# Lament and the Construction of Identity in the Psalms

SOTS Summer Meeting 2018, Durham 17th July 2018

Rev’d Dr Simon P. Stocks, St Augustine’s College of Theology [s.stocks@staugustinescollege.ac.uk](mailto:s.stocks@staugustinescollege.ac.uk)

**Introduction**

* How did the psalms of lament shape the self-understanding of the Israelites who used them in worship?
* De Vito: ancient constructions of personal identity are based on social roles and relationships.

**Cottrill**

* *Language, Power, and Identity in the Lament Psalms of the Individual* (LHBOTS 493; London: T&T Clark, 2008).
* Narrative identity, expressed dialogically.
* Shame/honour framework gives rise to competing narratives of social diminishment and dominance/aggression.
* Critical of laments as ‘dangerous in their desire to enlist God as a personal champion in order to relieve suffering by imposing suffering.’

**Questioning Cottrill**

* Is God’s ‘violence’ the same as human violence? What is the eschatological perspective?
* Surrendering Retribution (Firth)
* Openness of figurative language.
* Shaping emotive responses or expressing them?
* Expressive function vs. ideological communication.
* ‘obscures the humanity of the one he prays against’?

**Buber**

* No ‘I’ other than as part of ‘I-Thou’ or ‘I-It’. ‘Man becomes an I through a You’
* Personal images for God.
* Psalmist’s experience of the dehumanizing behaviour of ‘enemies’.
* Does the psalmist similarly objectify the enemies, or allow them to remain as people to relate to?
* Relating to the absolute ‘Thou’ of God necessarily embraces and envelops all things.

**Social Setting**

* Private community settings (Gerstenberger).
* Known enemies in an ongoing community context – necessary for the shame/honour framework to have any significance.
* Ongoing relationship, albeit impaired, which demands authenticity.
* Relating to a threatening Thou is vulnerable, thus shaping the narrative that shapes identity.

**Conclusions**

* Genuine relationship with ‘enemies’ – they are not dehumanized.
* Dominance of relationship with God and call for justice is not equivalent to human violence.

**Bibliography**

Braiterman, Z.J., ‘Martin Buber and the Art of Ritual’, in M. Zank (ed.) *New Perspectives on Martin Buber* (Religion in Philosophy and Theology 22; Tübingen: Mohr Sieback, 2006), 111-24.

Buber, M., *I and Thou.* Trans. W. Kaufmann (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1970).

\_\_\_\_\_\_ *Right and Wrong: An Interpretation of some Psalms.* Trans. R.G. Smith (London: SCM, 1952).

Brettler, M.Z., ‘Those who Pray Together Stay Together: The role of Late Psalms in Creating Identity’, in M.S. Pajunen & J. Penner (eds.) *Functions of Psalms and Prayers in the Late Second Temple Period* (BZAW 486; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 279-304.

Cottrill, A.C., *Language, Power, and Identity in the Lament Psalms of the Individual* (LHBOTS 493; London: T&T Clark, 2008).

Dietrich, J., ‘Human Relationality and Sociality in Ancient Israel: Mapping the Social Anthropology of the Old Testament’, in E.-M. Becker, J. Dietrich & B.K. Holm (eds.) *“What is Human?”: Theological Encounters with Anthropology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 23-44.

Eidevall, G., ‘Images of God, Self, and the Enemy in the Psalms. On the Role of Metaphor in Identity Construction’, in P. Van Hecke (ed.) *Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium CLXXXVII; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), 55-65.

Firth, D.G., *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms: Responses to Violence in the Individual Complaints* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).

Friedman, M.S., *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue.* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1955).

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue.* (4th edn.; Abingdon: Routledge, 2002).

Hobbs, T.R., ‘Reflections on Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations’, *JBL* 116.3 (1997), 501-503.

Hwang, J., ‘“How Long will My Glory be Reproach?”: Honour and Shame in Old Testament Lament Traditions’, *OTE* 30.3 (2017), 684-706.

Janowski, B., *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms* Trans. A. Siedlecki (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013).

Katz, S.T., ‘Martin Buber in Retrospect’, in M. Zank (ed.) *New Perspectives on Martin Buber* (Religion in Philosophy and Theology 22; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 255-66.

Olyan, S.M., ‘Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations in Ancient Israel and Its Environment’, *JBL* 115.2 (1996), 201-218.

Stocks, S.P., ‘”Children, Listen to Me.”: The Voicing of Wisdom in the Psalms’, in D.G. Firth & L. Wilson (eds.) *Exploring Old Testament Wisdom: Literature and Themes* (London: Apollos, 2016), 194-204.