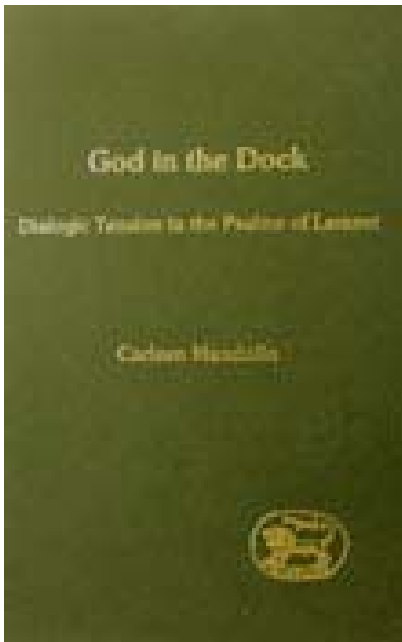


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God in the Dock: Dialogic Tension in the Psalms of Lament

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The subtle changes from the first-person voice of a “supplicant” to the third-person voice of a didactic speaker—changes typical of individual lament psalms—are the focus of Carleen Mandolfo’s multifaceted study that builds on the work of W. Brueggemann (primarily in *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy, Fortress* [1997]) and on M. M. Bakhtin’s sociolinguistic theories of (*Problems of Dostoevski’s Poetics* [University of Minnesota Press, 1984]).

The interrupting voice in the lament psalms, Mandolfo discovers, is typically didactic in content and tone. It does not address the deity but the congregation or the one praying. The inclusion of a didactic voice in prayer or supplication points to the functions of the lament psalms as both “performative,” that is, as recited prayer, and instructional, that is, as a teaching tool for a congregation. The voice shifts, thereby, bring the cultic and teaching functions of the psalms together.

Mandolfo begins by reviewing the history of psalm interpretation. She observes that the present interpretive interest in psalms as literature diminishes concern for the psalms’ performative functions. By studying the didactic voice, Mandolfo focuses on the human-to-human dimensions of the laments as well as on their ritual aim of maintaining contact

with God. Chapter 3 provides exegetical study of the following lament psalms 4; 7; 9; 12; 25; 27; 28; 31; 55; 102; 130 and thanksgiving Pss 30 and 32. Mandolfo's exegesis is clear, readable, and illustrated with charts that characterize the nature of the discourse, the speaker, and the addressee. The words of the didactic voice appear in italics, revealing visually the shift in tone and content the voice brings into the psalms.

Chapter 4 takes these exegetical results and analyzes the grammar and style of the didactic voices identified in the exegesis. Mandolfo recognizes that most of the interjections by the didactic voice characterize God by naming attributes or actions of the deity or characterize a person's fate in relation to those divine attributes. When the didactic voice uses the imperative mood rather than the indicative, it exhorts people to some action based on God's attributes. Moving her reflections into the larger canon, Mandolfo embraces Brueggemann's contention that Israel's ways of characterizing God arise from worship; public prayer generated Torah and generated theology.

The didactic voice in the psalms of lament need not represent actual multiple voices but may be the voice of one speaker arguing with or correcting herself or himself in a dialogue of viewpoints. To describe this inner psalmic dialogue, Mandolfo employs Brueggemann's categories of testimony and countertestimony. *Testimony* refers to a standard theological position in Israel, whereas *countertestimony* is speech that disputes orthodox opinion. For Mandolfo, the didactic voice of lament psalms is the voice of Deuteronomistic orthodoxy that corrects and modulates the countertestimony of the one praying. Important content distinctions emerge from Mandolfo's grammatical analysis of the didactic speech. Nominal clauses representing YHWH, for example, usually speak of nurturing aspects, whereas verbal constructions tell of "a deity who rages and reproves" (130).

The primary goal of lament psalms is to exercise persuasive rhetoric toward God, to convince God to do what is right. The didactic voice is central to that purpose. As the supplicant cries out against divine governance, the teaching voice "batters God up" and reminds God to be just and faithful as Deuteronomy promises. For Mandolfo, as for Brueggemann, the glory of lament psalms is the coexistence of multiple voices where the supplicant's voice and the didactic voice are left side by side. Together they create a dialogue, "a psychologically astute and emotionally sensitive theological discourse" (144).

Across the book Mandolfo builds her arguments with careful detail, but the significance of her work becomes fully apparent in the last chapters, where she draws sociorhetorical and theological conclusions. Her inquiry into the social location of the lament psalms begins with an instructive and balanced discussion of cult. Eschewing narrower views of

cult as public acts of worship restricted to the temple, Mandolfo argues rather that Israel's cult encompassed small-group situations, family rituals, and individual practices outside the temple, but in her view, these rituals were connected to temple precincts by a shared frame of reference. The multiple voices of the lament psalms turn the cultic setting into a place of ideological interplay, of supplication, of instruction, and, ultimately, of transformation.

Bakhtin's theories of dialogism and heteroglossia help expand Mandolfo's claims about the dialogical nature of the lament psalms. According to Bakhtin, dialogical meaning appears in the places within an utterance where voices interact and cause transformation. The lament psalms are dialogic because the one praying the psalm both subverts and negotiates with the powerful voice of the didactic speaker whose pedagogical intention is to control opposing views. However, Mandolfo's work also challenges Bakhtin's unhappy view of poetry as monologic and controlling, because she shows the presence of multiple languages in the lament psalms, even if actual multiple speakers are not present. Complaint exists alongside words of confidence in God's saving deeds to create dialogue that destabilizes.

The stabilizing presence of the didactic voice, by contrast, serves as "a hinge between joy and despair" (186), while the double voicing of the psalms prevents "the impulse toward defining social reality monolithically" (188). As institutionalized protest, the lament psalms place YHWH "in the dock" (a phrase of Brueggemann's) as the supplicant holds God to legal standards, challenging divine neglect and conferring the right to rebel when God does not live up to covenant promises.

Mandolfo's study is a model of careful argument and of traditional exegetical method made socially and theologically potent by her concluding interactions with Bakhtin and Brueggemann. This book will benefit anyone working in Psalms, Lamentations, the Prophets or any multivoiced poetry. For Mandolfo, the very dialogic nature of these texts and of the Bible itself makes them endure. I only wish that some of her concluding theoretical discussions were woven into the developing argument for the sake of integration of methods and perhaps to create her own multivoiced text sooner for the reader.