A *Nepeš* Divided: Trust, Doubt, and Longing in Psalm 42–43*

Andrew R. Davis
Boston College; davisax@bc.edu

Abstract

This article argues that the two different uses of *nepeš* in Psalm 42–43 (one metonymic. the other apostrophic) are integral to the psalm's rhetoric and ritual function. Like other poetic prayers, Ps 42–43 expresses longing for God and, through the recitation of the psalm, produces the kind of encounter for which the speaker longs. At the same time, however, the psalm betrays the speaker's doubts about the possibility of such an encounter. While she longs to meet God in God's temple, she finds herself distanced from God and needs to remind herself to trust in her relationship with God. Psalm 42–43 gives voice to this tension between desire and doubt, and the distinct uses of *nepeš* play a vital role in this discourse. The ritual language associated with the apostrophic *nepeš* even begins to resolve the psalm's tension by creating the experience of worship she longs for.

Keywords

Psalms, *nepeš*, ritual, anthropology, prayer, soul

* I am grateful to colleagues who gave me feedback on earlier drafts of this article, especially Colleen Griffith and the members of the Catholic Old Testament Colloquium in Collegeville, MN, and also to the two anonymous reviewers of this journal. Any errors in this final version are my responsibility alone.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the President and Fellows of Harvard College. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

HTR 118:4 (2025) 601–616

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Introduction

There are some aspects of the Hebrew word *nepeš* on which nearly everyone agrees. It is clear to all, for example, that its base meaning is "throat, neck," as attested in several biblical verses (Isa 5:14; Ps 107:9; Prov 25:25; Jon 2:6) and Semitic cognates (Akk. *napištu*; Ug. *npš*). There is also a broad consensus that "soul" is a misleading translation of *nepeš*, because it implies the common modern dichotomy of body and soul and imports modern conceptions of the soul as a spiritual and immortal entity distinct from the human body.[1] For most scholars, these modern connotations make "soul" an anachronism to be avoided.

Despite the strong agreement on these key features of Hebrew *nepeš*, there is ongoing debate over how to understand it within ancient Israelite anthropology. On the one hand are arguments for the psychosomatic unity, or monism. According to this view, *nepeš* refers to the total human being. Insofar as its concrete meaning, "throat," represents a key locus of human life (i.e., the passage of air, blood, and food), it became a metonym for vitality and life itself and thus the entire person.[2] The place of *nepeš* within the framework of psychosomatic unity may be summed up with the oft–cited formulation of Hans Walter Wolff and others, "one does not *have* a *nepeš*; one *is* a *nepeš*."[3]

On the other hand are scholars who have argued for a more dualistic view of Israelite personhood. A good example of this opinion is James Barr's study of Genesis 2–3, in which he writes that "in spite, therefore, of the importance of Hebrew totality thinking—which I do not dispute in principle—some formulations of the Hebrew Bible point towards more dualistic conceptions."[4] This view is based on the simple fact that no small number of references to *nepeš* in the Hebrew Bible (and beyond) depict it as something disjoined from a person.[5] As the subject of

[1] The translation "soul" for *nepeš* is rooted in the LXX, which in 600 out of 755 instances translates it with the Greek word *psychē*. For a thorough discussion of this tradition of translation and its problems, see Katrin Müller, *Lobe den Herrn, meine "Seele." Eine kognitiv-linguistische Studie zur næfæš des Menschen im Alten Testament* (BWANT 215; Stuttgart: Kolhammer, 2018) 19–99, 195–205; also Thomas Krüger, "'ach ja die seele': Der Verlust der Seele – ein Gewinn für die theologische Anthropologie," *Hermeneutische Blätter* 11 (2005) 34–41; Jürgen van Oorschot, "Lost in Translation, Regain by Exegesis: נפש in alttestamentlicher Verwendung und Funktion," in *Anthropologie(n) des Alten Testaments* (ed. J. van Oorschot and A. Wagner; Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie 42; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015) 117–31; Bernd Janowski, *Anthropologie des Alten Testament. Grundfragen – Kontexte – Themenfelder* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019) 57–58.

[2] For an overview of this position, see Müller, *Lobe den Herrn, meine 'Seele*,' 106–20; and Richard Pleijel, "To Be or to Have a *Nephesh*?," *ZAW* 131 (2019) 194–206, at 198–201.

[3] Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 10. See similar statements in H. Seebass, נֶפֶשׁ *nepeš*, *TDOT* 9:511–12; Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (trans. Aslaug Møller; 1926; repr., 2 vols.; SFSHJ 28; Atlanta: Scholars, 1991) 1:99.

[4] James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality: The Read–Tuckwell Lectures for 1990* (London: SCM, 1992) 43.

[5] See the discussions of Robert A. Di Vito, "Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity," *CBQ* 61 (1999) 217–38; Richard C. Steiner, *Disembodied Souls: The "nepesh" in*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

various verbs of movement, Hebrew *nepeš* is spatially situated both inside and outside the body and therefore is not in every case coterminous with a person's life or vitality.[6] Thus, a dualistic view of ancient Israelite anthropology finds substantial support within the biblical evidence.

Opting out of this debate's binary framework, Carol A. Newsom has recently argued that both views betray the modern predilection for precise definitions of key concepts, which can be compiled and organized in stable categories of ancient beliefs.[7] The variegated references to *nepeš* resist such systemization, and Newsom offers the following as an alternative:

> What I am suggesting is that the debate about whether the ancient Israelites envisioned the person as a psychosomatic unity, or as James Barr has forcefully suggested, has more of a dual composition, might be more helpfully reframed by recognizing that more than one cultural model existed for thinking about human vitality as manifested in the breath, models that are in significant ways inconsistent with each other.[8]

This approach aligns well with Katrin Müller's work from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. Just as Newsom argues for multiple cultural models, Müller employs different conceptual metonyms, such as "BODY PART FOR PERSON" and "BODY PART FOR FUNCTION," and argues that *nepeš* is not a "Hauptbegriff" of biblical anthropology but functions together with other metonymic body parts. In this way, she moves the conversation away from the "Stereometrie synthetischen Denkens" of Wolff and others who do not adequately distinguish between "Wort" and "Konzept."[9]

By allowing for multiple models, Newsom and Müller make room for the diverse uses of *nepeš* (and related terms, such as *rûaḥ*) and invite us to think outside of the anthropological and historical categories that usually frame discussions of the word. To be sure, these categories are indispensable for understanding *nepeš*, but ancient views of personhood and their diachronic development are not the only factors at play in a given instance of *nepeš*. In this article I will argue that, in addition to the cultural cognitive models proposed by Newsom, we should also consider the literary and rhetorical context of each usage. How does the genre of a text affect the word's meaning in that text? What kind of rhetoric has the author employed and how does *nepeš* contribute to the rhetoric?

Israel and Kindred Spirits in the Ancient Near East, with an Appendix on the Katumuwa Inscription (ANEM 11; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015).

[6] Pleijel, "To Be or to Have a *Nephesh*?," 201–3. Verbs of movement that take *nepeš* as their subject include *yāṣa'* (Gen 35:18), *šûb* (1 Kgs 17:21–22), *dibbēq* (Gen 34:3; Ps 63:9l; 119:25), *šāpak* (Job 30:16), and *dālap* (Ps 119:28).

[7] Carol A. Newsom, "In Search of Cultural Models for Divine Spirit and Human Bodies," *VT* 70 (2020) 104–23.

[8] Ibid., 113–14.

[9] Müller, *Lobe den Herrn, meine 'Seele,'* 77–81, 100–125.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These questions recognize that biblical authors were in the business of putting new spin on words whose basic meaning they presumed their audience already knew. Each occurrence of *nepeš* surely offers some insight into its basic meaning, but our encounter with it comes after it has been refracted through the prism of the author's rhetoric, literary aims, and ritual perspective.[10] Attention to literary and rhetorical factors has guided recent studies of other Hebrew words and concepts, such as *Sheol*. Although it is commonly regarded as the universal abode of ancient Israelite dead, scholars have pointed out its low frequency in the Hebrew Bible (less than seventy mentions, compared to the thousand or so references to death) and its concentration "in psalmodic, reflective, and prophetic literature" rather narrative and legal texts.[11] The distribution suggests not a general belief about the afterlife but a narrower significance that is suited for particular genres of text. Another example is David Lambert's argument against reconstructing Hebrew *lēb* (heart) as a discrete entity and instead seeing it as "a rhetorical mode for describing a being in relation to outside forces."[12] These studies show that biblical references to *Sheol* and *lēb* are not plot points on a graph which together reveal the word's fixed shape; rather, they are discursive elements embedded within particular literary settings.

In this article I will make a similar case for *nepeš* by examining its meaning in Ps 42–43, where the word occurs seven times but in diverse and seemingly inconsistent ways.[13] Four times the word is used as a metonym of the speaker (42:2, 3, 5, 7), but three other times, in a refrain that punctuates the psalm, the speaker addresses "my *nepeš*" in the vocative, as if it is something distinct from herself (42:6, 12; 43:5).[14]

[10] This is not to say that "the basic meaning" is a fixed value, since each refraction affects the word's meaning and contributes to its semantic development. As James Barr showed in his classic study, Hebrew words cannot be reduced to single meaning; rather, meaning is generated by its use in combination with other words of a sentence in a particular context (*The Semantics of Biblical Language* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961] 270).

[11] Philip Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002) 72; see also Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 72–75.

[12] David Lambert, "Refreshing Philology: James Barr, Supersessionism, and the State of Biblical Words," *Biblical Interpretation* 24 (2016) 332–56, at 346; see also Risto Lauha, *Psychophysischer Sprachgebrauch im Alten Testament. Eine strukturalsemantische Analyse von* לב, נפש, *und* רוח (Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, Dissertationes Humanarum Litterarum 35; Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1983) 240–41.

[13] Most scholars regard Ps 42 and 43 to be a single psalm (cf. Ps 9 and 10). In addition to their shared refrain (42:6, 12; 43:5), evidence of their unity lies in their complementary content. Individual laments typically include an invocation of God, a complaint, a petition, and a declaration of trust/praise. The first two are found in Ps 42 and the latter two in Ps 43; together the psalms form a well-rounded lament. Lastly, we can note the lack of a heading to Ps 43. See further Thomas Dockner, *"Sicut cerva . . .": Text, Struktur und Bedeutung von Psalm 42 und 43* (ATSAT 67; St. Ottilien: EOS, 2001) 22–24.

[14] My choice of feminine pronouns in reference to the speaker of Ps 42–43 is a way to highlight that the psalms' use of the first-person perspective leaves the question of gender open. For a discussion of women as pray-ers of Ps 42–43 (and other psalms), see Sarah Riegert, *Die "Ich-Sphäre" des Beters. Eine anthropologische Untersuchung zur Selbstreflexion des Beters am Beispiel von Ps*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

From a strictly anthropological perspective, the references to *nepeš* in Ps 42–43 are confusing: the four metonymic instances of the word seem to support a monistic view, but the three apostrophes seem to support a dualistic view.

This apparent contradiction disappears, however, if we see the word's use in Ps 42–43 not as information toward a definition but a discursive element within the poetry of the psalm that contributes to its overall purpose. Like other poetic prayers, the purpose of Ps 42–43 is to express longing for God and, through the recitation of the psalm, to produce the kind of encounter for which the speaker longs. At the same time, however, the psalm betrays the speaker's doubts about the possibility of such an encounter.[15] While she longs to meet God in God's temple, she finds herself distanced from God and needs to remind herself to trust in her relationship with God. Psalm 42–43 gives voice to this mix of desire and doubt, and the distinct uses of *nepeš* play a vital role in this discourse. The ritual language associated with the apostrophic *nepeš* even begins to resolve the psalm's tension between desire and doubt by creating the experience of worship she longs for.

In the following sections, I will first establish the tension between desire and doubt as a central feature of the overall psalm, and then I will show that the two uses of *nepeš* within it—one metonymic, the other apostrophic—epitomize this feature, signaling, on the one hand, movement toward God and, on the other, distance from God. In the last section, I will argue that the psalm itself represents an answer to the problem described by the speaker. Drawing from ritual studies, I will highlight the liturgical language in the three apostrophes to *nepeš*, which suggests ritual engagement with God, even as the speaker questions the possibility of such engagement. Attention to this ritual dimension underscores the embodied quality of *nepeš* and offers a corrective to the tendency among interpreters to over-spiritualize its meaning in Ps 42–43.[16]

Inner Struggle and the Divided *Nepeš*

Although *nepeš* is the principal symbol of Ps 42–43's different theological outlooks, the psalm as a whole gives expression to the speaker's mixed perspectives about the possibility of an encounter with God at the temple—probably the Jerusalem

42/43 (FRLANT 275; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020) 249–53.

[15] Cf. Richard J. Clifford's discussion of the "conflicted self" depicted in the psalm, especially in 42:5 (*Psalms 1–72* [Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002] 215–16). On the theme of relational ambivalence in the Psalms more generally, see Amy C. Cottrill, *Language, Power, and Identity in the Lament Psalms of the Individual* (LHB/OTS 493; New York: T&T Clark, 2008) 130–37.

[16] For more on the function and significance of body images in the Psalms, see Cottrill, *Language, Power, and Identity in the Lament Psalms of the Individual*, 29–57; Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, "Body Images in the Psalms," *JSOT* 28 (2004) 301–26; Klaus Seybold, "Das Menschenbild der Psalmen," in *Studien zu Sprache und Stil der Psalmen* (BZAW 415; Berlin 2010) 277–92; and Danilo Verde, "Trauma, Poetry, and the Body: On the Psalter's Own Words for Wounds," *Biblica* 101 (2020) 208–30.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

temple but possibly a different one.[17] On the one hand, the speaker longs for such encounter, and the psalm itself builds toward deeper relationship with God, but on the other hand, the water imagery and spatial organization of the psalm call attention to the formidable obstacles that stand in the way of that encounter. These obstacles are the source of the speaker's doubt; she does not question God or her relationship with God but rather her ability to overcome the barriers that keep her away from the divine encounter she desires. This mix of desire and doubt throughout Ps 42–43 provides the backdrop for its depiction of the speaker's divided *nepeš*.

We can first note that Ps 42–43 includes many characteristic expressions of trust in and yearning for God. For example, the phrase "to thirst for God" (42:2) has a parallel in Ps 63:2 (cf. 143:6),[18] and the speaker's desire to "see the face of God" (42:3) may be compared to Psalms 27:4, 13 and 63:3, which likewise express longing to behold God in the temple.[19] Indeed, all of these psalms (27; 42–43; 63) are connected by their speakers' orientation toward the temple as the locus of their longed-for encounter with God.[20] In 43:1–4 this encounter takes the form of legal vindication, as the speaker petitions God with imperatives containing juridical language familiar from other psalms: "Vindicate me, O God! Come to my defense!" (43:1; see also 7:9; 26:1; 35:1, 24; 74:22). This language establishes a legal bond between God and the speaker by casting them in the roles of judge and plaintiff, respectively.[21] Indeed, within Ps 42–43, the imperatives mark a turning point, as for the first time the speaker makes a direct request of God and moves toward solidarity with God.[22]

This movement toward deeper engagement with God can also be seen in more subtle aspects of Ps 42–43, such as the expanding length of addresses to God as the psalm proceeds and the increasing use of possessive pronouns. As for the former, the psalm shows a clear pattern of alternating addresses:

[17] Based on the psalm's reference to "the land of Jordan and Hermon" (Ps 42:7), Michael D. Goulder proposes that the speaker wants to worship at the Dan temple (*The Psalms of the Sons of Korah* [JSOTSup 20; Sheffield: JSOT, 1982] 25–29).

[18] See Robert C. Culley, "The Temple in Psalms 84, 63, and 42–43," in *"Où demeures-tu?" Jn 1,38: La maison depuis le monde biblique. En hommage au professeur Guy Couturier à l'occasion de ses soixante-cinq ans* (ed. J.-C. Petit; Saint-Laurent, QC: Fides, 1994) 187–97, at 188–89.

[19] See Mark S. Smith, "'Seeing God' in the Psalms: The Background to the Beatific Vision in the Hebrew Bible," *CBQ* 50 (1988) 171–83; Simeon Chavel, "The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 19 (2012) 1–55, at 17–18.

[20] This focus on the temple as the preeminent locus of encounter with Yahweh is also characteristic of the Korahite psalms, which Ps 42–43 heads (Ps 42–49, 84–85, 87–88; see Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Die Psalmen I: Psalm 1–50* [NEchtB 29; Würzburg: Echter, 1993] 266). The association of Ps 42–43 with the Korahites, who were a guild of temple singers (1 Chr 9:19; 2 Chr 20:19), adds another dimension to the distress of the speaker's removal from the temple.

[21] See Shalom E. Holtz, *Praying Legally* (BJS 364; Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2019) 46–59.

[22] Ibid., 57.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

To God (42:2)	To God (42:7–8)	To God (43:1–4)
To unspecified audience (42:3–5)	To unspecified audience (42:9–11)[23]	
To *nepeš* (42:6)	To *nepeš* (42:12)	To *nepeš* (43:5)

This simple table shows the speaker's alternation between speaking to God and speaking to her *nepeš*, but whereas the addresses to the *nepeš* are a single-verse refrain, the addresses to God double in length with each turn. The first is a single verse; the second, two verses; and the third, four verses. The expansion shows increasing engagement with God over the course of the prayer.

Similarly, the distribution of possessive pronouns attached to God indicates a strengthening connection between the speaker and God:

A – O God (42:2; address to God)

B – God of life (*lĕʾēl ḥāy*), God (42:3; address to unspecified audience)

C – "Where is your God?" (42:4; words of mockers)

D – God, (42:6; refrain apostrophe to the *nepeš*)

A – O my God (42:7; address to God)[24]

B – YHWH, God of my life (*lĕʾēl ḥayyāy*), God my rock (42:9; address to unspecified audience)

C – "Where is your God?" (42:11; words of mockers)

D – God, my God (42:12; refrain apostrophe to the *nepeš*)

O God . . . my God (43:1–2; address to God)

God . . . O God, my God (43:4; address to God)

God . . . my God (43:5; refrain apostrophe to the *nepeš*)

Breaking Ps 42–43 into three stanzas delineated by the refrain, we see that in the first stanza there are no possessive pronouns attached to God, at least not from the speaker; the only one comes from the mockers who sarcastically ask, "Where is your God?" The second stanza follows a similar pattern of divine names, but here the speaker uses multiple first-person possessive pronouns. Especially noteworthy are those attached to words repeated from the first stanza: "O God" (42:2) becomes "O *my* God" (42:7); "God of life" (42:3) becomes "God of *my* life" (42:9); and no mention of God at the end of 42:6 becomes "*my* God" at the end of 42:12. These pronouns indicate a shift from the first stanza to the second, as the speaker declares a personal connection to the God she is addressing. The last stanza does not repeat the pattern of the first two but instead concludes the prayer with three forthright references to "God . . . my God." Altogether this distribution of possessive

[23] Within these verses is the speaker's report to the audience of what she has said to God, so it is and is not a direct address to God within the psalm.

[24] Some interpreters follow certain LXX and Syriac manuscripts, which attach this phrase to the preceding verse, so that the first refrain ends with "my God" as do the refrains in 42:12 and 43:5 (see *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* [ed. Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983] 1125; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, 268).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pronouns, combined with the expanding addresses to God, speaks to a deepening bond between the speaker and God over the course of Ps 42–43.

In other ways, however, Ps 42–43 expresses doubt about the possibility of (liturgical) connection with God. This doubt is especially apparent in the psalm's water imagery and spatial organization. The first images of water occur in its opening verses, in which the speaker compares herself to a deer longing for streams (*'ăpîqê-māyim*); likewise, her *nepeš* thirsts (*ṣāmĕ'â*) for God. Thus, from the beginning of the psalm (lack of) water serves as a metaphor for the speaker's desolation (vv. 2–3; cf. Ps 63:2; 143:6), which only worsens with her abundance of tears (*dim'â*) and outpouring (*špk*) of *nepeš* in verses 4–5. Together these images depict what Terence Collins called the "weeping *nepeš*," which involves the flow of tears out of the intestines, through the throat (*nepeš*), and out the eyes (cf. Jer 13:17; Lam 2:11–12; Ps 31:10) and results in the desiccation of the weeper (cf. Ps 69:4).[25] These comparative examples of the "weeping *nepeš*" indicate that the outpouring of tears and *nepeš* in verses 4–5 is a continuation of the thirst described in verses 2–3, and the verses altogether depict the speaker's parched condition as a physical reality and metaphor for spiritual desolation.

Later in the psalm, it is God who is associated with water imagery, though not the kind that will bring relief to the speaker. Rather, we find images of water as an overwhelming force of mythic proportions. In a direct address to God in 42:7–8, the speaker describes a scene of "Deep (*tĕhôm*) calling out to Deep (*tĕhôm*)," roaring channels (*ṣinnôreykā*) of water, and breaking waves (*mišbāreykā wĕgalleykā*) that sweep over her. Such imagery evokes God's overwhelming power and suggests the impossibility of renewed encounter between God and the speaker. The references to *tĕhôm*, in particular, speak to a profound disproportionality in scale. Whereas the images of water associated with the speaker are mundane (streams, tears), the *tĕhôm* refers to the cosmic waters of pre-creation (Gen 1:2; 49:25; Deut 33:13; Ps 104:6; Job 28:14; 38:16) and is cognate with the name of a Mesopotamian deity (Akk. *Tiamat*).

Thus, the water imagery of Ps 42–43 symbolizes the speaker's mixed outlook about her encounter with God.[26] On the one hand, the imagery speaks to her personal and embodied desire to be with God. Divine absence is felt as thirst, and her body produces tears in hopes of renewing that bond. On the other hand, the disparity in scale between the various images of water indicates the speaker's perceived distance from God and her doubts that the gap can be bridged. Her internal thirst for an encounter with God must contend with external obstacles that stand in the way of that encounter.

[25] Terence Collins, "The Physiology of Tears in the Old Testament: Part I," *CBQ* 33 (1971) 18–38, at 23–26.

[26] On this point, see Alexandra Grund-Wittenberg, "Is There Somebody There?: Soliloquy in the Psalms," *Biblica* 100 (2019) 481–505, at 500.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Significantly, both sets of water images are given from the speaker's perspective; the tension between them is one that she herself embodies. It would be different if the imagery of longing were from the speaker, and the images of overwhelming power came from a different voice, such as God or the enemies. In that case, we might say that the speaker's desire for relationship must overcome the doubts of others who only see the obstacles to it. In Ps 42–43, however, it is the speaker's own awareness of those obstacles that makes the psalm a poignant expression of both desire and separation. Part of her is desperate for relationship, but another part knows all too well the challenges that stand in the way.

This tension finds further expression in the psalm's spatial organization, in which the speaker locates herself far from God's dwelling in Jerusalem. First of all, she is low, while God is high. Her abasement is clear from the word *tištôḥăḥî*, which occurs in the three refrains (42:6, 12; 43:5) and once more in a slightly different form (*tištôḥāḥ*) in 42:7. Whether we take the verb from the root *šḥḥ* ("to be bowed down") or from the root *šwḥ* ("to be downcast, depressed"),[27] the word situates the speaker's *nepeš* in a low position, as the typical translation "downcast" indicates.[28] By contrast, God's place in Ps 42–43 is high on the "holy mountain" of Zion, which the speaker hopes to visit (43:3). Such a visit is complicated by a second spatial marker in the psalm, namely, the speaker's location "in the land of Jordan and Hermon" (42:7). This phrase likely refers to the karstic springs at the base of Mount Hermon, which feed the headwaters of the Jordan River.[29] These references locate the speaker in the extreme north of Israel, the farthest possible place from the Jerusalem temple. Thus, the spatial arrangement of Ps 42–43 reiterates the central tension of the poem. The speaker wants God's light and truth to lead her to Zion, but throughout the psalm she calls attention to her own remoteness from God's presence.[30]

Against the backdrop of these images signifying both movement toward and perceived distance from God, we can now look more closely at the ways that *nepeš* epitomizes this same tension. The word sometimes represents the speaker's

[27] David J. A. Clines lists both roots as possibilities (*The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* [8 vols.; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011] 8:302, 320), while Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs list the root as *šḥḥ* (*A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952] 1006). Alternatively, Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm take the root to be *šyḥ*, "to melt away, dissolve" (*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* [trans. Mervyn E. J. Richardson; 4 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999] 1477). See Mark S. Smith, "Some Biblical Soul Talk in the Psalms: The Reflexive Self (*nepeš*)," in *Fromme und Frevler: Studien zu Psalmen und Weisheit. Festschrift für Hermann Spieckermann zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. C. Körting and R. Kratz; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020) 77–86, at 81–82.

[28] Another hint of the speaker's lowliness is the word for "streams" (*'ăpîqê*) in 42:2, which in Hebrew (and Ugaritic) refers to water running through deep valleys or springs (cf. Job 6:15; Joel 1:20; 2 Sam 22:16).

[29] See Andrew R. Davis, *Tel Dan in Its Northern Cultic Context* (ABS 20; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013) 17–18.

[30] Grund-Wittenberg, "Is There Somebody There?," 500.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

desire for encounter with God (42:2–3); at other times, it symbolizes her depleted condition without God's presence (42:5); and, finally, in the refrains, the speaker refers to it as a distinct entity, one whose lowliness implies a remote distance from the heights where God dwells (42:6, 12; 43:5). This mixed representation of the *nepeš* mirrors the speaker's inner conflict, which is further highlighted by the use of apostrophe in the refrain. The poet could easily have simply stated, "My *nepeš* is downcast and disquieted" (cf. 42:7), but instead has the speaker address it as something separated from God and even from herself.

This separation is underlined by the prepositional phrase *ʿālay* after the verb *hmh*, which denotes all sorts of noise-making (e.g., thunder, sea-roar, growl, bleat, murmur, groan, etc.). I will argue below that the verb is best rendered in Ps 42–43 as "intone," but whatever the translation, it is striking that the speaker's *nepeš* makes a sound *ʿālay* "upon/over me." Contrary to the "within me" found in many modern translations (NJPS, NABRE, NIV, NRSVue),[31] the prepositional phrase indicates a distinction between psalm's speaker ("me") and her *nepeš*, such that the latter makes a noise upon or over the former. The same distinction is found in another combination of *nepeš* and *ʿālay*, this time in 42:5 where the speaker says, "I pour out my *nepeš* upon me (*ʿālay*)." Although this *ʿālay* is often omitted from modern translations (NJPS, NABRE, NIV, NRSVue), the phrase offers further evidence that Ps 42–43 presents the speaker's *nepeš* as somehow separate from her.

The direct address to the *nepeš* as a distinct entity plays a crucial role in the rhetoric of Ps 42–43. Such apostrophe, which Jonathan Culler defines as "a turning aside from supposedly real listeners to address someone or something that is not an ordinary, empirical listener, such as a nightingale, an urn, or one's own poem," is best understood as a formal technique used to accentuate some part of the poetic discourse.[32] As Culler goes on to explain, apostrophe "is not just one trope among others but a troping on the circuit of communication or situation of address. . . . Apostrophes foreground the act of address, lift it out of ordinary empirical contexts, and thus at some level identify the poetic act as ritualistic, hortatory, a special sort of linguistic event."[33] Attention to this poetic and rhetorical function of apostrophe shows that it is a mistake to enlist the refrains in Ps 42–43 as evidence of a dualistic view of ancient Israelite personhood or to make it the basis of any claims about biblical anthropology. Rather, the apostrophe is a poetic expression of the speaker's inner tension regarding her relationship with God, a tension that runs so deep, her *nepeš* may as well be divided from itself. She is, as we might say, "beside herself."

What is especially significant about this apostrophic expression of inner tension is that it is repeated three times in Ps 42–43, thus serving as its principal structuring device. Earlier in this section we saw that in several ways the psalm builds toward

[31] See Smith, "Some Biblical Soul Talk in the Psalms," 82–83.

[32] Culler, "Lyric, History, and Genre," *New Literary History* 40 (2009) 879–99, at 886. See also F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 196.

[33] Ibid., 887.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

greater connection with God, but three times this trajectory is interrupted by a refrain, whose distinctive poetic style within the psalm calls extra attention to itself. Its depiction of the speaker's abased *nepeš* more than punctuates the psalm; it stands in tension with the speaker's progress toward God. These countervailing movements of deepening relationship with God and persistent separation from God are encapsulated in Ps 42–43's depiction of the speaker's divided *nepeš*. Like other biblical texts that portray some kind of disjunction between a character's body and self, the divided *nepeš* in Ps 42–43 serves a rhetorical purpose.[34] Such a *nepeš* may be confusing as data for constructing a biblical anthropology, but as a metaphor, it is a poignant symbol of the speaker's mixture of desire and doubt in her relationship with God.[35]

Psalm 42–43 as an Answer to its Own Dilemma

The above exegesis of Ps 42–43 has focused on the ways it articulates the speaker's inner tension over her relationship with God, and I noted that the psalm ends without a clear resolution to the tension it expresses. The last verses are a final repetition of the apostrophic refrain, encouraging the reluctant *nepeš* to share in the hope and praise of God. At the end there is still a part of the speaker that holds back, mindful of the obstacles and distance between her and God, so that we readers are left uncertain if and when the speaker will ever overcome her doubts about encountering God in the temple. But just because modern readers, who encounter Ps 42–43 two-dimensionally as a text to be read, lack resolution does not mean that resolution, or at least mitigation, of the speaker's inner conflict is altogether absent. Here again the literary form of the psalm is instructive, for if we consider the psalm not just as text but also as a prayer, then we can see how Ps 42–43 represents movement toward renewed integration.[36]

[34] See David J. A. Clines, "The Disjoined Body: The Body and the Self in Hebrew Rhetoric," in *Biblical Interpretation* (ed. G. A. van den Heever and S. W. van Heerden; Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2001) 148–57; Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 78–92; Amy Erickson, "'Without My Flesh I Will See God': Job's Rhetoric of the Body," *JBL* 132 (2013) 295–313.

[35] Such polysemy should not be surprising since it is precisely their capacity for multiple meanings that makes metaphors valuable, especially in poetry. According to Paul Ricoeur, tension between different possible meanings is a key feature of the explanatory power of metaphor; he writes that "tension, contradiction, and controversion are nothing but the opposite side of the reconciliation in which metaphor 'makes sense'" (*The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language* [trans. R. Czerny; London: Routledge, 1977] 230). A similar point is made by Adele Berlin in her discussion of metaphor in biblical poetry. Using Ps 42:2–3 as an example, she writes that "metaphor involves more than a simple comparison or equation of one object with another"; it also involves the juxtaposition of dissimilar objects whose interaction creates new meaning ("On Reading Biblical Poetry: The Role of Metaphor," in *Congress Volume: Cambridge, 1995* [VTSup 66; Leiden: Brill, 1997] 25–36, at 30).

[36] Here I acknowledge the gap between our encounter with Ps 42–43 as a text and the actual performance of it as a prayer; a ritual text is not the same thing as the ritual itself (see James W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture* [Cambridge: Cambridge

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

One of the insights of ritual studies of the last few decades is that religious rituals, like all social practices, both express beliefs and values and also play an active role in shaping them.[37] On the one hand, a ritual is a way of negotiating and responding to a set of circumstances, but on the other hand, "it redefines or generates the circumstances to which it is responding."[38] In many instances this process of redefinition is unconscious; the meaning and impact of a ritual exceed the intention and awareness of the worshipers who engage in it.[39] As an embodied activity, the ritual produces an effect beyond the original purpose behind it. For example, a prayer generates different meanings when spoken from a sitting, standing, or kneeling position; its significance changes when it is sung aloud or whispered *sotto voce*. Such embodiments are integral to the overall meaning of any text that is embedded in a ritual performance. As Catherine Bell writes, "the molding of the body within a highly structured environment does not simply express inner states. Rather, it primarily acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of the acts themselves."[40] For Bell, kneeling exemplifies this effect insofar as it does more than convey deference; it also produces a deferential kneeler.

Although we cannot be certain how Ps 42–43 was performed in ancient Israel, it seems likely that it was performed in some way, and this ritual dimension offers important insight into the psalm's overall meaning.[41] As a prayer, the psalm is addressed to God in the context of worship, perhaps in the temple. By situating the speaker in divine space and orienting her towards God, the ritual performance of Ps 42–43 gestures toward an encounter with God, even as the words of the prayer cast doubt on the possibility of such an encounter.[42] This orientation to God does not

University Press, 2007] 27–32; David P. Wright, "Ritual Theory, Ritual Texts, and the Priestly-Holiness Writings of the Pentateuch," in *Social Theory and the Study of Israelite Religion: Essays in Retrospect and Prospect* [ed. S. Olyan; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012] 195–216). In my view, however, this gap does not leave us unable to make any inferences about the ritual practice represented by a text. In any event, the Psalms are an exceptional corpus. Because they are performed today in their present textual form, the present-day gap between text and ritual is not as wide. It is possible that an interpretation based on ritual performance could be valid in a modern context but not in an ancient one.

[37] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (trans. R. Nice; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 72–95.

[38] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 109.

[39] On these instances of "misrecognition," see ibid., 108–10.

[40] Ibid., 100.

[41] On the cultic setting of Psalms both in and outside of the Jerusalem temple, see Richard J. Clifford, "Psalms of the Temple," and Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "Non–Temple Psalms: The Cultic Setting Revisited," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms* (ed. W. Brown; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) 326–37 and 338–49, respectively. Certainly, not every psalm involved performance (e.g., wisdom psalms, "prophetic" psalms, etc.), but the performance of Ps 42–43 seems likely based on its references to worship at the house of God.

[42] As a more recent example of this double effect of Ps 42–43 in the context of ritual, we may note the psalm's use in the Tridentine Mass of the Roman Catholic Church. In this rite the psalm is recited at the beginning of the mass as one of the prayers at the foot of the altar; in this liturgical setting, the psalm expresses the priest's desire to approach the altar as well as the need for God

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

erase the inner conflict that the speaker expresses in the psalm, but it does reframe it. Like other genres that convey doubt and despair (e.g., laments, complaints), Ps 42–43 gives voice to estrangement but does so in a ritual and literary form that actually establishes connection with the divine. In this way, the performance of the psalm represents a step toward mitigating the tension named within it.

Support for this reading of Ps 42–43 comes from two recent studies of the psalm. One is by Alexandra Grund-Wittenberg, who analyzes it as one of several examples of soliloquy in the Psalms. Although I disagree with her characterization of the refrain in Ps 42–43 as soliloquy,[43] I think she is right to highlight the way that the refrain orients the speaker towards a relationship with God: "the speaker must address him or herself repeatedly in order to arrive at a final, assured vow of praise."[44] The second is Anja Marschall's recent study of the verb performed by the doe in verse 2—*ta'ărōg*—which she reads as "crying out" (cf. Joel 1:20) rather than the more common "longing for" (cf. LXX).[45] For her, this translation is crucial to demonstrating the psalm's movement from an animalistic cry to a prayer of lament. She writes that in the refrains of Ps 42–43, "the *næfæš* communicates with God in a nonverbal and instinctive way. It is not passively longing but reacting and doing its best to change the situation: moving in the direction of God and attempting to move God toward itself."[46] Both Grund-Wittenberg and Marschall recognize how Ps 42–43, as a prayer, moves the speaker toward the divine encounter she desires, and here I build on their insight by showing how the refrain's imagery of abasement and its use of apostrophe indicate embodied ritual actions that begin to mitigate that tension between doubt and desire.

Both roots proposed for *tištôḥăḥî* (downcast)—either *šḥḥ* (to be bowed down), or from the root *šwḥ* (to be downcast, depressed)—are associated with acts of mourning. For example, the root *šḥḥ* occurs in Ps 35:13–14 alongside fasting and wearing sackcloth, and the root *šwḥ* is found in Lamentations 3:20 as part of a lament, in which the speaker describes being "bowed low" whenever he recounted his pain and misery.[47] The latter verse is especially interesting because it features *nepeš* as the subject of the verb: "My *nepeš* recounts [my pain and misery] and

to remove the obstacles that might block his approach. See Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development (Missarum Sollemnia)* (trans. F. Brunner; Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1986; orig. 1951) 293.

[43] The broadness and variability of Grund-Wittenberg's definition of soliloquy limit its usefulness as a framework. She writes that "in a drama, a soliloquy is easily recognized when a character turns away and talks to the audience. In a narrative, we know it is soliloquy when the narrator tells us a character's thoughts" ("Is There Somebody in There?," 484). When it comes to the psalms, she defines it as conversations that the speaker has with himself or herself (ibid., 485).

[44] Ibid., 502.

[45] Marschall, "A Doe's Call Grows into Lament: The Comparison with the Doe in Psalm 42:1 and its Meaning for the Description of the *Næfæš*," *VT* 72 (2022) 688–98.

[46] Ibid., 697.

[47] Reading here the Qere *wĕtāšóaḥ* instead of Ketib *wĕtāšíaḥ*; see Rolf Shäfer, *Biblia Hebraica Quinta: General Introduction and Megilloth* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004) 126*–127*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

bows low upon me."[48] Both verses are instructive for appreciating the ritual aspect of the verb *tištôḥăḥî* in Ps 42–43. The word does not denote an interior disposition ("depressed") so much as a physical gesture of lament, perhaps one repeated more than once, if we take the Hithpoel form to indicate an iterative action.[49] According to this reading of *tištôḥăḥî*, the verb indicates a ritual engagement with God even as the words of the refrain express estrangement from God. The resulting tension is not unlike that found in the psalms of lament, which direct harsh words of complaint at God but at the same time presuppose relationship with God.

A similar case can be made for the verb *wattehĕmî* in the refrain. As noted above, the root *hmh* has a broad semantic range of noise-making, but as with the root *šḥḥ*, I would highlight its use in the context of prayer. In Ps 55:17–18, for example, we find the couplet "I call upon God, and Yahweh will save me/morning, noon, and night I intone (*wĕ'ehĕmeh*) my complaint, and he hears my voice." The parallel between "call upon God" and the verb *hmh* is clear evidence that the latter could refer to prayer. Likewise, in Ps 77:4 the speaker declares: "When I recount God, I intone (*wĕ'ehĕmāyâ*) my complaint, and my spirit grows faint."[50] Both of these verses indicate that a complaint addressed to God is one of the noises that *hmh* could refer to.

Taken together with the bowing down gesture of lament signified by *šḥḥ*, this interpretation of *hmh* as a prayer of complaint offers a new perspective on the refrain in Ps 42–43 and its depiction of *nepeš*. The refrain still stands in tension with the speaker's desire to meet God in the temple, and the apostrophized *nepeš* still symbolizes the speaker's inner conflict over relationship with God. But the verbs signifying lament and prayer suggest an orientation toward God and even a kind of engagement with God in the midst of the estrangement expressed in the psalm. Insofar as rituals play a role in producing reality, not just reflecting it, the depiction of embodied prayer in the refrain of Ps 42–43 represents a first step towards mitigating the inner tension expressed throughout the psalm. According to this interpretation, the refrain that punctuates Ps 42–43 features the speaker addressing that part of her divided *nepeš*, which is distanced from God but nonetheless is engaged in a religious practice directed at God. It articulates separation but also creates through gestures the possibility of connection with the divine.

Moreover, the recognition of the ritual aspect of *šḥḥ* and *hmh* offers a corrective to the tendency among modern scholars to over-spiritualize and over-psychologize the tension expressed in Ps 42–43. Peter Lombard, for example, described the

[48] Cf. also 1QH 16:33: "my *nepeš* bows low (*tštwḥḥ*) completely upon me."

[49] The Hithpoel conjugation of geminate verbs corresponds to the Hithpael, whose general meaning is reflexive but is in some cases iterative (e.g., *hithallēk* = "to walk back and forth"); see P. Kyle McCarter, "Hebrew," in *The Ancient Languages of Syria-Palestine and Arabia* (ed. R. Woodard; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 36–81, at 71–72.

[50] Here, as in Ps 55:18, I take the pairing of *śyḥ* ("to complain") and *hmh*, both conjugated as 1 pers. sg. verbs, as hendiadys.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

psalm's refrain as "reason comfort[ing] the emotional soul through hope in God,"[51] and more recently, James Luther Mays wrote that "in this refrain, the ego addresses the soul."[52] These interpretations are characteristic of the larger tendency in biblical scholarship to interiorize Hebrew terms for the self.[53] While it is true that *nepeš* in Ps 42–43 abstracts from the concrete meaning of "throat," it nonetheless remains an embodied reality lived out in the cultic performances at the temple. This embodied dimension of *nepeš* is underscored by the ritual connotations of *šḥḥ* and *hmh*.

This emphasis on embodiment is not meant to sideline the psychological or emotional dimensions of *nepeš* in Ps 42–43. Indeed, by attending to its rhetorical, poetic, and ritual aspects, we gain deeper insight into the spiritual dynamics at play in the psalm As an expression of the speaker's spirituality, the divided *nepeš* in Ps 42–43 is a powerful and poignant metaphor of the inner tension felt by any pray-er who makes the words of the psalm their own. Although the original *Sitz im Leben* of Ps 42–43 probably involved someone—perhaps a Korahite or some other cultic functionary—separated from the Jerusalem temple and longing to visit there, it is easy to imagine other contexts in which the psalm's combination of desire and doubt would be equally compelling. The Judeans exiled in Babylon, for example, would likely have identified with its mix of longing for encounter with God and painful recognition of the obstacles that stand in the way, not least the temple's recent destruction. Evidence of this exilic reception of Ps 42–43 consists of its inclusion in (and position at the head of) the Elohistic Psalter (Ps 42–83), whose emphasis on reestablishing Zion suggests that the collection reflects post-exilic hopes of rebuilding.[54] It is also noteworthy how often Rashi reads Ps 42–43 through the lens of the Babylonian Exile.[55]

Another example of Ps 42–43 serving as an expression of spiritual tension beyond the specific scenario depicted in the psalm comes from its quotation in the New Testament scene of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33–34; Matt 26:37–38). After becoming grieved and agitated, Jesus says to Peter, James, and John, "My soul is downcast" (Gr. *perilypos estin hē psyche mou*), which has long been recognized as a (slightly revised) quote of the refrain in Ps 42–43 (LXX *perilypos ei psychē*).[56] In the next verses, Jesus struggles to accept his fate, praying that the cup will pass from him but also trusting in God's will. This inner conflict

[51] This quote (and similar examples) is cited in Alonso Schökel, "The Poetic Structure of Psalm 42–43," *JSOT* 1 (1976) 4–21, at 8.

[52] Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1994) 175.

[53] See Lambert, "Refreshing Philology," 332–56.

[54] See Joel S. Burnett, "A Plea for David and Zion: The Elohistic Psalter as Psalm Collection for the Temple's Restoration," in *Diachronic and Synchronic – Reading the Psalms in Real Time: Proceedings of the Baylor Symposium on the Book of Psalms* (ed. J. Burnett et al.; LHB/OTS 488; London: T&T Clark, 2007) 95–113.

[55] Specifically, Ps 42:1, 2, 3, 7, 9 (Mayer I. Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on the Psalms* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2007) 335–45.

[56] See Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (2 vols; New York: Doubleday, 1994) 1:153–57.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

within Jesus is the perfect occasion for Ps 42–43, whose combination of trust and doubt correspond to his own painful predicament.

But as in Ps 42–43 itself, Jesus' quotation of refrain offers him a way forward even as it articulates his profound inner tension. In her analysis of the scene at Gethsemane, Angela Kim Harkins argues that Jesus' prayer in the garden, including the quote from Ps 42–43, is a ritual reenactment of Second Temple penitential prayer.[57] Although this reenactment resulted in abandonment rather than the expected divine response or communal support, it nonetheless moved the gospel narrative forward by presenting Jesus' inner tension as a necessary ritual step toward the fulfillment of his mission. In this way, Mark and Matthew's quotation of the refrain from Ps 42–43 not only conveys key words from the psalm but also its overall spiritual and ritual significance. By expressing the speaker's inner tension between longing and doubt, the psalm gives voice to a spiritual struggle familiar to pray-ers across the centuries, and at the same time it creates for them an experience that moves them closer to the divine encounter they desire.

Building on the work of Katrin Müller and Carol Newsom, this article's analysis of the rhetorical, literary, and ritual dimensions of *nepeš* in Ps 42–43, in both its biblical setting and its later reception, underlines the need for multiple interpretive approaches to such a concept. Arguments that adduce *nepeš* as evidence of a monistic or dualistic anthropology provide some insight into the concept but do not tell the whole story, especially for a prayer-poem like Ps 42–43, where *nepeš* is presented in both monistic and dualistic ways. This mixed presentation corresponds to the larger theme of the tension between desire and doubt and thus advances the psalm's literary and even spiritual aims. Furthermore, attention to the ritual language associated with *nepeš* in Ps 42–43 shows how the psalm offers a way forward through the very tension it expresses.

[57] Harkins, "Ritualizing Jesus' Grief at Gethsemane," *JSNT* 41 (2018) 177–203.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816025100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press