

BIBLIOTHECA EPHEMERIDUM THEOLOGICARUM LOVANIENSIVM

CCCIX

NETWORKS OF METAPHORS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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PEETERS
LEUVEN – PARIS – BRISTOL, CT
2020

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METAPHORS OF SPACE AND TIME

IMAGINING STABILITY IN THE FOURTH BOOK OF PSALMS

At the end of the third book of psalms (Psalms 73–89), Psalm 89 laments the loss of the Davidic kingdom and with it a stable political and religious frame. Consequently, the fourth book starts with the question of gaining stability. Looking for an answer, the psalms focus on God as an assurance of their hope when they try to (re)establish the concept of earthly and human stability¹. In this process, metaphors of space and time play an important role. They are used to confirm well-known concepts of stability but they also introduce new perspectives. The network of spatial and chronological metaphors in the fourth book of psalms (Psalms 90–106) offers insights into concepts of stability and reveals, how the psalms envision continuity and stability, despite all experiences of unpredictability and human fragility.

I. SPATIAL CONCEPTS OF STABILITY

When the psalms envision the world, they construct a spatial concept by reflecting their experience of physical, social and religious space. The construction of space thus mirrors the hopes and fears of the lyrical speakers, it is part of their retrospection and it is also a sphere where new imaginations, hopes, and dreams are shaped, which may even rearrange the world². The psalms show that spatial concepts are not static; rather, the construction of space is a process. When the lyrical speaker envisions the ongoing creation of space, he/she artfully arranges selected spatial elements to an overall picture. Furthermore, space is also presented as a synthesis, an insight into given constellations and their evaluation in relation to an idealised spatial concept. Such an insight is based on a selective perception focusing on specific spatial elements while ignoring others. Hence, synthesis like spacing is a creative activity producing new patterns

1. D. TUCKER, *The Ordered World of Psalm 92*, in *OTE* 32 (2019) 358-377.

2. The idea that space is a social construction has been emphasised by works of the so-called “critical spatiality”. E.g., H. LEFEBVRE, *The Production of Space*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991; E. SOJA, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2007.

of spatial orientation³. In this way, synthesis proves to be an important aspect affirming and encouraging actions of spacing. It also provides the basis for creating a “Thirdspace”, a space of resistance and the possibility to engage in divergent ways of spacing⁴.

In the metaphorical images of Psalms 90–106, two different spatial aspects are frequently mentioned. On a cosmic level, they highlight the synthesis that the world is firmly established and will not be shaken. Stability is presented as a well-ordered space, which God establishes, provides and maintains. On a personal level, spatial stability focusses on the vision of safe and stable places for the people (“Thirdspace”). In metaphorical expressions, God is experienced as such a stable space people may come to and find refuge. However, neither the stability of the world nor the stability of human life is taken for granted or widely experienced; thus it remains a desirable good. Looking for stability in a volatile world, the psalms form a network of metaphors connecting different point of views and thus allowing the readers to envision the divine space as an antitype to human space, but nonetheless, as a “Thirdspace” they are looking for.

1. “Majestic Is YHWH on High”: God’s Own Space

Descriptions of God’s own space in Psalms 90–106 use different metaphors. One of the most prominent images is God’s space in the height (Ps 92,9; 93,4; 102,20; 104,3). This image envisions God’s position in opposition to humans or any other forces. The height emphasises YHWH’s sublime position, enabling him to overlook the world, dominate it and guarantee its stability⁵. In this way, the metaphorical image of God in the height offers an orientation, summarising the divine superiority with the spatial metaphor UP IS GOOD/SUPERIOR⁶. As each psalm uses the metaphorical

3. According to the theoretical approach of Martina Löw, spaces are created by “spacing”, arranging social goods and people, and “synthesis”, the combination of different elements through perception. Spatial actions and spatial structures are mutually dependent; thus, creating and perceiving space is inextricably linked. See M. Löw, *Einführung in die Stadt- und Raumsoziologie*, Opladen, Budrich, 2008, pp. 63-65.

4. Soja calls such a concept “thirdspace”. This space “is an act of resistance, a way of using space that points out its constructed nature [...]. Thirdspace always presents possibilities for resistance, for popular activity that redefines the realities of space”. J. BERQUIST, *Introduction: Critical Spatiality and the Uses of Theory*, in C.V. CAMP – J.L. BERQUIST (eds.), *Constructions of Space I: Theory, Geography, and Narrative* (LHB/OTS, 481), London, T&T Clark, 2007, 1-12, p. 5.

5. F. HARTENSTEIN, *Die Unzugänglichkeit Gottes im Heiligtum: Jesaja 6 und der Wohnort JHWHs in der Jerusalemer Kultradition* (WMANT, 75), Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 1997, p. 47.

6. G. LAKOFF – M. JOHNSON, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 14-17.

image in a slightly different way, the repeated usage not only highlights this spatial metaphor but it also creates a network of related images.

Ps 93,4 uses this metaphor in the most general way by presenting God as being superior to all majestic forces: “Majestic is YHWH on high”. The powerful image of the mighty waters, with its splendid and threatening aspects, is surpassed by YHWH’s majesty⁷.

While Psalm 93 emphasises God’s superiority in general, Ps 92,9 contrasts God’s chronological and spatial stability with the volatile success of the wicked and evildoers, who sprout like grass (v. 8). Although they quickly thrive and successfully cover the space, their obvious prosperity is doomed to end. Their spatial success thus is put into perspective by their limited time. In sharp contrast to their fate, v. 9 points out God’s spatial and chronological superiority: “But you (are) on high (מרומ) forever (עולם)”. From the lyrical speaker’s point of view, stability can only be found with YHWH.

Ps 102,20 also uses the metaphor UP IS SUPERIOR in the context of a threatening situation, but it goes beyond a general comparison of the enemies and God, envisioning a divine intervention. “For YHWH looked down from the height of his holiness / from heaven he looked upon the earth”. In the context of Psalm 102, the image of God in the height points out God’s distance from the earth to emphasise the divine overview of the earth, which in turn leads to the vision that God is able to intervene from above, that is outside the spatial range of human activities. God’s course of action thus clearly differs from human possibilities and surpasses them.

The divine space on high places God in a position beyond human reach, it is God’s exclusive space, and simultaneously, it endows him with the unlimited use of the vertical dimension. The metaphorical image of God’s space in the height thus emphasises God’s independence from any human and earthly constraints. In this way, the image of God’s own, exclusive space lays the foundation for the confidence, that God is able to organise earthly space and to provide a stable environment for humans⁸.

7. Ps 93,4 highlights in a climactic stair like parallelism God’s superiority. First, the waters’ voices and their majesty are pointed out in form of a comparison, without mentioning whom or what they are compared with. Hence, the sole emphasis lies on the mighty waters, before the third line mentions God as superior force putting a special emphasis on YHWH as the final element of the verse. See S.A. GELLER, *Myth and Syntax in Psalm 93*, in N.S. FOX – D.A. GLATT-GILAD – M.J. WILLIAMS (eds.), *Mishneh Todah: Studies in Deuteronomy and Its Cultural Environment in Honor of Jeffrey H. Tigay*, Winona Lake, IN, Eisenbrauns, 2009, 321-331, pp. 326-327.

8. Another metaphor used to highlight the stability of God’s space is the image of the divine thrones. In the context of the metaphor “God is king” the throne represents God’s reign (Ps 93,2), and its stability indicates the permanence of God’s kingly rule.

2. “He Established the Earth on Its Foundations”: God as a Master Builder

In the textual world of the fourth book of psalms, the master builder of the human world is God. The firm resolution, that his divine power determines the existence of the world and the stability of its inhabitants, is frequently emphasised and joyfully proclaimed (e.g., Ps 93,1; 96,10). So, for example, the metaphorical image used in Ps 104,5 envisions God acting like a builder, who lays the foundation (יָסַד) of the earth or, according to Ps 102,26, makes the heavens with his hands⁹. A similar image is also applied to God (re)building (בָּנָה) Zion (Ps 102,17). When the activity of a builder is applied to God, unlimited divine possibilities blend with the craftsmanship of a master builder, enhancing the imagined builder’s competence and reliability. Hence, the confidence in the building and its stability is likewise increased.

Furthermore, the image of God as a master builder is closely connected to the metaphor GOD IS KING. Within this image, the task of a master builder is just one of numerous royal functions¹⁰. When Psalm 93 and the following Psalms 95–99 unfold this metaphor further, it becomes clear, that one major function of the divine king is to guarantee the world’s stability. Repeatedly, these psalms express the confidence, that the world will stand firm (כָּךְ)¹¹ and will not be shaken (מוֹט)¹². With this statement, the psalms reveal a fundamental hope for the entire, inhabited world (תָּבֵל). In the realm of the speaker of these psalms, God’s kingdom manifests itself in the stability of the earth¹³.

The close links between the images of God’s own space, his space-building activities and royal reign establish a metaphorical network presenting and explaining God’s superiority and unlimited ability to act.

3. “You Are My Dwelling Place”: God as a Stable Space for the People

More than in God’s own space, however, the psalms are interested in images of a stable space for humans. Several metaphors envision God as a secure place for the people, blending images of natural and man-made

9. See also Isa 48,13; 51,13.16; Ps 8,4.

10. With this metaphor, the image of the stability God may provide is widened. The king is not only responsible for spatial stability, but also for the stability of society, the implementation of justice and righteousness, as well as for protection from hostile forces.

11. E.g., Ps 90,17; 93,1.2; 96,10; 99,4; 101,7; 102,29; 103,19.

12. E.g., Ps 93,1; 96,10; 104,5.

13. See M. LEUENBERGER, *Konzeptionen des Königtums Gottes im Psalter: Untersuchungen zu Komposition und Redaktion der theokratischen Bücher IV–V im Psalter* (Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments, 83), Zürich, Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2004, p. 142.

structures, which provide stability, with God. These metaphors are quite prominent in the Psalms 90–104, offering varied, yet networked images of such a divine space.

Already Psalm 90, the first psalm in the fourth book of psalms, puts an explicit emphasis on the concept of stability. Ps 90,1 opens with a metaphor of spatial stability: “Lord, you have been a residence (מעון) for us”. The term מעון describes a dwelling place, it is frequently used in connection with wild animals¹⁴, but it also may designate a human habitat (2 Chr 36,15) or even refer to YHWH’s dwelling place¹⁵. If מעון is used in a metaphor, it adds the basic image of a dwelling place as a (permanent) place of residence or retreat. But it might also bring in further information, depending on whose dwelling place it is. From a human perspective, animal dwellings may become a menace if they threaten to replace a human settlement (Jer 9,10; 10,22; 49,33; 51,37); while God’s dwelling place, on the other hand, appears as a highly desirable place (e.g., Deut 33,27; Ps 71,3). In contrast to a human habitat, which is always volatile, God’s dwelling place is imagined as an epitome of security where people might find refuge. In this line of thought, the longing for a safe habitation is expressed with the metaphor GOD IS A DWELLING PLACE. The lyrical speaker’s hope of experiencing God as space exceeds the reality of an earthly space by blending it with a spiritual experience, a religious encounter. There-with the psalm creates a new, a “Thirdspace”, where the yearning for stability might be fulfilled. Despite the risks and shortcomings of an earthly and human space, the security people may find in God, opens such an alternative space.

The image of God guaranteeing stability and safety against all threats is the central metaphor in Psalm 91¹⁶, where it is presented in several variations and from the perspective of different speakers. Together they form a metaphorical network offering a reliable and safe space. First, a heterodiegetic speaker opens the psalm with two statements introducing the main image: “Dwelling in the hiding place (סתר) of the Most High, he will pass the night in the shadow (צל) of the Almighty” (v. 1). While the verbs used, suggest that somebody is living with God¹⁷ (like

14. E.g., Amos 3,4; Nah 2,12; Ps 104,22; Job 37,8; Song 4,8.

15. E.g., Deut 26,15; 1 Sam 2,29.32; Jer 25,30; Zech 2,17; Ps 26,8; 68,6; 2 Chr 30,27; 36,15.

16. Like Psalm 90, this psalm starts (vv. 1-2) with the metaphorical reassurance that God is a safe and stable place.

17. Ps 91,1 uses the terms עלין and שרי in a parallelism, thus putting Elyon’s hiding place and Šadday’s shadow on the same level. These aspects accumulate, and, as Hunziker points out, are subsumed under the image of Adonay (v. 2). See R. HUNZIKER-RODEWALD, *Bild und Wort im Gespräch mit Gott: Gedanken zur Kommunikationspragmatik in Psalm 91*, in W. GRÄB – J. COTTIN (eds.), *Imaginationen der inneren Welt: Theologische, psychologische*

a guest)¹⁸, the specified places suggest a divine hiding place, where someone may not only stay undiscovered but where he/she is hidden and thus protected by God¹⁹. These metaphors are then continued, calling God refuge (מחסה, vv. 2 and 9), fortress (מצודה, v. 2), and dwelling (מעון, v. 9). The variety of different metaphorical expressions highlights several aspects of the hoped for stable space: it offers refuge, it is a hiding place or a place difficult to access, so dangerous forces and enemies cannot reach it. Such a separate place is an ideal dwelling place. Furthermore, the metaphorical images hint that God's space is accessible only to the lyrical speaker and people like him. A second, anonymous speaker joins the first speaker in v. 3, encouraging and confirming the first speaker's hope in God by unfolding the divine actions of protection and rescue. Therein, the metaphor of God's wings²⁰ (v. 4) complements the cluster of spatial images of stability. In contrast to the other metaphorical spaces, this image emphasises the aspect of active protection that may be experienced in the close proximity to God. The metaphorical variation highlights the confidence that God will offer protection and stability²¹. Twice (vv. 1-2 and 9), these metaphorical images of God as a stable place, offering shelter, function as a summary, that is followed by examples of threatening situations God will rescue from. The security of the divine space forms a sharp contrast to the dangers and the instability experienced. Psalm 91 claims that it is possible to remain in God's space and thus to elude the dangers. The images create and unfold an extensive and detailed alternative space ("Thirdspace"), offering the experience of stability and security²².

The metaphors of God as a stable space are repeated in the following psalms, although not with the same intensity. Ps 92,16 picks up this basic image with the metaphor GOD IS MY ROCK (צור), thus recalling the elaborate images of Psalm 91 and highlighting the stability God offers²³. In addition

und ästhetische Reflexionen zur spirituellen Dimension der Kunst (Religion – Ästhetik – Medien, 3), Frankfurt a.M., Lang, 2012, 123-140, pp. 127-128.

18. F.-L. HOSSFELD – E. ZENGER, *Psalmen 51–100* (HTKAT), Freiburg i.Br. – Basel – Wien, Herder, 2000, p. 621.

19. The protective shade is metaphorically ascribed to the king (e.g., Judg 9,15; Lam 4,20) and God (Isa 49,2; 51,16; Hos 14,8-9). See M.E. TATE, *Psalms 51–100* (WBC, 20), Waco, TX, Word Books, 1990, p. 104.

20. See O. KEEL, *Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte Testament: Am Beispiel der Psalmen*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996, pp. 170-172.

21. This line of thought is also complemented by the metaphors of God as shield and buckler (v. 4); or God (re)arranging the spatial order in favour of the one who needs help (vv. 12-13; see Ps 106,9).

22. Unlike Psalm 104, that offers a well-ordered concept of the world, Psalm 91 presents a space which can only be experienced in hopeful confidence.

23. This frequently used metaphor occurs three times in the fourth book of psalms (Ps 92,16; 94,22; 95,1).

to the metaphors used in Psalms 90 and 91, a rock evokes images of a stable, natural formation that does not need construction measures. In Ps 92,16, the metaphor is part of the final summary, envisioning the joyful fate of the righteous. The foundation of their success lies in their proclamation of God's stability, of God as their experienced alternative space.

In a similar way, Ps 94,22 uses the metaphor GOD IS MY ROCK to express a hope despite all perils and enemies. The past experience of God as a stronghold, confirms the lyrical speaker in his/her confidence that the construction of God as a "Thirdspace" still holds strong. In v. 22 the metaphor of God is specified as "rock of my (secure) height/retreat" and, furthermore, it is complemented by another metaphor, i.e., GOD IS A SECURE HEIGHT/FORTRESS/STRONGHOLD (מִשְׁגָּב). The underlying image is the security of a height, an unreachable place²⁴. In this way, the basic image is specified, emphasising the stronghold as a place up high, offering refuge in times of a crisis²⁵. It is a space outside the realm of danger.

Psalms 95 immediately continues the image of Psalm 94 as it addresses a joyful praise to YHWH, who is metaphorically called "rock of our salvation (יִשְׁעֵי)". The specification "our salvation" blends a stationary and a dynamic image, whereby the stability and permanence of the rock is transferred to the event of the salvation. In this way, salvation becomes accessible, it may be climbed like a rock. Salvation is not imagined as a one-time event, but an ongoing, permanently available space. The metaphor thus refers to an already existing and ongoing relation between God and the people. In the song, this psalm invites his audience to join in; this "Thirdspace" is remembered, experienced and proclaimed.

Another metaphor in Ps 95,7 further supplements the network of images of God as a stable place for his people. Here, the well-known images of "being God's people" or being "a flock of God's pasture" (e.g., Ps 74,1; 79,13; 103,3) seem to be mixed: "Yes, he is our God, and we are people of his pasture/and sheep of his hand"²⁶. With this modification a special emphasis is put on the space, presenting the relation between the people and YHWH as a spatial connection. The parallel spatial elements, God's pasture and his hand, blend divine space and power and thus evoke the image of God as a nourishing and unassailable space²⁷. Unlike the metaphors of God as a

24. Here, the metaphoric spatial orientation UP IS GOOD/SECURE is used again.

25. The verb מִשְׁגָּב means to be strong (*qal*), or to be exalted (*niphal*), to lift high, to protect (*piel*). From the 17 occurrences of the noun מִשְׁגָּב most appear in the metaphorical language of prayers. Isa 25,12; 33,16, and Jer 48,1 are the only occurrences outside a psalm prayer.

26. Watson calls it a "metathetic parallelism". W. WATSON, *Traditional Techniques in Classical Hebrew Verse* (JSOT.S, 170), Sheffield, JSOT, 1994, p. 254.

27. The image of God's hand is often used to point out divine power and agency. The use of a genitive relation (sheep of his hand) indicates, that the sheep belong to God's hand, they thus are God's property and responsibility.

safe place, people can choose to live in, or were they may take refuge, these images highlight the people's belonging to the divine space; it is their native space.

4. "Sprouting Like a Palm-Tree": Stability in Plant Images

A safe and stable space does not only offer refuge or a safe place to live, it also provides new possibilities for the people. There they may prosper and unfold the full potential of their lives. To imagine this hoped-for possibility, Psalm 92 compares these people to well-known trees. Although plant images are frequently used to express instability and transience, comparing human life to the short cycle of growing and withering of grass and small greenery²⁸, long living trees, however, offer images of duration and stability (see Ps 1,3).

In Ps 92,13-15 the image of a long and fruitful life is described in two comparisons and two (verbal) metaphors. The parallel descriptions present images for vivacious sprouting and stability, provided that a special place is available. First, v. 13 depicts a process of sprouting and growing²⁹: "The righteous sprout (פָּרַח) like a palm-tree, they grow/thrive (שָׁגַה) like a cedar in Lebanon". The images already evoked by the verbs are enhanced by the comparisons with the trees mentioned, the palm-tree and the cedar. Besides being tall, even majestic trees³⁰ and in high demand for their fruit or timber, these trees have one more thing in common: they only grow in a specific environment. While the palm-tree, in particular the date-palm, needs an ample supply of (ground)water³¹, the cedar only grows and multiplies in the cooler climate of the mountains³². In this way, not only the trees themselves, but also the specific conditions of the place, where they

28. See C. STICHER, "Die Gottlosen Gedeihen wie Gras": Zu einigen Pflanzenmetaphern in den Psalmen. Eine kanonische Lektüre, in P. VAN HECKE – A. LABAHN (eds.), *Metaphors in the Psalms* (BETL, 231), Leuven, Peeters, 2010, 251-268.

29. The verb פָּרַח denotes the act of a plant's sprouting, flourishing or springing up. Such a description is sometimes used in a non-figurative way (e.g., Gen 40,10; Ezek 17,24; Hos 10,4; Song 6,11; 7,12), or it might be interpreted as sign (e.g., Num 17,20,23; Ezek 7,10), but more frequently it is used figuratively, emphasising an (unexpected) break through. In a positive sense this can be a hopeful vision of new vitality, or, in a negative sense, it may point to an unexpected and unwanted appearance of something (e.g., a disease; see Exod 9,9; Lev 13,12.20.25; 13,42). The verbs שָׁגַה (Ps 73,12; 92,13; Job 8,7.11) and נָוַח (Zech 9,17; Ps 62,11; 92,15; Prov 10,31) focus on thriving and prospering.

30. The metaphor UP IS GOOD is used for God in v. 9, he is located in a high place, and in v. 13 the height is used as an image for the righteous. See G. VAN EK, *Tijd en Ruimte: Een studie over Psalm 92*, Zoetermeer, Meinema, 2002, p. 107.

31. Therefore, the palm tree is linked to water sources and oases, e.g., Elim (Num 33,9) and Jericho (Deut 34,3; Judg 1,16; 3,13). See TATE, *Psalms 51–100* (n. 19), p. 467.

32. Especially the seeds of the cedar need a cold period to shoot.

might flourish, is highlighted. The next verses replicate the process of growing; first, v. 14 repeats the verb פָּרַח, and v. 15 carries on with another verb of thriving and prospering (גִּוַי): “Planted in the house of YHWH they sprout (פָּרַח) in the courts of YHWH, they still prosper (גִּוַי) in old age, they are fat and green”. This parallel statement also emphasises a special place, now identifying it with the house of YHWH and its courts³³. The divine space offers ideal conditions to blossom and grow³⁴. Furthermore, v. 15 also highlights the chronological aspect already inherent in the image of the cedar. Like a cedar may flourish for centuries on the Lebanon, old age and high vitality match in the metaphorical space of YHWH. Again, stability is rooted in a space ascribed to God³⁵. Here, it is not only a place of stability and safety but also a place for development, growth and permanence³⁶. In this way, the envisioned divine space provides stability enabling people to fully develop their potential³⁷.

5. “You Have Raised My Horn”: Strengthening the Praying Person

The metaphors so far mainly described the divine space and the possibilities that arise from this for the people. The main actor thus is YHWH, providing spatial stability of the world and offering stable places as refuge, nonetheless, humans also take part in the organisation of their space. From the perspective of the psalms, the wicked and evil doers are frequently portrayed to claim (all) the space, while the righteous may not be able to

33. The hope to reside in the temple, in God’s proximity, is also emphasised in Psalm 23. See M.Z. BRETTLER, *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, 277-304, p. 297.

34. Trees planted in temple gardens are well-known throughout the Ancient Near East. They may symbolise divine blessings or allude to God’s garden. See KEEL, *Die Welt der altorientalische Bildsymbolik* (n. 20), p. 118; TATE, *Psalms 51–100* (n. 19), p. 468.

35. Here, the connection to the temple, that is implicitly present in many metaphors imagining God as a secure space of refuge, is made explicit. The image of the temple as “a place in which God hides and protects the speaker” and the spatial image of God merge. See S.E. HOLTZ, *God as Refuge and Temple as Refuge in the Psalms*, in S. FINE (ed.), *The Temple of Jerusalem: From Moses to the Messiah* (The Brill Reference Library of Judaism, 29), Leiden – Boston, MA, Brill, 2011, 17-26, p. 22. See also W.P. BROWN, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*, Louisville, KY – London, Westminster John Knox, 2002, pp. 22-27.

36. This spatial aspect is also a main contrast to plant metaphors of transience, where this special place is usually missing. In Ps 92,7, for example, the wicked are not assigned to a space and their fate lacks stability, although they also sprout (פָּרַח) and blossom (צָוֵר). See Ps 90,5-6; 102,5-6; 103,15-16.

37. Brettler points out, that such images help to “form and reinforce the identity of a temple-centric group”. See BRETTLER, *Those Who Pray* (n. 33), p. 297.

find or keep a space for themselves³⁸. In such a situation God is presented as the one who empowers the righteous to protect and keep their own space. The metaphor “You have raised my horn” (Ps 92,11) uses the image of a victorious animal, which after it defeated its opponent, raises his head – and hence his horns – in triumph. The space the lyrical speaker is able to defend establishes his/her position³⁹. In retrospective, the psalm describes this experience as a divine intervention strengthening the lyrical speaker to successfully act on his/her own⁴⁰. Only in this psalm, the metaphorical image of raising one’s horn is further specified. The comparison of the (new) horn with that of a wild ox, adds the strength of one of the most powerful animals to this image⁴¹. This psalm thus proclaims that there is no doubt on the outcome of a struggle, if God supports the praying person. Then he/she will be able to defend the own position, holding his/her head high.

Seen in the context of the metaphorical network of the safe and stable space God provides, the last two metaphors expanded the network by the aspect of an empowered human agency. Nonetheless, these aspects are firmly linked with the other metaphors by causal connections – growth is only possible in a safe divine space, and human power depends on divine strengthening – and also by the repetition of the orientational metaphor UP IS GOOD. With God’s help, the people are able to experience a “high place”, in the image of a tall tree, or a horn held high.

II. CHRONOLOGICAL CONCEPTS OF STABILITY

The aspect of spatial stability is complemented by images of chronological stability. The human experience of a limited time span and, maybe even more challenging, the experience of the impermanence of all their

38. Although most of the time, the focus lies on the threatened space of the righteous, Psalm 101 elaborates on what it looks like, if the righteous constructs his/her own space. Here, the lyrical speaker takes over the spacing, offering stability and refuge to the righteous (v. 6), but turning away the deceitful (v. 7).

39. P. RIEDE, “*Doch du erhöhst wie einem Wildstier mein Horn*”: Zur Metaphorik in Ps 92,11, in VAN HECKE – LABAHN (eds.), *Metaphors in the Psalms* (n. 28), 209-216, pp. 210-211.

40. The metaphorical image of “raising a horn” is frequently used as a hopeful or joyful expression of God’s support for the king, the people or an individual (e.g., 1 Sam 2,1.10; Ps 89,18.25; 92,11; 112,9; 148,14; 1 Chr 25,5). It can also be used as a warning (Ps 75,5.6), or a proclamation of misery, when God raises the horn of the enemies (Lam 2,17).

41. This image is also used to emphasise the strength of the enemies (e.g., Ps 22,22), or divine power (e.g., Num 23,22; 24,8; Job 39,9-12). See RIEDE, “*Doch du erhöhst wie einem Wildstier mein Horn*” (n. 39), pp. 213-214.

efforts and achievements, encourages the psalms to search for a concept of time, which is able to offer stability. Again, the psalms compare divine and human concepts. While God's existence is unlimited, he is able to act outside a human time frame and he also has a perfect chronological overview, human life is limited, as is their perspective. Thus, divine and human time concepts are presented as totally different⁴². From this follows that a vision, in which humans might participate in a divine time frame, needs to create new perspectives of how to envision time. Like divine and human space, which overlaps in the metaphorical images of a "Thirdspace", the psalms are searching for images to envision an alternative concept of time. Again, such a concept is outlined by a network of metaphors, offering selected insights, which, however, are modified and expanded in the context of the network.

By pointing out the differences between a divine and a human perception of time, the psalms search for a concept of stability that is able to cope with the time limit of human existence⁴³.

1. "Before the Mountains Were Born": God's Unlimited Existence

Right at the beginning of the fourth book of psalms, Ps 90,2 introduces the theme of chronological stability: "Before the mountains were born, and (before) you travailed⁴⁴ with earth and world, from everlasting to everlasting (are) you, God".

42. Nonetheless, in order to provide insights into a divine time frame, metaphorical descriptions based on human experience of time are used. So, for example, birth and death, the cycle of generations but also common experiences of growing and withering plants or things wearing out and being replaced are used as input spaces for images envisioning God's unlimited time.

43. The numerous metaphors of transience in these psalms further highlight the longing for chronological stability, by pointing out contrasting experiences.

44. The consonants of the verbal form תחולל are ambiguous. MT reads it as *waw*-consecutive 2 m./3 f.sg. *polel* "you/she brought to birth / were in labor". The metaphorical image of God giving birth can be found in Deut 32,18 (חיל), where it is also used in a parallelism with ילד. See M. GROHMANN, *Metaphors of God, Nature and Birth in Psalm 90,2 and Psalm 110,3*, in VAN HECKE – LABAHN (eds.), *Metaphors in the Psalms* (n. 28), 23-33, p. 24; J. SCHNOCKS, *Vergänglichkeit und Gottesherrschaft: Studien zu Psalm 90 und dem vierten Psalmenbuch* (Bonner Biblische Beiträge, 140), Berlin – Wien, Philo Verlagsgesellschaft, 2002, 50-54; HOSSFELD – ZENGER, *Psalmen 51–100* (n. 18), p. 604; T. KRÜGER, *Psalm 90 und die 'Vergänglichkeit des Menschen'*, in *Biblica 75* (1994) 191-219, p. 193. Hence, God's active creation is emphasised, pointing out that God is bodily engaged in this process. The consonants, however, also allow to read passive *polal*. Reading 3 f.sg. *polal*, would lead to the translation: "earth and world were in labour". What they are going to bring forth is not mentioned explicitly. In this image, the earth is personified and takes part in the creation process. See A. WEISER, *Die Psalmen* (ATD, 14-15), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966, p. 407; H.J. KRAUS, *Psalmen. Band 2: Psalmen*

The psalm starts with a metaphorical description of God's time, using the creation of space as a metaphorical point of reference⁴⁵. The lyrical speaker imagines a time before the world where only God existed. To give this unimaginable time of divine pre-existence some structure, Psalm 90 uses a metaphor based on human experience of life. The metaphor of a birth uses the image of a woman of childbearing age. It assumes that she has lived several years before giving birth, and usually lives for several more years thereafter. If this image is transferred to a cosmic and divine sphere, the time periods vary, the basic time ratio, however, remains. Hence, the metaphorical image is convincing, and it is easily comprehensible that God existed before and after he delivered the world. The incomparable aspect, however, lies in the duration of the divine time before and after the birth. Ps 90,2 defines this time as unlimited⁴⁶, from an indefinite time in retrospect (מעולם) to an indefinite time in the future (עד עולם)⁴⁷.

2. "You Will Change Them Like a Robe": God Acts Outside an Earthly Time Frame

Ps 90,3 continues with a time-related image of change: "You (always) brought⁴⁸ humankind back to dust and you said: Return children of Adam!" Here God is presented as the cause for the time limit of human lives;

60–150 (BKAT, 15), Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 1989, p. 89; H. GUNKEL, *Die Psalmen*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1926, p. 397. Reading the passive form puts a distance between God and the creation process, and thus the description functions primarily as a reference to time, pointing out God's pre-existence.

45. The metaphor of God giving birth to the world can be seen in the light of the myths of the Ancient Near East, which show phenomena of nature as having a numinous, even personal character. See GROHMANN, *Metaphors of God* (n. 44), p. 28.

46. In contrast to the divine existence, the time of everything created is characterised by circulation: humans exist from generation to generation (Ps 90,1; 100,5; 102,13.25), and even heaven and earth are subjected to a circulation (Ps 102,27).

47. Similar expressions occur in Ps 103,17; 1 Chr 29,10. With a sole focus on the past, Ps 93,2 underlines God's unlimited existence from everlasting (מעולם), a time before and beyond (historical) time. See H. IRSIGLER, *Thronbesteigung in Psalm 93? Der Textverlauf als Prozeß syntaktischer und semantischer Interpretation*, in W. GROSS (ed.), *Text, Methode und Grammatik: Wolfgang Richter zum 65. Geburtstag*, St. Ottilien, EOS Verlag, 1991, 155-190, pp. 171-172; D. HUMAN, *Psalm 93: Yahweh Robed in Majesty and Mightier Than the Great Waters*, in ID. (ed.), *Psalms and Mythology* (LHB/OTS, 462), New York, T&T Clark, 2007, 147-169, pp. 159-160.

48. The shortened form of the imperfect may be used to express a general experience. See W. GROSS, *Verbform und Funktion wayyiqtol für die Gegenwart? Ein Beitrag zur Syntax poetischer Texte* (Arbeiten zu Text und Sprache, 1), St. Ottilien, EOS Verlag, 1976, p. 153.

hence, the human life cycle is part of God's shaping the world. This further implies, that God acts outside the human time frame.

A quite similar but more elaborate image based on a human perception of change over time is used in Ps 102,27: "They will perish but you will remain, and they will all wear out like a garment; you will change them like a robe and they will pass by". The line of thought already starts in v. 26 with the metaphor of God as builder, who laid the foundations of the earth in primeval times, and formed heaven and earth. Instead of highlighting their stability, v. 27 continues with a disturbing image of chance. When the psalm compares heaven and earth with a garment, the time-limited usability of clothes is used as a starting point. Like a garment, heaven and earth will grow old and wear out⁴⁹. Thus, their usefulness is strictly limited and they have to be replaced periodically. In contrast to God, their time is measured and will be completed. The contrast between the lifetime of robes and the lifetime of the one, who uses and changes them, is used to describe the differences between creator and creation. Implicitly, the different availability of time for God and humans is also further enhanced. While people only have very little time available compared to the existence of heaven and earth, even this unimaginable long time is only a short period in God's perception of time. This difference is further highlighted by the way the creator and his creation act. While heaven and earth, like robes, inevitably grow old, God reacts actively.

However, the image of God replacing heaven and earth is singular. In the context of the fourth book of psalms it continues and widens the image of God giving and taking life from all creatures (Ps 90,3; 104,29-30) to the whole creation (represented in the merism of heaven and earth). The metaphor of God (repeatedly) changing heaven and earth, envisions God as acting outside an earthly time frame. This image goes one step further than the metaphors on the stability of the earth and cosmos; here, even they are subject to God's planned cycle of life. In this way, God is presented as a sovereign of time, controlling and shaping all chronological processes of his creation.

With this network of images, the passing of time is subdued to a divine acting and a divine plan. Although time is unpredictable from a human point of view, it is not arbitrary from a divine perspective. Insights into the divine perception thus may yield knowledge that can be applied to the understanding of human time.

49. Isa 51,6 also uses the image of earth wearing out (בלה) like a garment to convince the addressees of the divine stability.

3. “A Thousand Years (Are) in Your Sight Like a Previous Day”: Human and Divine Perception of Time

In order to envision God’s perspective on time, Ps 90,4 describes the divine perception by combining different human time units. “Yes, a thousand years (are) in your sight like a previous day, when it passes, or (as) a watch in the night”⁵⁰. Here, different units, namely years, days and fractions of a day, are equated. In this way, 1000 years correspond to one day, or even only a night watch⁵¹. Such an equation is only plausible if it is based on the human experience, that time appears to move at different speed, depending on the context and on who is watching. For humans, with a life-span of 70/80 years at the most (Ps 90,10), thousand years span many generations. Seen from the perspective of God’s unlimited time, the human experience of a thousand years corresponds to one day or even only a few hours in the divine experience of time. Thus, from the divine point of view, human time is characterised by change, their generations change like the night guards⁵². Although God is imagined to share the same kind of experiencing time as humans, the divine time does not equal a human time scale⁵³. The radical difference is the impression time makes on the divine or human perception. This different experience of the passing of time is emphasised by highlighting that the point of comparison is not even a day, but a retrospective view on a day gone by⁵⁴.

This image makes it evident, that the human and divine time span are totally different, so that there is no use of hoping to participate in God’s time. Thus, stability of time for humans cannot be achieved by visions of a prolonged lifespan⁵⁵, nor is it of any help to lament the limited human lifetime.

50. The use of the imperfect is striking, it does point to a day that has already passed, but focusses on the point of view: in retrospect, a previous day passes very quickly. The time scale, that is compared, does not use the experience of the lived-through previous day, but the passing of this day as it is remembered.

51. אֶשְׁמִירָה is one shift of the night watch (see Judg 7,19; 1 Sam 11,11; Lam 2,19).

52. K. SEYBOLD, *Zu den Zeitvorstellungen in Psalm 90*, in *Theologische Zeitschrift* 53 (1997) 97-108, p. 102.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

54. This additional description is based on another metaphorical concept, namely “time is space”. When time passes by, it is moving like objects in space. See Z. KÖVECSES, *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 47-51.

55. Even the life span of the people before the flood (Genesis 5) is short compared to God’s time measuring.

4. “To Number Our Days, So Teach Us”: Human Coping with Impermanence

Although the psalms emphasise that human and divine time is totally different, and human life is fleeting, they still are confident that God may provide chronological stability for his people. Important aspects of this hope are God’s steadfast love (חסד)⁵⁶ that endures forever and his faithfulness (אמונה) to all generations⁵⁷.

One metaphor, however, stands out from these broader images, namely the request to be told how to measure the days in Ps 90,12: “To count (מנה) our days, teach (us); and we will bring a heart of wisdom”. This expression is singular in the Hebrew Bible: as Kartje argues, while “there is nothing unusual about the request for wisdom, the idea that one can acquire it by the numbering of days is unique in the MT”⁵⁸. Although most things are countable⁵⁹, huge quantities⁶⁰ or things humans do not fully understand or control⁶¹ may be considered as uncountable. With regard to time, days may be counted in cultic contexts, to schedule festivals (e.g., Lev 23,16; 25,8; Deut 16,9) or to be aware of the duration of one’s impurity (e.g., Lev 15,13,28; Ezek 44,26). These counting schemes allow the people to maintain order, by guaranteeing the cycle of festivities and restoring a desirable cultic status (to be clean) within a given time frame. Counting the days thus implies stability, as it allows people to uphold (God-given) chronological cycles⁶². However, to be aware of the number of days of one’s life is not granted to humans. This is reserved for God, who also assigns a specific time to people’s lives (see Dan 5,26).

The reason why the lyrical speaker in Psalm 90 asks to count the days is to bring a wise heart. In wisdom literature, the expression לב חכם is

56. See Ps 100,5; 103,17; 106,1.

57. See Ps 100,5. In a similar way, Ps 93,5 points to God’s trustworthy (אמן) testimonies and unlimited impact of God’s temple for the people.

58. J. KARTJE, *Wisdom Epistemology in the Psalter: A Study of Psalms 1, 73, 90, and 107* (BZAW, 472), Berlin, De Gruyter, 2014, p. 130.

59. Like in Ps 90,4, this image is based on the metaphor “time is space” and hence days can be counted like objects.

60. E.g., Abraham’s descendants (Gen 13,16; 15,5), Joseph’s grain/sand (Gen 41,49); the people (1 Kgs 3,8), Solomon’s offerings (1 Kgs 8,5; 2 Chr 5,6).

61. E.g., things lacking (Qoh 1,15); God’s wondrous deeds (Ps 40,5) and thoughts (Ps 139,18), clouds (Job 38,37) or the months of an animal’s pregnancy (Job 39,2).

62. Kartje argues, that the verb מנה does not express “the simple act of counting, but rather an ordering – and thus an understanding – of the nature of things (...) that only Yhwh may rightfully engage in and that only he is fully capable of performing. Thus, when the psalmist asks to be taught to ‘number’ (מנה) his days (Ps 90,12), he may well be boldly asking for a type of knowledge that is proper to Yhwh himself”. KARTJE, *Wisdom Epistemology in the Psalter* (n. 58), p. 137.

used several times as a *pars pro toto* for a wise person (e.g., Prov 16,23; Qoh 7,4; 8,5; 10,2). However, using the “wise heart” as an object⁶³ and hoping to bring it (forth)⁶⁴ is singular and puts a special emphasis on this formulation. A wise heart, as it is depicted in Proverbs, provides understanding, enables to teach, or leads the right way⁶⁵. Particularly interesting is its mention in an instruction on the wise man’s behaviour before a king: “Who keeps a command will know no evil thing, and a wise heart will know (ידע) proper time (עת) and judgment” (Qoh 8,5). Here, like in Ps 90,12, knowledge of time is connected with a wise heart. The lyrical speaker’s request to be taught to count the days thus may aim at the possibility to make active use of their days⁶⁶, that is to recognise the requirements at any given time and live accordingly⁶⁷. In this way, people would be able to order their days and to account for their days in the light of God’s commandments⁶⁸. Continuing this line of thought, stability of time is not measured by its length, but by its usage. As a consequence, time is no longer something unknown, but it is meaningfully structured and thus countable.

Seen as a network of time-metaphors, the irreconcilable differences between divine and human time and its perception become comprehensible. Although the differences remain, the metaphorical network offers a perspective that enables the readers to not only acknowledge them but to find stability within the volatility of human time.

63. The only other text using the wise heart as an object is 1 Kgs 3,12, God promising Solomon to give him a wise heart.

64. See Isa 16,3 “Bring forth (בוא, *hiphil*) counsel”.

65. Clifford also points out that wisdom (חכמה) refers to a “practical knowledge enabling one to act rightly in a situation”. R.J. CLIFFORD, *Psalm 90: Wisdom Meditation or Communal Lament?*, in P.W. FLINT (ed.), *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception* (VT.S, 99), Leiden, Brill, 2005, 190-205, p. 204.

66. See K. LIESS, *Sättigung mit langem Leben: Vergänglichkeit, Lebenszeit und Alter in den Psalmen 90–92*, in M. BAUKS – K. LIESS (eds.), *Was ist der Mensch, dass du seiner gedenkst? (Psalm 8,5): Aspekte einer theologischen Anthropologie*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 2008, 329-342, p. 331; C. FORSTER, *Begrenztes Leben als Herausforderung: Das Vergänglichkeitsmotiv in weisheitlichen Psalmen*, Zürich, Pano Verlag, 2000, p. 191.

67. With this plea, the lyrical speaker also refers back to the iniquities mentioned in v. 8, which disturb the people’s time by causing their years to vanish like a sigh.

68. In this line of thought, a wise heart is shaped by divine commandments. Bringing (forth) such a wise heart might bear a vague allusion to an offering. The verb בוא *hiphil* is frequently used in the context of sacrifices, however, the addressee of the sacrifice or an information where the offering is brought to, is usually mentioned. See R. BRANDSCHEIDT, “Unsere Tage zu zählen, so lehre du” (*Psalm 90,12*): *Literarische Gestalt, theologische Aussage und Stellung des 90. Psalms im vierten Psalmenbuch*, in *Trierer Theologische Zeitung* 113 (2004) 1-33, p. 25.

III. CONCLUSION

In the context of the fourth book of the Psalms, the challenging question of gaining stability is raised at the very beginning. Discussing the possibility of human permanence, these psalms oppose the human experience of impermanence with images of stability. In this line of thought, they imagine human stability as a dynamic concept, they envision a beneficial development, fully unfolding human potential in a stable and secure environment. The foundation for such images is built on the psalms' concept of God as the centre of stability and unchallenged sovereign of space and time. Searching for human stability, the metaphors create points of intersection between a divine and human perspective on space and time. In this way, they widen human perception, enabling the lyrical speaker to create new spaces, or shifting the focus from the immediate situation to an overview, offering new insights on causal and temporal relations.

The various spatial metaphors envision a stable space that is not taken for granted, but mostly hoped for. This vision, however, is carefully constructed and argued. Although at first glance, the metaphors might seem unrelated, they form a network that becomes more obvious with each metaphor. At the heart of this network lies the idea, that God is the sole master of space. From this follows, that divine space is stable and unassailable, that God guarantees the stability of the word, offers a protected space to his people and is able to empower people to shape and maintain their own space. By repeating and varying the spatial metaphors, the psalms deepen and enhance the awareness of a divine space that is stable and also partially available for human experience. In this way, the metaphors contribute significantly to the construction of a "Thirdspace" that offers a safe dwelling place and allows them to experience their space differently.

Like spatial metaphors, metaphors of time create a stable perspective if they are viewed as a metaphorical network. Again, God, his perspective and handling of time, is used as a point of focus. These metaphors envision God as a sovereign, whose time is not limited, and who has unrestricted access to all events. However, a human participation is not envisioned as sharing God's time, but as participation in a divine perspective on time. Metaphors of time are used to present an insight into God's perception of time and to deduce thereof a way not only to cope with the limitations of human lifespan, but to construct stability within their limited time⁶⁹.

69. This hopeful perspective is envisioned for the righteous, who live in accordance with the divine testimonies (see Ps 90,16-17; 92,12-14; 102,28).

Furthermore, the networks of spatial and chronological metaphors of stability not only reveal new perspectives, they are also emotionally charged. If the people are able to experience stability they react with joy. Hence, in retrospective the psalms joyfully proclaim God's steadfastness (Psalm 100), they tell about their experiences and invite others to join in their joy, and they hopefully anticipate a stable and thus joyful future (Ps 90,14-15).

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