whole of psalm 131. Firstly, the supplicant actively reaches out to God, searching for his attention, for his liberating presence, healing, justice, blessing and grace. Secondly, and at the same time, the supplicant opens herself up to the direct influence of God's presence. This stance, which is at the same time both active and passive, forms the absolute foundation of reciprocal human relationships.

When the pilgrim of psalm 131 addresses God as 'Wezer', she prayerfully and expectantly reaches out to his countenance: 'Wezer'! At the same time she exposes herself to the presence of the One who says: 'I am here'!⁷ Significantly, by addressing 'Wezer' in this way the Name is allowed to resonate through the whole of the diptych of part one of the psalm. The same name, 'Wezer' is repeated in part two: 'Wait, Israel for Wezer' (v.3a). Allowing the name to resound and resonate in this way is one way of responding to the second commandment: 'Do not swear falsely by the name' (Ex.20,7; Deut.5,11)⁸. Therefore, in the first strophe, by means of three negative statements ('I do not...') the pilgrim asserts that she does not unlawfully violate Wezer. However, the psalm is not actually concerned here with the kind of self-aggrandizement which causes people to 'raise' themselves up and be 'haughty' (qualities which stand in stark contrast to the pilgrim's humility), but with the unlawful attempts to conquer and restrain Wezer in his inviolability (v1cd), in his incomprehensible greatness and in his capacity to be otherwise (v1ef). As a result, the calm, responsive and tranquil expectancy of the pilgrim comes clearly into focus. In this sense the three negative statements seem to rise up, like a crescendo, to a point of intensity.

My heart is not raised up

To 'rise up' is to ascend, increase in height, extend beyond oneself, to desire to be more than. When combined with the 'heart' it points to a very conscious and willful movement, which arises

⁷For this reciprocal structure of the name 'Wezer' see K. Waaïjman, *Betekenis van de naam Jahwe*, Kampen, 1984.

⁸Ibid., 96-97.

out of the very depths of a person's striving⁹. This striving upwards can be heard particularly well in some words from Jeremiah: 'We have heard of Moab's pride, he is very proud, of his loftiness, his pride and arrogance, his haughtiness' (Jer.48,29). There are three reasons why a heart that is 'raised up' is considered to have negative connotations. Firstly it is self-destructive: 'Before destruction one's heart is haughty, but humility goes before honor' (Prov.18,12). The heart that 'rises up' desires to go higher and higher....until the relationship with the self actually snaps. Haughtiness is self-destructive: 'Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall' (Prov.16,18). The inflated and proud spirit desires to ascend, higher and higher, wants to have more and more. This unrestrained arrogance leads to an inner floundering, a spiritual collapse - and then comes the fall.

Secondly - in essence - the heart that is 'raised up' disrupts the community. Psalm 9-10 portrays, half-way through the Hebrew alphabet, the figure of the wicked person (Ps10,2-12) in his unrestrained, inflamed 'pride' (v2), someone who is scornful in his arrogance (v4), who celebrates the covetousness of his heart (v3): he swears, threatens, extorts, torments, eradicates and destroys the life of the poor and helpless (v7-10).

Thirdly - in essence - the heart that is 'raised up' disrupts the relationship with the divine: the wicked person who arrogantly pursues the desires of his own heart never calls on the Mighty One¹⁰: 'There is no Mighty One' (Ps.10,4). 'He says in his heart: The Mighty One does not call to account, hides his face' (v5). In his loftiness he pretends to be God. This becomes his undoing because 'your heart is proud and you have said, "I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas," yet you are but a mortal, and no god, though you compare your mind with the mind of a god (Ez.28,2). The heart has reached beyond itself and taken the place of God (see also Ez.28,5.6.17; Chron.26,16; 32,25-26). This is the real source of self-destructiveness. It is an abomination in the eyes of Wezer and ushers in the end: 'Every heart that has ascended too far is an abomination to Wezer. Be assured that it

⁹R. Hentschke, gaba, in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament 1 (TWAT)*, (1973), 894-895.

¹⁰The Mighty One stands for the Hebrew word for God ('El or 'Elohim). The reader is thus invited to recall that it means 'He who is mighty'. See, Kees Waaijman in: *The Psalms - A Way of Life* (1992), 7 (transl. from the Dutch by John Vriend).

will not go unpunished' (Prov.16,5).

When the pilgrim declares in psalm 131 that her 'heart is not raised up', such a witness reaches further than the simple statement of not being haughty. Loftiness of heart unleashes a dynamic which is destructive at the religious level and has disastrous consequences for the way in which a person relates both to herself and her community.

My eyes are not proud

The heart that is 'raised up' is driven from the unfathomable depths of the human heart and mind (Ps.64,6). It is a drive that propels a person upwards, out of the depths, sweeps him away... and then breaks him. Having 'eyes that are proud' affects the ability to observe, to see. The eyes, which are inextricably linked with the affective deep layers of the soul and with the light of life, are destined to stand, 'face to face', with the reality of Wezer himself (Num.14,14; Isa.52,8). Whenever 'the eyes are haughty' they break away from this web of reciprocity: they seek to dominate and look down on others with an arrogant look and in a one-sided manner.

Haughty eyes, eyes that are full of pride and look down on others, are partly to do with having a distorted self-image from which Wezer distances himself. A wise individual offers the following profile:

Six things are shunned by Wezer,
 seven are an abomination to his soul:
 proud eyes, a deceitful tongue,
 hands that shed innocent blood,
 a heart that concocts deluded plans,
 feet that run swiftly to do evil,
 who spreads lies around like a deceitful witness,
 and who sows strife between brothers. (Prov.6,16-19)

The profile of the wicked person is sketched out by means of words, which focus on different parts of the body: eyes, tongue, hands, heart, feet and mouth. Here, the eyes are directly linked with the tongue and the hands. Elsewhere they are compared to devouring teeth: 'A generation with its proud looks and disdainful glances. A generation whose teeth are swords and fangs are knives'

(Prov.30,13-14). So here we also see the ultimately negative connotation of having proud eyes. In the first profile they are linked to deceit, to threatening behavior, empty-headedness, malice, lying, perjury and discord; in the second cameo, they are linked to murder. It is therefore not surprising that haughty, prideful eyes often coincide with the harmful acts of wicked people.

Proud eyes and a heart that is puffed up –
Evil acts guide the ways of the wicked. (Prov.21,4)

As with the heart that is raised up, eyes that are proud are associated with having divine pretensions. It is, after all, the preserve of Wezer to look down out of heaven on the children of men in order to ‘test’ them (Ps.11,4; see 33,13-15). Eyes that are arrogantly superior and disdainful seize and occupy the place of Wezer as judge and sovereign. They imagine themselves to be lord and master and unleash a reign of terror: ‘They scoff and speak with malice, they threaten oppression from on high, they set their mouth against heaven and their tongue wanders over the earth’ (Ps.73,8-9). It is Wezer who shall humiliate and bring down those whose eyes are proud (Isa.2,11;5,15;10,12;Ps.18,28).

When the pilgrim asserts that her ‘eyes are not proud’, this is nothing more than a sign of humility. Eyes that are proud create a dislocation at the religious level with direct consequences for self-relationship and social contact – and vice versa. Unlawful oppression (towards the self and others) sits at the very heart of having ‘proud’ eyes.

I do not involve myself in great things

In general, ‘great things’ point to the great deeds of Wezer (Jer.33,3;Job5,9;9,10;37,5)¹¹. In particular the ‘great things’ during the exodus (Ps.106,21) make Him unforgettable and incomparable. ‘You who have done great things, Mighty One, who is there like You’ (Ps.71,19). These ‘great things’ acquire a totally different tone and significance whenever the wicked boast of being in control of them: ‘Wezer cuts off all flattering lips and the tongue that speaks so boastfully. They say, “By our tongues

¹¹R. Mosis, gdl, in: *TWAT 1* (1973), 939.

we shall prevail. With words as our ally, who can master us?'" (Ps.12,4). Their boastfulness – 'Who can master us?' – is a direct attack on Wezer. Whenever a whole generation (v8), 'children of men (v2.9) speak in such a deluded manner' (v.3), and the wicked strut around (v9), then the poor and needy are in mortal danger (v6), the minions get it in the neck (v2) and no-one can be trusted (v2-3).

The pilgrim testifies to the fact that she does not allow herself to be drawn into this erroneously appropriated talk of divine 'great things'. She does not allow herself to be violated in this way: she does not allow herself to be influenced or surrounded by such talk.¹² On the contrary, she follows the counsel, which Wezer gave to Baruch: 'And you, do you seek great things for yourself?' (Jer. 45,5). This kind of ambition is self-destructive (Jer.45,5).

Or matters which are beyond me

'Things that are beyond' point to the deeds of Wezer which are inexplicable and beyond description, but at the same time leave behind a deep impression: the creation of the human being (Ps.139,14), the exodus from Egypt (Ex.34,10; Ps.78,4.11.32 etc), the entry into the land (Jos.3,5), the return from exile (Ps.96,3), being rescued from mortal danger (Ps.107,8.15.21.31).¹³ Essentially, things that are beyond are 'incomprehensible and, as a consequence, unfathomable'.¹⁴ When the pilgrim speaks of 'things that are beyond her', then such a statement flows out of the very heart of the matter: things are unintelligibly strange, because they are matters, which cannot be fathomed, which lie beyond human knowledge and imagination. Because of their capacity to be so different – so otherwise – and because they lie well beyond the intellectual capacity of human beings, they impose a boundary which no-one is able to cross.¹⁵

The ungraspable strangeness of Wezer in his works can, as the psalms tell us, lead to acknowledge and praise of God. But, at the same time, it can also lead to a blatant transgression: 'What is this?

¹²For the meaning of 'involve' (halak be-) *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew 2* (1995), 550 and 6 (2007), 685.

¹³J. Conrad, pl' in: *TWAT*, 6 (1989), 576-578.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 578.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 570-572.

Why is that?' (Sir.39,20-21). As a result of this, Job was brought to a desperate place (Job 9,10-35). At the end he has to admit that he tried to extend himself beyond his own powers of human reasoning: 'Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know' (Job 42,3). It was literally beyond him. Therefore, the recommendation of the wise person is not to get involved in such strange and inexplicable things and not to get carried away, and ultimately dragged down and burdened by them.

'Neither seek what is too difficult for you
nor investigate what is beyond your power.
Reflect upon what you have been commanded,
for what is hidden is not your concern.
Do not meddle in matters that are beyond you,
for more than you can understand has been shown to you.
For their conceit has led many astray,
and wrong opinion has impaired their judgment.
Without eyes there is not light;
without knowledge there is no wisdom'. (Sir.3,21-25)

Clearly, the mysterious works of Wezer unleash an inquisitiveness, a searching and probing, a dogged-determination, a stressful striving after. Things must be understood, grappled with, got behind and underneath. Sense must be made of those things, which are strange; what is covered up must be uncovered; what is hidden must be exposed; what is beyond us must be grasped and brought within our reach. As a consequence, the human being finds himself lost in things that are too extraordinary; in things that lie outside and beyond him; things that are too much. And as a result of this striving and relentless searching after, he finds himself disorientated and living in a fantasy world. He starts drifting and roaming around. His grasp of reality starts to unravel: he no longer understands what has been entrusted to him and the things that he has been given. The ordinary light of day is no longer seen. The eyes become blind to what actually is. There is no real contact, no feeling. Human understanding becomes senseless and the way to wisdom blocked. This religious-psychological analysis of Jesus Sirach is clear: whoever allows himself to get lost in the extraordinary and exceptional things which are the preserve

of God, reaches beyond himself, enters a fantasy world, finds himself far away from reality, finds himself dislocated and totally disorientated. Jesus Sirach strongly advises his pupils against pursuing this peculiar and dangerous path and to remain vigilant to what has been commanded and what they have been shown.

The pilgrim follows the advice given in Jesus Sirach. She witnesses to the fact that she does not embroil herself and get lost in things that are beyond her. She therefore consciously decides not to lose herself in a religious fantasy world, as a result of which she would find herself deprived of the 'apple-of-her eye', the living-light, and would lose her intuitive sense of wisdom.

When the pilgrim's testimony is seen as something that rises up to a summit, then it is the final statement, which provides the key to understanding the first strophe. This statement actually exposes the essence of the whole of her testimony: she does not allow her will and desire, her powers of observation and intuition to be unravelled by a heart that is raised up, by eyes that are proud, or by allowing herself to get involved in a rather peculiar, mysterious religiosity. She distances herself from this psycho-religious self-destructiveness which impacts directly on moral and social truth.

Therefore, the declaration of the pilgrim witnesses not so much to humility and discretion but to a religious realism which is succinctly described in the words of Jesus Sirach: consider what has been entrusted and given to you, keep your eyes focused on what stands before you in the ordinary light of day and, living in fear of the Lord, learn how to become sensitive and alert to wisdom.

Not...not...not

In my opinion this personal testimony is not some kind of 'confession'. The pilgrim's declarations are much too general for that. The hands and the lips – one's actions and words – are also not the focus here and neither are certain behavioural aspects. It is also not appropriate to speak here about a kind of oath of purification because there is nothing to suggest defilement or desecration. There is also no evidence to support the idea that the pilgrim's declaration provides a way of gaining access to the

sanctuary: there are no admission requirements stated here. The pilgrim stands directly in front of Wezer's countenance. What is important here is the way in which the pilgrim is alert to and experiences her spirituality. Thus, it seems to me that at its heart, the pilgrim's declaration is concerned with the psychosocial stance and psycho-religious self-destructiveness, with all its consequences.

The key question therefore is: what is the function of the three negative statements combined with the emphatic, first and foremost calling out of the Name? When we look closely at this pattern of a recurring number of negatives in Scripture then we discover that it is often associated with the delivery of emphatic statements: promises receive a stately resonance; curses sound extremely threatening; reproach is very strong.¹⁶ What we also discover is that negative statements are combined to give voice to the nature of covenantal loyalty. By means of a stately declaration the covenantal partners are obligated to each other: when Israel carved out a bond with Wezer,

He commanded them saying:
 You shall fear no other gods,
 You shall not bow down before them,
 You shall not serve them,
 You shall not keep sacrificial feasts in their name.
 (2Kings17,35)

Here, four negative statements function within the context of Wezer's own obligations towards his people. The negative phraseology opens up the covenantal space, which is then expressed in a very positive way:

Wezer, who brought you out of Egypt,
 with great power and out stretched arm.
 Him you shall fear,
 before him you shall bow down.
 You shall keep your sacrificial feasts in his name. (2Kings17,36)

The negative statements serve to open up the covenantal space within which an unconditional dedication is expressed (see

¹⁶Three or four negatives appear more than a hundred times. In order to test their intensity see, for example, Isa. 13, 4, 20; 14, 14; 37, 33; Jer. 14, 14; 16, 6; 25, 33; 44, 10; Ez. 5, 7.

Ex.23,24-25; Lev.26,1; Deut.26,13-14 etc.) and the first-fruits are offered as a sign of such dedication. It is therefore in this context that the pilgrim of psalm 131 approaches the countenance of Wezer with her child. She enters into the covenantal space, which Wezer has carved out with Israel. Standing before his countenance, the pilgrim witnesses to the fact that she does not allow herself to be led into a place of self-destructiveness. Eye to eye with Wezer, she affirms that she lives from a stance, which is open and receptive to God's gift of himself. She states clearly that she does not allow her character to become unsettled and twisted but lives in accordance with the reality and truth that comes from Wezer.

Therefore, the three negative statements of verse 1 act to open up the covenantal space which the pilgrim desires to be drawn into. These negatives evoke an image of humility as opposed to being exalted (lifted up, aspiring to go higher and higher). What is surely important here is that the pilgrim does not allow her affectivity (her heart) and what she sees (her eyes) to become unsettled. Neither does she allow herself to get embroiled in great and marvelous things; things that cause her to push herself beyond and above her capacities. She holds onto the reality and truth which come from Wezer himself, within the human web of reciprocity. As we shall see in the second strophe, this is the core out of which the pilgrim's receptivity to Wezer opens itself up.

If I had not...

The second strophe (verse 2) opens with an incomplete statement. The psalmist speaks but does not actually give voice to the second part of the statement which, if actually expressed, would be a curse directed at the self (a self-malediction). In order to be able to taste the effect of this, it is useful to listen to a few complete statements, which culminate in such curses.

If my heart has been enticed by a woman
and I have lain in wait at my neighbour's door;
then let my wife grind for another,
and let other men kneel over her. (Job31,9-10)

If I have raised my hand against the orphan,
because I saw I had supporters at the gate;

then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder,
and let my arm be broken from its socket. (Job31,21-22)

If my land has cried out against me,
and its furrows have wept together;
if I have eaten its yield without payment,
and caused the death of its owners;
let thorns grow instead of wheat,
and foul weeds instead of barley (Job31,38-40)

What should be noted here is that the self-malediction holds fast to the rule of mutual redress: I call down upon myself what I (because of my actions) could have done to another. The meaning is clear: I have absolutely not done that but if I had then I would deserve to be cursed.

With an incomplete self-malediction the second part of the sentence – the part that contains the curse itself – is swallowed up into a silence; perhaps because the actual impact of speaking the words themselves would make people recoil in a kind of fear and trembling. We give a few examples of this out of chapter 31 of the book of Job.

If I have walked with falsehood,
And my foot has hurried to deceit – (Job 31,5).

If I have withheld anything that the poor desired,
Or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail – (Job31,16)

If I have rejoiced at the ruin of those who hated me,
Or exulted when evil overtook them – (Job31,29)

These incomplete self-maledictions also hold to the rule of mutual redress. The first example could be completed in the following way: then for the rest of my life may I be lied to and threatened. The second example could be completed in the following way: then may I be wasted and ravaged by the beggar's staff. Therefore, the meaning of the incomplete self-malediction is clear. People will declare, by means of very forceful assertions, such as: 'If I have done that, may I drop down dead....' Or, 'As sure as I am standing here, I...' Or, 'I swear to you that I...'

So what is it that the pilgrim wishes to assert here with such

force? And who is it that is doubting her? In whose presence must she speak the truth? The presence of Wezer? Or were there others who challenged her authenticity? Before we immerse ourselves in these questions, we listen first to the content of the first part of the incomplete self-malediction of verse 2.

Levelled my soul

‘To make level’ is similar to making something even; for example, the farmer levels the surface of his field (Isa.28,25).¹⁷ Leveling the ground, ploughing and harrowing, forms the principal way of making the ground ready for sewing the seed (Isa.28,24-25). The uneven ground is disturbed and broken up in order to be able to receive the seed. A field that is too coarse and uneven cannot receive the seed and is barren.

Relevant to an understanding of psalm 131 is the role of the Mighty One who assists the farmer with the sowing and harvesting. With an eye to the different sorts of seed and the different ways of sowing them, he instructs the farmer:

‘When they have leveled its surface,
do they not scatter dill, sow cumin,
and plant wheat in rows
and barley in its proper place,
and spelt as the border?
For they are well instructed;
their Mighty One teaches them’. (Isa.28,25-26)

With the eye directed towards the anticipated fruitfulness, the Mighty One teaches discipline and the required ways of working, a component of which involves smoothing and leveling the ground. The instruction belongs to the God of Israel: ‘And this comes from Wezer for the throngs of workers; his counsel knows no limit and great is his care’ (Isa.28,29). In the ‘great and marvelous things’, which are created by Wezer, the feet of the ‘throngs of workers’ remain firmly on the ground. In the midst of the process of sewing and harvesting, and everything, which is necessary for these, is the need for discipline and insight.

In psalm 131, ‘to level’ is used metaphorically: the pilgrim

¹⁷See M. Saeb, sjawah, in: *TWAT* 7 (1993), 1177-1182.

declares with great emphasis that she has 'leveled' her 'soul'. In this context, the field represents the soul, which is made ready for sowing.¹⁸

The soul is a multi-dimensional phenomenon.¹⁹ One of the facets which characterizes it, is its receptivity, its need to eat and drink (Isa.29,8;Jer.32,6;Prov.10,3), and to live in a manner which fully acknowledges the need for the Mighty One himself (Ps.63,1). It is a characteristic of the soul that it reaches out in full expectation to its beloved (Song of Sol.3,1-2). It waits and watches for the Mighty One (Ps.33,20; 130,5-6) and it clings to him (Ps.63,8). Whenever the soul is 'leveled and smoothed' then it is in a state of receptivity. It waits to receive the seed within which is life and fecundity – life that is gifted by Wezer himself. Even the process for making things ready (the preparation) comes from Wezer: 'Grain is crushed for bread, but one does not thresh it forever; one drives the cart wheel and horses over it, but does not pulverize it'. (Isa.28,28).

And stilled my soul

Just like 'to level', 'to make still' (bringing something to a state of rest) are also words which are part of a wider, encompassing process of becoming quiet and tranquil. In that wider process, four moments can be discerned.²⁰

The first moment of stillness occurs as a consequence of an initial shock; for example, the type of shock that follows a disaster (Ez.26,15-18), a theophany (Ex.15,6) or a serious sickness (Ps.31,23). In this process someone is perhaps struck dumb (Isa.6,5), or stands utterly frozen, rooted to the ground (1Sam.14,9) rigid with shock (Isa.38,10).

The second moment of stillness follows on from the initial shock. This is the point at which a person actively enters the silence. In doing this, the impact of the shock is allowed to permeate and be assimilated. It was this type of stillness that characterized the

¹⁸I do not think that we should, psychologically speaking, broaden out 'to level' into something like 'to soothe' and 'to calm down' (see for example H. Krauss, *Psalmen*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1978, 1052), because the problem here is not agitation or turmoil but the 'unevenness' (the striving upwards, the desire to reach beyond oneself). The response to this striving is therefore 'to level' with an eye to receptivity and fruitfulness. The 'levelling out' serves to promote receptivity and is guided by means of Wezer's teaching and instruction.

¹⁹K. Waaijman, *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods*, Peeters, Leuven, 2002, 435-446.

²⁰See A. Baumann, *damah*, in: *TWAT 2* (1977), 277-283, particularly 281-282.

response of Job's friends who, when they were confronted with his suffering, 'did not speak a word' for 'seven days and seven nights' (Job 2,13). This silencing usually occurs alongside other rituals such as tearing one's clothes and shaving the head. In turn, these form part of a broader repertoire of abasement rituals which people use when having to assimilate drastic events into their lives: languishing, almost paralyzed on the ground (Ps. 6,2-3), stumbling around and bent over by the burden of it all (Ps. 38,17), dressing in sackcloth (Ps. 30,11), fasting and keeping vigil (Ps. 35,13).²¹ In this context, becoming still involves having to consciously experience and persevere with being still.

The third moment reveals itself in the silence that has been consciously maintained. It is a movement which rises out of silent expectation and watchfulness: 'It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of Wezer' (Lam. 3,26). A characteristic of this is that the silence knows no other form of support beyond watchfulness itself. It is pure 'waiting' (see Ps. 39,8).²² Indeed, the loss of one's footing (which means waiting without an object or a timeframe), which characterizes the waiting, forms the essence of this maintained silence. Wise people consider that this silence represents the right attitude to life: 'Be still before Wezer and wait patiently for him' (Ps. 37,7). It is through prayer that this quiet expectancy is mastered: 'Only Wezer stills my soul, yes, I am intent on Him' (Ps. 62,5). In a similar way, the psalmist can say: 'Only the Mighty One stills my soul, He is my salvation' (Ps. 62,1).

Finally, the still expectation of the one who waits becomes His silent answer, though this may sound paradoxical. This is implied in psalm 22 by the words: 'O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest' (Ps. 22,2). Here, silence is the experience of the Presence within the cry itself, characterized by calling out the Name.²³ This is the hushed exultation of a Presence, which has not been wrung out or filled in. In this way the silence becomes a celebration.

Which moment of silence does psalm 131 point to? The first moment of silence (involving the initial reaction to shock) does not

²¹See N. Lohfink, "Enthielten die im Alten Testament bezeugten klageriten eine Phase des Schweigens," in: *Vetus Testamentum*, 12 (1962), 260-277.

²²For the relationship between silence and waiting see: C. Barth, jachal, in: *TWAT* 3 (1982), 608.

²³K. Waaïjman, *Betekenis van de naam Jahwe*, o.c., 79-100.

seem to fit here because the text does not speak of any drastic event. The fourth moment of silence (the still Presence) is also not fitting here because it is the one who speaks in the psalm (the first person narrator), who states that she has actively stilled her soul, pointing to a wilful act on the part of the pilgrim. This form of silence therefore comes pretty close to the second moment of silence during which a time of silence is consciously sustained. But it is in this willfully sustained silence, that the silence of waiting (the third moment) begins to germinate. This would seem to characterize the silence of psalm 131. In the second part of the psalm, the 'I figure' exhorts Israel to wait: 'Wait, Israel for Wezer' (v3). We return to this later when we describe this summons.

In connection with this there is yet another point which deserves our attention: the relationship between making level and making still. By means of the caesura at the end of v2a something seems to be left hanging in mid-air: 'If I had not leveled and stilled my soul...' There is an expectancy but without an object. When we consider that 'making level' points to the final preparatory process before the seed is sown then this, together with the enjambment, strengthens the sense of expectancy. In this situation, 'making still' reinforces and supports the waiting. Indeed, in this situation there is no climax, no sought after objective or anticipated end to the waiting: 'If I had not prepared my soul for receiving the seed; if I had not brought it to a point of still expectation,' 'Leveling' and 'making still' strengthen each other in the direction of a receptive and still waiting, during which there is no other foothold, nothing to hold fast to, except the waiting itself.

What is on the line here?

Now that we have explored the content of the self-malediction, we are able to respond to the questions which were posed earlier: why does the pilgrim emphasize so strongly her personal witness? Is her sincerity being challenged? Who stands opposite her? What curse would she have called down upon herself if she had not spoken the truth?

We begin by responding to the last question. As we have seen, self-maledictions (both complete and incomplete) are rooted in the rule of proportionate 'pay-back'. In the context of psalm 131

this means that whenever the pilgrim does not bring her soul to a point of expectant receptivity, then her life ceases to be hopeful and receptive. Rather it becomes hopeless, futureless and barren. But what must be immediately added here is that from the very beginning, the pilgrim is standing directly opposite to Wezer. This gives the self-witnessing of the pilgrim a great charge and clarity. The pilgrim has presented her case to the highest legal body who is able to penetrate her heart and see through to the very depths of her being (see psalm 11). In this respect, psalm 131 appears to be very similar to psalm 139 because here also the psalmist presents before Wezer his truth and authenticity, which have been challenged.

‘Search me, Wezer and know my heart;
Test me and know my musings’
See if the way of the ungodly is in me,
And guide me in the everlasting way.’ (Ps.139,23-24)

In psalm 139, the ‘ungodly’ points to those who worship false gods (cf. v21-22).²⁴

Is it possible that one’s trust in Wezer is actually on the line in psalm 131? This would explain why the psalmist in her self-malediction seems to wheel out the heavy artillery. Whenever the authenticity of my relationship to God is brought into doubt, then all that remains is the strongest form of self-witnessing – the self-malediction. If this interpretation is correct then it explains the reading of the first strophe of psalm 131. In this, the psalmist is not seeking to draw attention to any good behaviour. Rather, she has entered the covenantal space and is actually witnessing to the reality: that she has remained true to Wezer.

Like a loved and nurtured child with his mother

The incomplete self-malediction is connected to the metaphor which defines the character of this psalm: ‘My soul is’... like a child, who with his mother, has outgrown the mother’s breast. The point at which the self-malediction and the metaphor pointedly intersect is with the words ‘my soul’ at the end of the verse.

Meanwhile, the image of the child with his mother raises a

²⁴K. Waaïjman, *Psalmen over de schepping*, Kampen z.j., 93-104.

number of questions (which is what metaphorical language is meant to do!). How do we visualise this child (gamoel)? What is it called? What is it that binds this child to its mother? What is the inner landscape, the inner life of such a child actually like? What function does the metaphor of the mother with her child serve after the self-malediction (v2ab) and with regard to the exhortation 'to wait' (v3a)? What is the relationship of the child to the first person narrator of the psalm?

A good place to begin is with the external image of a child who is in this phase of development. In the following passage, the mother of seven sons, who are to die as martyrs, says to one of her children just before his death:

'My son, have pity on me.
I carried you nine months in my womb,
and nursed you for three years,
and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life
and have taken care of you'. (2Macc,7,27)

Out of this perspective of the mother, three phases of development can be discerned. The first phase is that of pregnancy: the child stays for nine months in the mother's womb. This phase ends with birth. With this, the child emerges from the womb and in the second phase receives the tenderness and safety of the mother's breast (ps.22,9-10). The period of 'suckling' (joneq) then begins.²⁵ The child sucks at his mother's breast (Job3,12; Songs8,1) and the mother soothes her child (Gen.21,7; Ex.2,7.9; 1Sam1,23). A word appropriate for this phase of development is 'nourishment'. From the very first day (Isa.65,20) the child is nourished by the mother's milk (see Gen33,13;1Sam6,7.10).²⁶ After approximately three years a third phase begins in the child's life. Parenting, bringing up a child, marks this phase. At the heart of this phase is the growth towards adulthood: the child grows up, matures, and becomes a strong figure. But in this phase his means of support are still his parents. A key word associated with parenting and becoming an adult is lamad meaning to 'meditate' and 'learn'; to gradually and soberly become familiar with the good arrangements of Wezer.²⁷ This learning

²⁵ H. Ringgren, janaq, in: *TWAT* 3 (1982), 665-668.

²⁶ M.Saeb, 'awal, in: *TWAT* 5 (1986), 1131-1135.

²⁷ A. Kapelrud, lamad, in: *TWAT* 4 (1984), 576-582.

encompasses all facets of life: a job/trade, ritual customs, manners and etiquette. This transition from the second to the third phase of life was usually marked with a feast. It is recounted that Isaac 'grew and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned' (Gen.21,8).

The name for a child in the third phase of life is *gamoel*, a difficult word to interpret and translate because it is derived from a root-word *gamal* which covers many different meanings.²⁸ In the broadest sense it means to respond to someone, freely and in person. This engagement with another person can turn out to be a negative or a positive encounter for the one who is 'received' but there is always some level of reciprocity at work – a move towards or a move away from someone.²⁹ Lying at the foundation of the words which group around *gamal* is the idea of equal and reciprocal transactions between people, like those that occur between partners who seek to relate to each other on the basis of equality.³⁰ This reciprocity implies that through the process of being 'affirmed' by another, one's 'otherness' is nurtured and fed. The self that finds a response in another person acts out of its own centre and in doing so encounters and discovers another 'other'. A person who is received and affirmed by another flourishes and, by means of the reciprocity, matures to the point at which s/he finds herself able to stand independently across from and facing an 'other'. This process of growth and coming to maturity is very important for a good understanding of the *gamoel*. Some people interpret the *gamoel* from the perspective of a 'weaned' child that is released from the breast, whilst others emphasise the process which involves an awakening of a child's independence: through reciprocity, nurturing the child's capacity to stand across from an 'other'. This leads us to the next question: what is the child's inner perspective like?

Psalm 131 emphasises the perspective of the *gamoel*: 'Like a child that is weaned, or, alternatively: Like a child that is loved and nurtured...' When we look at the inner perspective of the *gamoel*, we look first to the past: by means of his mother's milk the suckling has

²⁸See K. Seybold, *gamal*, in: *TWAT* 2 (1977), 24-35.

²⁹The Dutch word which is used here to describe the self/child/soul in psalm 131 is that of 'bejegenen' which means: 'to treat, use or receive someone coolly or warmly; to snub or rebuff someone; to treat someone kindly, use someone well' (Van Dale Groot Woordenboek: Nederlands Engels, fourth edition, October 2008). An explanation of the author's understanding of the verb 'bejegenen' is available in a series of recordings over the author's work on Psalm 119. The recording is available from the Titus Brandsma Institute, Nijmegen.

³⁰K. Seybold, *gamal*, a.c., 32.

grown: therefore the breast has achieved its purpose.³¹ But it is a curious maturity because, whilst the blossom has fully bloomed (i.e. the time of being nursed at the breast has come to an end), the grape on the vine (the *gamoel*) is still small (see Isa.18,5 and Num.17,23). It is as though being nurtured at the breast has brought forth a responsive individual who, in turn, develops the capacity to give and receive the best and to become a child who is able to present his own 'otherness' to the world. Indeed, loving and nurturing means wanting and doing the best for another, and for oneself. 'Whoever nurtures his soul is a kind and loving person' (Prov.11,17; see also Prov.19,17). What is special here is that a person who nurtures another in this way, actually helps to liberate that other from a state of dependency by awakening the 'otherness' that lies within. Just like someone who has been empowered by another finds herself able to recognise and freely make use of her own power. In the process of growth there is always a 'letting go': 'The one who is loved and nurtured at the breast is able to leave the breast behind' (Isa. 28,9). We follow the *gamoel*, beginning with his period as a suckling who, by means of being nurtured by another, discovers his own 'otherness', in all its tenderness. In this transition from the second to the third phase of life, the child's path to the future begins to take shape. The child that is loved and nurtured walks his path into the future with a sense of his own capacity to be an 'other'. He no longer needs to be carried in the sling but walks freely or sits aloft on his mother's shoulders; comes into contact with other children (Gen.21,9); learns to explore his world (Isa. 11,8) and goes through a process of being reared by his parents (1Sam.1,22-28; Isa.28,9-10; 1Kings11,20).³² The 'other' which is cultivated through love and being nurtured, shows itself in the child's capacity to respond to and nurture others, in a growing awareness of affirming and compassionate love and by the increasing capacity to step out as an 'other' and encounter another as a mature being. It is out of this nuanced meaning of 'affirming, responding to, loving and nurturing' that we translate *gamoel*.³³

Now that the external and inner horizon of the nurtured child

³¹It is possible that 'original meaning' of *gamal* is to allow something to ripen, to bring something to maturity (Ibid., 28).

³²See *ANEP 49*; K. Seybold, *gamal*, a.c., 28; F. Hossfeld & Zenger, *Psalmen 101-150*, 0.c. 607.

³³The proper name *Gamoel* can also mean: 'Who has received blessings' (1Chron. 24, 17). See *HALAT*, 189.

has been sketched out, we can consider the nature of the child's relationship with his mother. In psalm 131, the nurtured child is with his mother. In the broadest sense, this means that he remains in her presence: is next to her, against her, on her shoulders, close to her in the vicinity.³⁴ In the child's increasingly expanding world the mother is still an important point of reference. She who continues to keep an eye on her child but more from the side. This image does not conform to the idea of the child being a suckling who rests on his mother's breast, dependent, helpless, still and contented after being fed. It goes without saying that the relationship is warm, pleasurable and secure because there is a conscious investment, a strong desire to continue to nurture the child after he is weaned. However, the characteristic of the child who is nurtured through the love, which he receives from the very start of life, is that his capacity for 'otherness' will assert itself more strongly over time. Both the parenting and 'teaching' are directed to this process. Such an orientation gives shape and content to the way in which the loved and nurtured child actually co-exists 'with his mother'.

Now that we have explored (by way of various images) the world of this child with his mother, we are able to see which aspects of psalm 131 come to the fore. Seen from the context of the songs for pilgrims, a group of psalms to which psalm 131 belongs, it seems plausible that the image of the nurtured child with his mother points towards the pilgrim, who with her child appears before the countenance of Wezer.³⁵ Whether or not the child sits on the shoulders, is carried on the hip or holds his mother's hand when walking is not that important. What does matter is that the 'I' who speaks at this point, stands directly with her soul before the countenance of Wezer, just like a mother with her nurtured child.

Is it possible to make the metaphor even more concrete? We have seen how the psalmist swore that he had made the field of his soul receptive to Wezer and had brought it to a place of expectant waiting (v2cd). Later on we shall see how the pilgrim exhorts Israel to 'wait' on Wezer (v3a). What possible meanings can be drawn out of this parable? I think that two other pilgrim psalms can help us here. The first is psalm 84, of which the last three strophes point to

³⁴ See *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* 6 (2007), 388-389.

³⁵ K. Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, Tübingen 1996, 494-495; K. Seybold, *Poetik der Psalmen*, Stuttgart 2003, 241-243; F. Hossfeld & Zenger, *Psalmen 101-150*, o.c., 601 en 606-607.

the final stretch of the pilgrim's way: entering the temple precincts (v2-3), approaching the altar (v4) and being drawn into the house of Wezer (v5). Worthy of note here is that it is the pilgrim's longing to be 'seen' (v8) and 'heard' (v9) in the courts of Wezer that sustains him on his journey (v4; see also v5) and which the pilgrim's soul passionately longs for. His 'heart' and 'flesh' are at the 'end' of their powers (v2-3). And it is this expectant and receptive 'waiting' which psalm 131 addresses. An interesting detail: the pilgrim of psalm 84 sees how 'even a sparrow finds a home and a swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young at your altars O Lord of hosts' (v3). The pilgrim points to the altar, where these birds can nest safely with their young. In the same way the pilgrim desires to shelter his soul with Wezer.³⁶ This image chimes with that of the mother who, with her child, approaches and stands before the countenance of Wezer. The second psalm is psalm 42-43. Here also the soul thirsts for and yearns to stand before the countenance of Wezer and 'to be seen' (ps42,2-3). The pilgrim does all that he can to prevent his soul from being swept away in dramatic and polarized movements. He speaks to his soul: 'Wait on the Mighty One, for I will continue to acknowledge him who is the liberation of his/my countenance, my Mighty One' (Ps.42,6-7.12;43,5). The pilgrim counsels his soul to adopt a stance of waiting until the Mighty One reveals his liberating countenance which, at that same moment, will also mark the liberation of the pilgrim's countenance. After all, 'waiting' is primarily about 'recognition and acknowledgment'.³⁷ Just like psalm 131, we also see in psalm 42 the pilgrim's relationship with his soul (my soul), in a stance of waiting on the Mighty One. It is as if we hear the first person narrator of psalm 42-43 say to his nurtured soul: allow your longing to be transformed into still 'waiting'. In the same way, the mother in psalm 131, together with her nurtured child (her soul), swears under oath that she has walked this path of waiting with great longing and anticipation. Later on in the psalm she exhorts Israel to walk the same path.

³⁶For a further interpretation see: K. Waaijman, *Psalmen om Jerusalem*, Kampen, 1985, 67-74.

³⁷For a further interpretation see: K. Waaijman, *Psalmen vanuit de ballingschap*, Kampen, 1986, 54-61.

So my soul is like the loved and nurtured child within me

At first sight the second half-verse of the metaphor (v2d) seems to bring nothing particularly new. It appears to be a repetition which we encounter elsewhere in the pilgrim psalms (see, for example psalms 121,3-4; 122,5; 126,2-3; 129,1-2; 130,6). However, on closer inspection, the first half-verse describes in the broadest sense a nurtured child who is with his mother, whilst the second half-verse depicts something that is much more specific and concrete: the nurtured child who is with me. Therefore, the self that speaks in the psalm actually does two things in a single verse. She compares herself in a general way to a mother with her child on a pilgrimage (v2c) and then goes on to assert this image in a more concrete way by describing her own nurtured child (her soul) who is with her on her own pilgrimage.³⁸ The interpretation that arises from this reading is therefore: 'that the one who speaks in the psalm is a real mother, because the metaphor of verse 2d takes up and individualises the more general metaphor of verse 2c'.³⁹ We concur with this reading. This means that there is talk of a double metaphor.⁴⁰ On the one hand, the pilgrim that speaks in psalm 131 sees the relationship with her soul reflected back to her in the more general, everyday image of a mother with her gamoel. And, on the other hand, in this general metaphor of a mother with her gamoel the pilgrim recognises her own journey to the holy sanctuary, which she makes with her own soul. Out of these permeating and repeating images, which depict the relationships between a mother with her gamoel, the self and its soul and the real mother with her real child, comes a growing awareness. And this growing awareness cannot be separated from the real process: the divine-human process of transformation. The pilgrim is not simply on a journey. She stands before the countenance of Wezer and addresses Him. And it is this relationship to God, which gives the psychological dimension its real point. The same goes for the relationship between the self and the soul, which is challenged by means of the relationship with God. Both of these together bring to the fore the many sided image of the

³⁸K. Seybold, *Poetik der Psalmen*, o.c., 241. People can also see the definite article (ha-) as syntactically referring back: 'So my soul is the nurtured child that is with me'. See J. Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible*, Vol III, Assen 2003, 292, note 57. Seybold's and Zenger's readings seem to be the more plausible.

³⁹F. Hossfeld & Zenger, *Psalmen 101-150*, o.c., 599-601.

⁴⁰K. Seybold, *Poetik der Psalmen*, o.c., 242.

expectant receptivity which characterizes the relationship between a mother and her gamoel. Thus, the meaning of the psalm is markedly diminished when it concludes 'that the central message of the text is searching for that which is closest to the psalmist herself' and that the metaphor refers to the association 'with oneself. (...) I am who I am'.⁴¹ In psalm 131 the mother (the self) is not actually pointing towards herself but away from herself to her gamoel (the soul). She guides her gamoel (the soul) to an inner place, to a place of expectant waiting on Wezer.

My soul

Just as the first strophe speaks about my heart, my eyes and the feet which carry me in the world, so the second strophe speaks about my soul. All together, they describe the anthropological dimension of the divine-human relationship. From this perspective, the soul can be seen as the inner space in which the unfathomable depths of the heart, the perspectival ways of seeing by the eyes and the unparalleled agility of human action (see Ecc.6,9) all come together and receive their depth. The soul's space makes the heart, the eyes and the actions not only needy, driven and restless but also sensitive, vulnerable and open to a state of surrender and receptivity. The last – the sensitivity for contact, the ability to change, the capacity to adapt oneself, the waiting and being receptive – forms the focus of the metaphor which the psalm highlights. This keeps the focus on Wezer and his blissful ways. The soul is compared to an affirmed and nurtured child (gamoel) who must learn from his mother (the self that speaks in the psalm and the real mother) how to wait on Wezer (ps42-43). She is the mystagogue who teaches her soul how to open itself up to Wezer. She resembles Hannah who brings her gamoel Samuel to the holy sanctuary of Wezer in Shiloh, after she has weaned him from the breast (1Sam.1,23-24). In Shiloh, Samuel's true life as a gamoel begins: 'that he will appear before the presence of the LORD and minister to the LORD' (1Sam 1,22;2,18) and learn to discern his voice (1Sam 3,12-14), and will be helped to do this by Eli who is his mystagogue (1Sam,3.1). Therefore Hannah does not direct her gamoel Samuel in any single way to herself but to Wezer. Wezer is his future, the reality, which Samuel encounters as

⁴¹Ibid., 242-243.

a gamoel, a learning process which goes on for some years. It seems to me that the gamoel of psalm 131 is not like a weaned child that 'is with you YHWH, like a calming and consoling mother'⁴². Wezer is seen here as the nourishing, nurturing and comforting mother of Israel.⁴³ Rather, psalm 131 'presents God as a mother whose proximity is sought and celebrated by means of the child's own self-will'.⁴⁴ In this reading, the gamoel is not treated like a suckling, who is closely bound up with his mother, but like a free yet nurtured child (the soul) who is released in order to be instructed and educated by the mother (the self) in the way of life which unfolds according to Wezer's will and in a stance of expectant receptivity.⁴⁵

Wait, Israel on Wezer

At first sight it seems that the exhortation to Israel to wait on Wezer (v3) 'is not semantically prepared by verses 1-2'.⁴⁶ This impression is strengthened somewhat by psalm 130 (v7) which contains the same summons and which appears to have been inserted into the text. However, such a literal similarity does not mean that the turn of phrase 'wait, Israel on Wezer' cannot be used appropriately in another psalm setting. What's more, it is possible that psalm 130 took the text from psalm 131. Anyway, we will once again encounter in the B-colon of the closing verse a turn of phrase which also appears elsewhere: 'From now on and forever more' (v3b; ps.121,8b;ps125,2c).

There are three lines, which 'semantically' link the summons to Israel to the diptych of verses 1-2. The first line is the divine name Wezer. We have already seen how the name, when expressed as the first word, provides a sort of over-arching canopy. The Name pervades the self-witness (v1) and the incomplete self-malediction and metaphor (v2). In part 2 Wezer returns as the one to whom the waiting is directed. That is the second line: the waiting. We have seen how, by means of three negative statements which form the

⁴²F. Hossfeld & Zenger, *Psalmen 101-150*, o.c., 607.

⁴³Ibidem.

⁴⁴Ibidem. See also E. Jungel, Psalm 131, in: *Einfach von Gott reden. Ein theologischer Diskurs* (Hrsg F. Mildenerger), Stuttgart 1994, 242.

⁴⁵We agree with Beyerlin who, gives full weight to the specific situation of the the gamoel when compared to the joneq. See W. Beyerlin, *Wider die Hybris des Geistes. Studien zum 131 Psalm*, Stuttgart 1982.

⁴⁶F. Hossfeld & Zenger, *Psalmen 101-150*, o.c., 602.

first strophe, the covenantal space opens up. It is within this space that the pilgrim prayerfully approaches the countenance of Wezer. And it is within this space that the pilgrim emphatically declares that she has leveled and stilled the ground of her soul, transforming it into a state of still expectation. This stance of a receptive expectancy is, as we have seen, the central point of the metaphor regarding the nurtured child and his mother. Thus, 'waiting' is a line, which connects both parts of the psalm. The third line is the covenantal space. The pilgrim places herself before the countenance of Wezer within the covenantal space which has been opened up by the three negative statements. This is the same space within which Israel stands. The pilgrim who speaks in the psalm, together with those in Israel who hear her, do not stand opposed to each other, as individual versus community. Both are simply two dimensions of one and the same thing: the covenant of Wezer with his people. Both are aligned towards and enclosed in each other. We can see a similar interweaving in the other pilgrim psalms. For example, in psalm 121 the one who watches over Israel (v4) is the one 'who watches over you, Wezer is your shade at your right hand' (v5). It speaks for itself that here, a transition is made from 'Israel' to 'you'. In psalm 122, the pilgrim tribes join together to 'witness on behalf of Israel' (v4) and within this collective witnessing a pilgrim also makes his own petition (v8-9). In psalm 123 the pilgrim imploringly 'lifts up his eyes to heaven (v1) in order to pray for us' (v3-4). In psalm 128 a man who lives in fear of the Lord is blessed (v1-4) from out of Zion (v5) and is promised a prosperous future in an Israel, which lives in peace (v6). In psalm 130 a 'self' calls out from the depths (v1-2) and waits on the word of Wezer (v5-6) after which the 'self' – just as in psalm 131 – summons Israel to 'wait' on Wezer who graciously forgives (v7-8). Thus, both the individuals and Israel itself who address God in the pilgrim psalms are, in a variety of ways, linked to each other.

Now that we have established the semantic lines, we can look more closely at the dialogue between the pilgrim and Israel. The pilgrim exhorts Israel 'to wait' on Wezer. Whenever the verb to 'wait' is used as an infinitive (without an object or any time-frame) then the focus is on the actual stance of waiting itself.⁴⁷ It is as though the essence of the 'waiting' sharply stands out: on the one hand there

⁴⁷C. Barth, jachal, in *TWAT* 3(1982), 606.

is an extreme reaching and holding out (ps. 71,14; Lam.3,21) which requires 'strength' (Job 6,11) and on the other side an extreme endurance and passivity (Job 32,16). This active-passive texture of waiting gives shape to its dialogic quality, because the nature of 'relationship' itself is both active and passive.⁴⁸ Indeed, we could say that the stance of waiting itself flows into and permeates the relationship. Therefore in psalm 42-43, the pilgrim exhorts his soul to wait so that the liberation of his/my face (ps42,7.12;43,5) can take place in the coming towards and beholding of the countenance of my Mighty One (ps42,2). The encounter with the countenance of Wezer can only occur in an extreme approach, which at the same time involves a letting go, and a receptivity. And my soul must learn this. It must learn to wait. And it is to this that the pilgrim exhorts Israel: to approach Wezer in ultimate surrender and resignation.

Retrospectively speaking, this waiting throws light on part one of the psalm. Making the field of 'my soul' level means that the very ground of my being reaches out in a total self-emptying to Wezer and his fecundity. The stilling of my soul takes it to a point where it does nothing. This doing nothing leads to an ultimate attentiveness. And it is this which the 'loved and nurtured child', after he has outgrown his immediate relationship with 'his mother', is called to learn: to wait in the sense of: approaching in ultimate fear and trembling. Then the name 'Wezer' resounds: it is a calling out which reaches out in an ultimate receptivity.

But part one also impacts on part two. Almost imperceptibly, the pilgrim has led Israel into the place of a nurtured child, the *gamoel*, because she has exhorted the faith community to adopt a stance of expectant receptivity. Moreover, she takes on the role of 'mother'. It is as if a new Deborah 'rises up' as a 'mother in Israel' (Judges 5,7). Thus, we see a reversal of roles! Since Hosea specifically called Israel 'mother' (even though this mother appeared to be a whore (see Hos.2 and Ez 16)), then this gives to the new Deborah of psalm 131 a critical-prophetic point. Whatever it means, the summons to Israel to wait on Wezer brings the pilgrim and Israel into one-and-the-same stance which requires to be exercised: a reaching out to Wezer in an ultimate desire for God's will, together with a receptivity.

⁴⁸ M. Buber, *Ich und Du*, Köln, 1966, 18.

From now on and forevermore

The turn of phrase, 'from now on and forevermore', which brings the psalm to, an end, also appears in a number of neighboring psalms (psalms 113,2; 115,18; 125,2; 131,3). In what can sometimes seem to be a rather hackneyed phrase, the two contrasting dimensions of time form a complete whole. 'Time' ('et) is concerned with 'a specific time in the cycle of nature, in human life in history'.⁴⁹ The adverb 'now' ('attah) often has a re-capitulatory function, which serves to pull the attention back to the present time.⁵⁰ This collective activity undertaken in a continuously shifting here-and-now (which lies at the knife edge of the past and the future), stands over-against 'eternity' ('olam), and pulls the awareness of time into the distance: both the distant past and the distant future, yet without losing the connection to the present.⁵¹ Both ways of experiencing time (i.e. a movement towards the present or a movement away from it) are complementary and allow for the all-embracing nature of time to be expressed in phrases such as: from top-to-toe; from sunrise to sunset; from the very heights to the very depths etc.

This balance in experiencing time in this way does not remain unmoved in itself. In the sequence 'from now on and forevermore' a climax is set in motion⁵² to the effect of: not only now but in eternity. When we locate the two dimensions of time within our lived experience of 'the way' – both of which have a not unimportant *sitz in leben*⁵³ – then a dynamic becomes visible: a focused attentiveness on this step (now) and at the same time a heart, eyes and feet which extend themselves and reach out towards the horizon.⁵⁴ The dynamic moves in the direction of a broadening out, a loosening of boundaries, a letting go of anxieties. And out of this movement comes a climax, which emanates from 'eternity' and which brings with it a deconstructing but freeing and liberating effect. The dynamic from 'now to eternity' encompasses the 'waiting' which, from each moment, continuously reaches out to the far horizon.

⁴⁹T. Kronholm, 'et, in: *TWAT* 6 (1989), 467.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 467 and 475-476.

⁵¹H. Preuss, 'olam, in: *TWAT* 5 (1986), 1145.

⁵²For this see 'Steigerung' van 'olam *ibid.*, 1147; 1149-1151.

⁵³ *Sitz in leben* is a German phrase which broadly translated means 'setting in life', e.g. the context in which a text is set, or the context within which an individual or a community functions.

⁵⁴For this movement which expands out of and away from the threatening narrowness of anxiety and fear, see psalm 121 (K. Waaijman, *Psalmen 120-134*, Kampen 1978, 17-24).

Both belong together. And this is precisely the essence of the first strophe because despite the pulling power of the pilgrim's longing, she does not allow herself to get drawn into an ecstasy which will leave her soul in a twisted and unraveled state. The pilgrim's heart does not over-reach itself; her eyes do not become 'proud', and in her daily life she does not allow herself to get embroiled in things that are beyond her capabilities. On the contrary, the soul remains firmly on the ground but at the same time reaches out in ultimate dependency and still expectation; just like a loved and nurtured child who is still a bud on the vine and enters willingly into the learning which presents itself in ordinary, everyday existence. In still expectation and step by step, the child binds himself to those ways, which encompass both the 'now' and the 'eternal'. And in the midst of this ordinary life, the focus is kept on Wezer and the child waits on Him. Yes, on Wezer, who is in each and every concrete moment – I am here! But who, at the same time, absolutely withdraws himself from every 'here-and-now', every 'this and that', every 'so-and-so': 'I AM who I AM' (Ex.3,14). It is the task of the nurtured child to learn to live creatively and prayerfully with the tension of the present time, which always encompasses the longing for what lies beyond: 'From now on and forevermore'. This is the stance of the pilgrim, this is the waiting of Israel: to be transformed, step by step, in the name 'Wezer'.

Review

We set out to interpret and discover the spirituality, which lies within psalm 131. In this review we will summarize briefly what we have unearthed in the text. If our interpretation is correct then the spirituality of psalm 131 has the following profile.

1. From the very first word of the psalm, and in the whole of part one, Wezer stands at the centre and is also the object of the waiting, which is the central focus of part two. Wezer is the one who is addressed and anticipated. With the name 'Wezer', the whole history of Wezer with his people enters the poem.
2. The self that addresses Wezer, who is involved with Wezer, is characterized by four essential anthropological details: the

heart, which lies at the center of human knowledge, desires, thinking and actions; the eyes which are linked to the center and observe, make contact and look around; the feet which carry a person into the world and which lead to a realization of his life path and behavior; the soul, the sensitive and needy inner space which, in surrender, makes itself ready to receive the seed.

3. The divine-human relationship, which occurs in the covenantal space and is carved out by means of the pilgrim's negative assertions. The pilgrim who enters this covenantal space is a mother who, together with her child, stands before the countenance of Wezer in the holy sanctuary of Jerusalem.
4. The dynamic of the relationship appears to be a pilgrimage during which the pilgrim distances herself from the things that are a desecration to Wezer (over-reaching herself, looking down on others and pushing beyond her capabilities) and, by means of a process of leveling, stilling and waiting, journeys towards a reciprocal encounter, towards the countenance of Wezer. This type of encounter requires an active-passive stance on the part of the heart, eyes, feet and soul.
5. A key characteristic of the psalm is its spiritual and psychological realism. The pilgrim resolutely distances herself from an exalted form of spirituality, which extends beyond itself. However, at the same time, she does not allow herself to tumble down into a form of subdued quietism. Her spirituality is lived out within the paradox of an extended waiting and receptivity to the movements of the present moment. (cf. psalms 42-43;63;84). This realism also counters the rather too romantic image of 'a child who has drunk and rests at the breast of his mother'. Rather, the image in the psalm is that of a child who, with his mother, approaches the countenance of Wezer. Just like Samuel, this nurtured child can learn to discern the voice of Wezer in a life-long journey of maturation. And his mother is just like Hannah; a woman who understands very well the path that her loved and nurtured child (and her soul) need to take. Indeed 'a mother has risen up in Israel' who, as female wisdom, emphatically urges the way of spiritual realism: To wait, in complete

surrender and receptivity, on Wezer in the ordinary and daily events of life.

Bibliography

- Barth, C. "jachal," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 3 (1982), 608.
- Baumann, A. "damah," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 2 (1977), 277-283, particularly 281-282.
- Beyerlin, W. *Wider die Hybris des Geistes. Studien zum 131 Psalm*. Stuttgart: 1982.
- Buber, M. *Ich und Du*, Köln: 1966.
- Conrad, J. "pl," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 6 (1989), 576-578.
- Fokkelman, J. *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible Vol. III*. Assen: 2003.
- Girard, M. *Les Psaumes découverts. De la structure au sens. Psaumes 101-150*. Québec, 1994.
- Hentschke, R. "gaba," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 1 (1973), 894-895.
- Hossfeld, F. & Zenger, E. *Psalmen 101-150*. Freiburg: i.Br:2008.
- Jungel, E. "Psalm 131," in *Einfach von Gott reden. Ein theologischer Diskurs*. Hrsg F. Mildenerger. Stuttgart (1994), 242.
- Kapelrud, A. "lamad," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 4 (1984), 576-582.
- Krauss, H. *Psalmen*. Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1978.
- Kronholm, T. "'et," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 6 (1989), 467.
- Lohfink, N. "Enthielten die im Alten Testament bezeugten klageriten eine Phase des Schweigens," in *Vetus Testamentum*, 12 (1962), 260-277.
- Mosis, R. "gdl," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 1 (1973), 939.
- Preuss, H. "'olam," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 5 (1986), 1145.
- Ringgren, H. "janaq," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 3 (1982), 665-668.
- Saeb, M. "sjawah," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 7 (1993), 1177-1182.
- _____. "'awal," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 5 (1986), 1131-1135.
- Seybold, K. "gamal," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 2 (1977), 24-35.

- _____. Die Psalmen. Tübingen: 1996.
- _____. Poetik der Psalmen. Stuttgart: 2003.
- The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew 2, (1995).
- The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew 6 (2007).
- Waaijman, Kees. Spirituality, Forms, Foundations, Methods. Leuven: Peeters 2002.
- _____. Betekenis van de naam Jahwe. Kampen: 1984.
- _____. The Psalms – A Way of Life, transl. from the Dutch by John Vriend, 1992.
- _____. Psalmen over de schepping, Kampen z.j., 93-104.
- _____. Psalmen om Jerusalem. Kampen: 1985.
- _____. Psalmen vanuit de ballingschap. Kampen: 1986.
- _____. Psalmen 120-134. Kampen: 1978.