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Accusing YHWH of Fickleness
A study of Psalm 89,47-52

Introduction

Psalm 89 offers in its first half (vv. 2–38) a colourful sketch of the distinctive fates of all those existing and living in the universe and in the human world. The praise of YHWH’s steadfast love, faithfulness, and lordship over the cosmos is dovetailed with an elaborate portrait of YHWH’s covenant with his chosen one, David, and with the joy this king and his people experience because of YHWH’s covenant and loyalty. At the same time these positive events are contrasted with the fate of YHWH’s opponents, viz. Rahab and human adversaries. Both the faithful and the opponents experience YHWH’s mighty hand and arm. In the second half of the psalm (vv. 39–52), however, this picture turns into its negative, exemplified by YHWH’s rejection of David, his anointed one, and his repudiation of the covenant. In this part, YHWH’s hand seems to be no longer the instrument of deliverance and judgment, and instead the hand of his enemies and of sheol turn out to be more powerful.

Because both contrasting lines are present throughout the psalm, the stance the psalmist takes towards YHWH becomes more important. This happens twice. The first time at the beginning of the psalm, in v. 3b, where the psalmist anticipates the negative questions and rebuts them in his own directly reported speech: “I declare: ‘Your steadfast love is built forever, in the heavens you establish your faithfulness.’”. The second time, in the center of the psalm, v. 19, he presents his view in an indirect narrator’s text. He first shares with his audience the joy they feel when they confide in the name of YHWH. And then he openly participates in their confession: “truly our shield is of YHWH, our king, of the Holy One of Israel” (v. 19). Thus the

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1 The collation of David with “the anointed one” is visible throughout the psalm. In YHWH’s directly reported speeches in vv. 4-5a (“I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David, I will establish your offspring forever”), in vv. 20-21 (“I have exalted one chosen out of the people, I have found David, my servant, anointed him with my sacred oil”) followed in the same direct speech in vv. 28-30 (“I will appoint him first-born, highest of the kings of the earth. I will maintain my steadfast love for him always, my covenant with him shall endure. I will establish his line forever, his throne, as long as the heavens last”), further continued in vv. 35-37 with “I will not violate my covenant, or change what I have uttered. I have sworn by my holiness, once and for all; I will not be false to David. His line shall continue forever, his throne as the sun before me”. At the end of the psalm, vv. 50 and 52, the psalmist refers to all these elements: “where is your steadfast love of old you swore to David in your faithfulness?” and “how your enemies, o YHWH, have flung abuse, abuse at your anointed at every step”. [The translations are the NJPS’s, with the exception of the tetragrammaton.] In other words: “my servant”, “the chosen one”, “the anointed one”, “the king”, do all refer to David. To him YHWH offers the covenant and his faithful and steadfast love.
psalmist associates himself with his audience and at the same time the indirect narrator’s text is a technique for inviting his audience to join in in this praise.

It stands in sharp contrast to the furious attack of the psalmist in vv. 39–40: “You have rejected, spurned and become enraged at your anointed. You have repudiated the covenant with your servant”. Although not phrased in accusations, the subsequent series of questions is as incriminating: “How long, YHWH, will you hide forever?” (v. 47) and “Where are your deeds of steadfast love of old, o Lord?” (v. 50). And it is followed by an outcry for help against the abuse the enemies inflicted on YHWH’s anointed one (v. 52). Thus the psalm seems to end in despair, as if the psalmist cannot understand YHWH’s inconsistent behaviour. What is the meaning of this psalm’s ending? I hope to answer this question by a syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical study of the final sections of this psalm.

The position of vv. 47-52 in Psalm 89

Although this long Psalm displays various antithetical lines and themes, it forms nevertheless one composition, of which its structure is widely discussed. Based on the pioneering work of Hermann Gunkel, form-critical researchers in the twentieth century distinguished the three genres present in Psalm 89 as hymn, oracle, and complaint. In their view these genres reflected three stages of a redactional process of origin, which they came to treat as virtually separate poems. Later on, attention was paid to the question of liturgical setting. From the 1980s onwards literary studies emphasised the affinities between the various parts, their

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2 The aim of this article is, therefore, to offer a synchronic analysis of Psalm 89 as a literary unit and focuses on the last episode, not a diachronic (source- and tradition-critical, redaction-historical, religion-historical, linguistic-historical) study. It does not contribute to the debate on the (possible) historical dating of the psalm, on Psalm 89’s position in the entire psalter (canonical criticism) or in the Messianic psalter (redactional criticism), nor discusses the intertextual relations with other Psalms (intertextual criticism). All these aspects fall outside the scope of the present study.


conceptual and structural coherence. And this unified composition was further described as a coherent poem of lament, as a prophetic complaint about the fulfillment of an oracle, or as an angry reproach. At present the distinction between the praise in vv. 2–38 and the complaint or accusation in vv. 39–52 is accepted by all. On the other hand, in his structuralist study of Psalm 89, Hans Ulrich Steymans describes the semantic structure of the psalm not in terms of praise and complaint, but as an alternation of contract and testing, and in his view this alternation returns in the last episode. With regard to the composition and unity of the last part, it appears that some scholars examine the last part in its entirety, while others divide it into three smaller sections, namely vv. 39–46, 47–49, 50–52. In his careful study of Psalm 89 Michael Floyd concludes (based on thematic distinctions) that the last two sections, vv. 47–49 and vv. 50–52, stand out against the entire Psalm. Also the Masoretes divided the psalm into five units, and marked the first four of them with selah’s, viz. vv. 2–5, vv. 6–38, vv. 39–46, vv. 47–49, and vv. 50–52 (there is no selah after v. 52).

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7 See Clifford, “Psalm 89”.

8 See Floyd, “Psalm 89”.

9 See Mitchell, “Genre Disputes”.


11 H.U. Steymans, Psalm 89 und der Davidbund. Eine struktural und redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung (ÖBS 27; Frankfurt am Main 2005) 254–258. He concludes (on p. 257): the implicit author offers YHWH a contract, both in the questions in vv. 47.50 and in the imperatives in vv. 48.51 (“Darin formuliert der implizite Autor Etan in der Tat Aufforderungen an Jhwh, bietet ihm also einen Kontrakt an.”) 257). I fail to see how the questions “How long, YHWH, will you hide forever?” and “[How long] will your fury blaze like fire?” and the imperatives “Remember what is a lifespan?” and “Remember the abuse of your servants” entail the presentation of a contract.

12 Cf. Hosfeld-Zenger, Psalmen 51-100, 596: “Der Beter schließt mit dem Frage- und Bittabschnitt V 47–52.” At the same time they call vv. 48–49 an insertion (“Einschub”) and consider v. 50 a continuation of v. 47.

13 Cf. Floyd, “Psalm 89”, 446: “The fundamental divisions in the text thus occur at v. 20 and v. 47, and not at v. 39. The basic sections can be delineated and preliminary described as follows: vv. 2–19, a hymn of praise; vv. 20–46, a narrative of Yahweh’s past involvement with the monarchy (...); and v. 47–52, a reproach petitioning Yahweh for deliverance.”

14 G. Barbero, “Alcune osservazioni sulla conclusione del Salmo 89 (vv. 47–53)”, Bib 88 (2007) 536–545, proposes to consider v. 53 the ending of the psalm, notwithstanding the fact that (in his words on p. 536) v. 53 is regarded ‘almost universally’ as a redactional addition to the original psalm that signals the end of the third book in the psalm collection. Barberio (543) summarizes the arguments in favour of the commonly accepted redactional view as follows: (1) the rhythm of v. 53 (3+2 accents) differs from that in the rest of the psalm; (2) the references to YHWH in the entire psalm are either set in first person (when YHWH’s speeches are reported
A narratological study of Psalm 89 does indeed confirm the distinct position of the last two sections. Whereas in vv. 39–46 the narrator addresses YHWH directly and furiously, in v. 47a the narrator starts to pose some general questions (“how long”?), followed in vv. 48–49 by questions marked by the interrogatives וַעֲלֵיהֶם, “what?”, and מי, “who”. This narrator’s text differs completely in tone and perspective from the previous sections. It is even more distinctive because the involved parties this time are not David or his people, but all human beings and every man. The final section still addresses YHWH directly, but returns to the main participant, David, again.

Therefore, based on the Masoretic selah’s, Michael Floyd’s thematic distinctions and the narratological variation, the last two sections, vv. 47–49 and vv. 50–52, can be considered to stand out as distinct from the preceding verses in the psalm. The reason why in modern scholarship relatively less attention is paid to these final sections is that many scholars consider them a later addition. In the present study I will analyse the two sections one by one, both syntactically and semantically. Subsequently I will discuss these units from a rhetorical perspective.

A syntactic analysis of Psalm 89,47–49

directly), or set in second person (when the psalmist addresses YHWH with ‘you’), whereas v. 53 speaks of YHWH in third person; (3) the obvious contrast between v. 53 (“blessing”) and the previous part in vv. 47–49 (“complaint”); and (4) the similarity with other psalms’ conclusions (Pss 41,14; 72,19; 106,48). Over and against these arguments, BARBIERO justifies his own view that v. 53 is an integral part of the psalm by pointing at (1) the repetition of words in vv. 47–52 and v. 53, namely the tetragrammaton and the lexemes אָמַּנְתֵךְ in v. 50 and אָמַן אָמַן in v. 53, and (2) the inclusio between beginning of the psalms in v. 2 and its ending in v. 53, because both speak of YHWH in third person and both contain a praise or blessing. BARBIERO’s arguments fail to convince me. His justification of the unity of vv. 47-53 is based on the repetition of lexemes. Yet, the lexeme אָמַּנְתֵךְ “your faithfulness” in v. 50 is a noun that qualifies YHWH’s attitude towards his servants, whereas אָמַן אָמַן in v. 53 “truly” is a twice used adverb that expresses the desirable utterance the psalmist hopes to invoke in his audience. BARBIERO builds his exegesis of the psalm mainly on his second argument of inclusio between v. 2 and v. 53. However, the clausal structures, the verbal lexemes, the addressed persons, and the content are not at all the same, because in contrast to the verbal clause in v. 2a with the verb שִיר in first person ‘I will sing’, v. 53 is a nominal clause and the participle passive ברוך ‘be blessed’ marks a declaration of state. Also v. 2’s reference to YHWH’s steadfast love (חסד) is missing in v. 53. Only the lexemes לְעַלְוֹל (v. 2a) and לְעַלְוֹל (v. 53a) are (almost) the same. A very weak basis to build an entire argument on. The reason why BARBIERO defends this thesis is that he does not want the psalm to end with a complaint, but instead wishes it to conclude with a note of hope. [His theological bias is clear from the English abstract on p. 545: “The anger of YHWH cannot last forever, because his fidelity to the promise he made to David lasts forever. These considerations serve to moderate an exclusively theocratic and democratic interpretation of the Psalter, restoring attention to the messianic dimension as such.”]

15 See HOSSELD-ZENGER, Psalmen 51-100, 589 who call it an “Einschub”, and CREACH, “The Mortality”, 238 who proposes that “Ps 89: 48-49 is a late addition to the poem intended to downplay royal efficacy by means of the king’s own testimony.” The exception is FLOYD, “Psalm 89”, 446-47, who does pay extensive attention to these verses.
The syntactic organisation of vv. 47–49 is in one respect simple and in another complicated. It is simple because each of the clauses opens explicitly or implicitly with an interrogative. Verse 47 consists of two clauses, in which the first in v. 47a starts with עָדוֹת, “until what time?” or “how long?”, while the second clause in v. 47b assumes the same interrogative. Verse 48 consists of three clauses. The first, זָכָרֵךְ in v. 48a, is an imperative clause in which the personal pronoun אֵין is set in a casus pendens construction. Commonly a unit in casus pendens is placed in a fronted position, whereas here אֵין follows the verb to which it is closely linked by a maqef. This irregular clause is followed in v. 48b and v. 48c by two interrogative clauses: עָלַיָּהוּ בַּעַדְנֹתָם אֵלֵיהוּ, a nominal clause opening with מה, “what?”, and עָלַיָּהוּ עָלַיָּהוּ, a verbal clause opening with עליהו “on account of what?” or “why?”. Verse 49 also consists of three clauses. The interrogative part of the verbal clause מי גבר יחיה “what man (will live)?” in v. 49a seems to be presupposed in the following verbal clauses ולא יראה-מות “and [what man] will not see death” in v. 49b, and יָלָם נֶפֶשׁ מְדִירָאֹל “[what man] can save himself from the hand of sheol” in v. 49c. All seven questions together form two groups: the first group (four questions in vv. 47a–48c) has the addressed deity as agent-subject, the second group (three questions in vv. 49ac) has a human being as agent-subject. The elliptic constructions of these questions are quite regular and clear.

Less simple is the syntactic construction of v. 48a. The imperative זָכָר “remember” is connected through a maqef with אֵין “I”. Thus the Masoretes indicated that the two words joined form a single tone unit. But do they also form a syntactic unit? If it were to indicate “remember me”, the personal pronoun would have been expressed by a pronominal suffix, זָכָרֵךְ. However, here this “I” is an independent form and seem to function as an interjection,
“remember, I” 18. In some of the ancient versions it is changed into “Lord” 19, followed by many modern commentators and translations 20. This emendation acknowledges the fact that the word אני is set apart from the verb, thus functioning as the addressed person. It also takes into consideration that v. 51 has a similar structure with the verb זכר. In both verses, v. 48a (זכור אני) and v. 51 (놀ר אני), the involved subjects אני and אני are set apart from the regular clause’s predication. I consider, therefore, this emendation plausible and justifiable.

Dependent on this imperative clause “remember” in v. 48a are the two next clauses in v. 48b and v. 48c. Verse 48b starts with the interrogative מה, “what”, and functions as an attribute of the noun חלד, “lifespan”, thus constituting a nominal clause: “what is a lifespan”. The same construction of an interrogative attributively linked to the noun שוא “futility” returns in v. 48c. This time it is followed by the verb ברא in qatal second person singular with YHWH as the implied subject and כל בני האדם as the explicit direct object. This construction has given rise to emendations and questions 21. The reason for emendations is mainly based on semantic arguments, because the combination of creation and futility is very irregular, to say the least. However, syntactically the similarities between v. 48b and v. 48c are clear, since they are set in parallel position: “[Remember, o Lord] מה־חלד” and “[Remember, o Lord] על־מה־שוא.” Because v. 48b introduces the main topic “what is a lifespan”? the psalmist can leave out this crucial term חלד “lifespan” in v. 48c. Hence, v. 48c is an elliptic construction. The

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18 H.U. STEYMANS, Psalm 89 und der Davidbund, 181 proposes to respect the Masoretic version of v. 48: “Doch in der endgültigen Form des Verses bezieht das bittende »Ich« diese Bitte auf sich selbst: »Ich – was ist (ist) Lebenszeit (für mich)?«” Problem with this proposal is that “for me” is not presented nor entailed in this verse. It merely asks: “Remember I, what is a life span?”, thus expressing a general question, not limited to a specific individual or collective. The same problem arises in BARBIERO, “Alcune osservazioni”, 539 who translates “Ricorda: io...che cos’è la (mia) vita?”, thus adding the possessive pronoun ‘my’ in “my life”.

19 Although not in LXX, in which ἐγώ in v 48a is translated with μοι (μνησθήτι τις μοι ή υπόστασις).

20 See BHS (prp עליון), and i.a. HOSSFELD-ZENGER, Psalm 51-100, 580: “Statt des זכר־אני des MT ist mit Rücksicht auf V 51 זכר אדני »gedenke Herr« zu lesen. Die Konjektur erscheint von den vielen vorgeschlagenen noch als die schonendste im Umgang mit dem MT zu sein”.

21 Rather than על־מה־שוא BHS proposes to read על־מה with an atnah under על־מה; others, as indicated in DCH 8:271-72, follow this reading, but do not take into account the atnah and they translate “the duration of eternity; have you created all human beings as futility”? I follow the Masoretic verse alignment here.
clause entails the noun חלד “lifespan” presented explicitly in the nominal clause of 48b to be included in the direct object of the action expressed by the verb ברא in v. 48c: it regards the lifespan of all human beings.

In short, immediately following upon the questions in v. 47 why YHWH is hiding his face and why he is so furious, the psalmist expands the scope from this fury to the limited lifespans of human beings.

How long – YHWH – will you hide your face forever?
– will your fury blaze like fire?
Remember – L ORD – what is a lifespan?
– on what שוא/futility did you ברא [the lifespans of] all human beings?

A related topic is discussed in v. 49, namely death and mortality. Again the subject is “human beings” in general. The verb forms are set in yiqtol and express that no one will live forever and that everyone will surely die, since no one can escape from the hand of sheol. The limited time given to human beings in v. 48 and their mortality in v. 49 stand in sharp contrast to v. 47, where YHWH is said to act forever, that is, for an unlimited time.

A semantic analysis of Psalm 89,47–49

YHWH’s powerful actions, in vv. 39–46 described as rejection of his anointed one and repudiation of the covenant, is in v. 47 resumed under the heading of “hiding” and “fury”. The Niphal of התר shows the event in which YHWH carries out the action of concealing, so that he cannot be seen or found. People experience this hiding as absence, loss of contact, and lack of possibility to connect. Consequently, they are afraid that their deity has left them. The noun חמה “anger, fury” expresses an even more aggressive attitude, especially because it is

specified by the simile חמותאש “like fire”. Together with the verb בער “blaze” the simile builds into the metaphor יְהוֹ ה רַע‘S FURY IS LIKE FIRE, יְהוֹ ה רַע‘S FURIOUS ACTIONS ARE LIKE BLAZING FIRE, יְהוֹ ה R‘S FURY CONSUMES EVERYTHING LIKE FIRE CONSUMES EVERYTHING. As such the two images in v. 47a and 47b are quite conventional in the Hebrew Bible, but the combination of the two contrastive images is remarkable: while the former evokes יְהוֹ ה‘S absence, the latter displays his aggressive and devastating presence.

Verse 48 sets one more step on this road of angry protest. Lifespan itself is criticised. The term used is חֲלָד which occurs four times in the Hebrew Bible in the meaning of ‘lifespan’ or ‘duration of life’. The first time, in Ps 17,14, the psalmist prays יְהוֹ ה to save him from his enemies: “(rescue me) from men, o יְהוֹ ה, with your hand, from men with a limited portion in lifetime”. Here a distinction is made between a limited portion, חֲלָד, and the total lifespan, חֲלַד. The second attestation is Ps 39,6, “you have set my days just handbreadths long; my lifespan (חֲלָד) is as nothing (כַּאֲנִי) before you (נַגְדֶךָ)”. Here the short total lifespan of the psalmist is set over against the enduring presence of the deity. In Job 11,17 Zophar incites Job to put all misery out of his mind, and live “life (חֲלָד) as long as it is bright as midday”. In these three usages, the word חֲלָד refers to the total time of life, which is nevertheless very short. Psalm 89,48 fits in this pattern of a critical assessment of human beings’ total lifespan, because it considers it grounded on שָוָא.

The 53 attestations of the noun שָוָא in the Hebrew Bible express meanings such as “deceit, worthlessness, falsehood, vanity, futility, emptiness, delusion, illusion, ineffectiveness, pointlessness, idleness”. Used as an adverb it denotes “in vain, futile, purposeless, without reason or cause, ineffective”. The dictionaries and lexicons describe שָוָא’s meaning extensively and demonstrate that the term in all its contexts of use has a very

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23 Dictionaries, lexicons, and commentaries all agree on this lexeme’s meaning (see BDB, HALOT and DCH, as well as the commentaries mentioned in note 6).
24 In combination with words of living or prepositions of place it means world: Isa 38,11 ‘world’, Ps 49,2 ‘all inhabitants of the world’. The lexicons and dictionaries record these occurrences as well as earlier proposed emendations. In the present study we do not discuss the emendations.
25 The noun נָחַל designates “a share,” while the verb נָחַל means “to divide”, “to have one’s share”, “to apportion”, “to distribute”, or “to get a share in”.

negative content. Yet, no one has raised the question whether שוא is ever used to qualify an action performed by YHWH, as here in Ps 89,48. Is YHWH ever said to be the agent-subject of an action that is qualified as “set on futile ground”, that is, purposeless, ineffective, or arbitrary? Is his action ever judged as in vain or without a cause? In fact, in a majority of cases the notion of שוא is positioned in direct opposition to the deity. It is used in relation to false speech, to those who break the covenant, to false magicians, to false prophets, to false idols. The only texts in which YHWH’s actions are associated with שוא are found in Jer 2,29–30 and 6,29. In the former, YHWH is reported saying: לֶשַׁוָיָה הָכִית יָבִינוּן “in vain I have beaten your sons; they would not accept correction”. And in Jer 6,29 the term is used metaphorically: לֶשַׁוָיָה זַרְוָה “in vain did the smelter smelt - the dross is not separated out”. In both texts, שוא is used in the prepositional construction לֶשַׁוָיָה to designate “in vain” and it functions in the context of punishment and rejection. However, here in Ps 89,48 it is used as an independent noun שוא construed with an interrogative “on what vanity/futile ground,” and it is used with YHWH as agent-subject of the verb בָּרָא. In conclusion, the usage of שוא in Ps 89,48 stands out as unique.

The verb linked to this noun is בָּרָא. Surprisingly in modern scholarship of Psalm 89, no one has raised questions with regard to the conceptual content of v. 48. If it meant: “you, God, on what futile ground did you create all human beings?”, it raises doubt to the entire creation of the human race. But does it? Is the text dealing with the creation of all human beings? To answer this question, further attention should be paid to the meaning of the verb בָּרָא.

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27 See HOSSELDIENZENGER, Psalm 51-100, 596 who merely state that this verse is inserted and an elaboration of the lament on the transience of life. See also H.U. STEYMAN, Psalm 89 und der Davidbund, 181 who does not spend a word on the semantic content of v. 48. The exception is BARBIERO, “Alcune osservazioni”, 538-9 who does discuss the meaning of v. 48b. Based on the conventional understanding of בָּרָא as ‘create’, he explains the odd combination of ‘creation’ with שוא. Without further explanation he translates שוא with ‘ephemera’: “vale la pena creare per poi lasciare vivere in una maniera così effimera?” (BARBIERO 538). Yet, transience is unlikely the meaning of שוא, because in all its biblical attestations this term expresses the more fundamental notions of unfoundedness, vanity, purposelessness, and not only a concept of short time (“short living”).
28 NJPS: “why should You have created every man in vain?”
Since more than a century ago biblical scholars have been doubtful about the standard view that בָּרָא denotes “to create” and suggested that the verb’s meaning comes closer to that of cutting or separation. Yet, they failed to convince the majority, mainly because God’s creation of the heaven and the earth in Gen 1,1 is a theologoumenon in both Jewish and Christian traditions. In the last decade a new discussion arose about the meaning of the verb בָּרָא. The present study directs its arrows on Psalm 89 and takes the opportunity to consider which of the two options is most likely.

First, the standard view: if בָּרָא denoted “to create”, v. 48 should be translated “on what futility/vanity did you create [the lifespans of] all human beings”? In this view, the entire creation of human beings is being criticized. YHWH is attacked because of the emptiness or arbitrariness of his choice to create humanity. This concept is, however, completely absent in the mind of ancient Israel, as least as far as we can deduce it from texts in the Hebrew Bible. Even in wisdom literature (Job, Qohelet) the notion of the vanity or the ungroundedness or arbitrariness of creation, is completely absent. Of course, Qohelet criticizes the absurdity of human life, but that is an altogether different topic. In Job, despite all its criticism, God’s creation is sketched as valuable, although following its own rules (Job 38-41). Also in Ps 89,10-15 reference is made to creation: YHWH’s mighty hand and powerful arm are praised; his ownership of earth and heaven. But to call his creation based on שָׁוָא, vanity, to call his creation

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futile seems out of the question. Even more important is the fact that in the immediate context of v. 48 nothing points in this direction. Instead, vv. 48b, v. 48c, and v. 49 discuss the topic of lifespan and mortality.

This brings us to the other option: בְּרָא designating “to separate”, a term that figures in the semantic domain of spatiality. Etymologically it is undisputable that in a great number of Hebrew verbs, such as פָּרַק, פָּרַשׁ, בָּרַא, בָּרַה, בָּרַד, בָּרָה, בָּרִים, פָּרִים, פָּרָק, פָּרָשׁ, פָּרַד, פָּרֹם, בָּרִיע, בָּרֹע, בָּרֹע, פָּרִים, פָּרָק, פָּרָשׁ, בָּרִים, the biconsonantal items בָּר and פָּר express the notion of cutting or separating. Related terms in cognate languages show the same. 31 Also the distribution of creation verbs in the Hebrew Bible shows that not the verb בָּרָא but the verb עָשָׂה is prototypically used to designate God’s creation of the heaven, of the earth, and of the heaven and the earth. 32 Furthermore, various usages of the Qal of בָּרָא are impossible to understand in its standard meaning “to create”, such as in Num 16,30-33 33, Isa 4,5 34, and Isa 57,19 35 whereas the explanation “to separate” fits these texts perfectly well 36. Also in this Psalm 89,
in v. 13, the Qal of בָּרֵא designates God’s setting apart of North and South. Other arguments in favour of בָּרֵא designating “to separate”, are the Piel occurrences of בָּרֵא which clearly designate “clearing a space (from trees, adulteresses)”, and the Hiphil of בָּרֵא “carved off portions of meat”. Finally, the ten usages of the Niphal of בָּרֵא appear to figure in a spatial domain, where they designate “to go apart”.

In conclusion, these arguments make the option of בָּרֵא to designate “to separate” very plausible. Consequently, Ps 89,48c should be translated “on what vanity/futile ground did you separate/set apart [the lifespans of] all human beings”? In other words, why, for what futile reason did you apportion or distribute shorter or longer lifespans to human beings? In effect, both questions in v. 48b and v. 48c regard general human conditions. This understanding of בָּרֵא fits in the surrounding context that states that every human being will surely die and cannot escape from the hand of sheol. Verse 48 questions the arbitrary grounds on which YHWH decides to distribute lifespans over humanity and it thus launches the attack on YHWH in full blow. It is not just David or Israel the psalmist is angry about, but the way in which YHWH is dealing with humanity. This also explains the otherwise incomprehensible indication

37 Wind directions cannot be ‘made’ or ‘constructed’, they are separated from one another.
38 The Piel of בָּרֵא expresses in Josh 17,15,18 not “to cut down trees” but “to make an empty space by cutting down trees”. Ezek 21,24 contains the verb בָּרֵא twice to designate “to cut out a spot”. Ezek 23,47 evokes “to clear the place” of adulteresses.
39 1 Sam 2,29.
40 The verb בָּרֵא Niphal occurs 4x in infinitive (Gen 2,4 “This is the history of the heaven and the earth in their going apart/when they went apart”; Gen 5,2 “He called their name ‘humankind’ on the day of their going apart/when they went apart”; Ezek 28,13 (to the king of Tyre, who is first described as staying among the gods in the garden of Eden) “on the day of your going apart” and Ezek 28,15 “from the day of your going apart”). It is used 1x as Niphal participle in Ps 102,19 where it refers to the resultative state with a spatial notion, namely “the set-apart people will praise YHWH”. Five times a finite form of בָּרֵא Niphal occurs. In Exod 34,10 YHWH’s working of wonders is strongly associated with Moses’ people and disassociated with all other people: “(the wonders) that will not spread out (ברא Niphal) over all the earth and all peoples”. Isa 48,6-7: “(As of now, I announce to you new things, well-guarded secrets you did not know). Only now they are spread out (ברא Niphal), and not of old; before today you had not heard them”. Ezek 21,35 “Return it to its sheath, in the place where you (= the sword) were unsheathed (ברא Niphal), in the land of your origin (= the sword’s origin), I will judge you”. Ps 104,29-30: “you hide your face, they are terrified; you collect their breath, they perish and return to their dust particles; you send off your breath, they fall apart (ברא Niphal); and then you will/can renew the face of the earth. Ps 148,5: “the waters above the heavens will praise the name of YHWH, because he commanded and they went apart (ברא Niphal)”.
41 Hence, whereas v. 49 regards the fact that every man will die, v. 48 discusses the fact that the lifespan of each and every one is different, and seemingly arbitrarily determined, acknowledging that righteous people may die at a very young age and bad people may enjoy a long life. In other words v. 49 regards mortality in general, v. 48 the length of all lives: they are the same because they all die, they are different because their lifespans are very different indeed.
“all” in “all human beings”. YHWH’s unfounded disparity has an effect on all human beings 42.

Verse 49 proceeds along the same path. The three questions open with the interrogative ‘what man?’ and considers the position of man ( Heb) in general. Also the terms life and death are not further specified, but for the last clause in 49c, where death is defined in terms of “the hands of sheol” 43. The action itself is expressed by the verb מָלַט, ‘escape, save (one’s life)’.

In contrast to previous statements in Psalm 89 in which YHWH’s hand was seen as the instrument of deliverance and judgment, this seems now to be no longer true. Instead the hand of sheol turns out to be more powerful. These questions in v. 49 testify of the general human condition: no one can escape from death.

In sum, the semantic analysis of vv. 47-48 explains the importance of the elliptic clausal constructions in vv. 48-49, in which v. 48b has the crucial noun חֵלֵד “lifespan” placed in prominent position and in which the immediately following clause in v. 48c entails the same noun. Also the ellipses in v. 49 are important, especially the absence of the subject [what man] in v. 49bc. Together the syntactic and semantic analyses lead to the following translation in which the ellipses are set between brackets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psalm 89,47-49</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>עדרמה יהוה ותת לוֹת</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>תבער כמות תמה</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

42 FLOYD, “Psalm 89”, 446-47, describes vv. 47-52 as a “reproach petitioning Yahweh for deliverance” (446), and explains it as follows: “The questions and petitions urging Yahweh to do something about the overthrow of the monarchy are predicated, not only upon the promise of an eternal covenant with David (vv. 50-52), but also upon the nature of the created order itself (vv. 47-49)” (447). Remarkably, FLOYD does not mention the notion of שוא, “futility,” “vanity,” or “deceit” at all: is the nature of the created order based on vanity? Yet, as far as I know, no commentator or scholar has discussed this notion of שוא in the context of Ps 89,47–52.

43 Although MITCHELL, “Genre disputes”, 518-519 notices the important “hand” references in Ps 89, he does not reflect on its consequence: what does it mean when at the end of the psalm, in vv. 43 and 49, only the hand of sheol is mentioned, and not the hand of YHWH anymore?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>זכר־אני</td>
<td>Remember, o Lord,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>מה־חלד</td>
<td>What is a lifespan?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>על־מה־שוא בראת כל־בני־אדם׃</td>
<td>[Remember, YHWH.] On what futile ground did you set apart/distribute [the lifespans of] all human beings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>מי גרר חיה</td>
<td>What man will live,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>לא־יראה־מות</td>
<td>And [what man] will not see death,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ממלט נפשו ממלט־שאול׃</td>
<td>[what man] Can save himself from the hand of sheol?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**A syntactic analysis of Psalm 89,50–52**

Set apart from the previous section by a *selah* is the final section in vv. 50–52. Although a unity on its own, it is linked to the previous section by the interrogative איה, ‘where’, that continues the series of interrogatives in vv. 47–49, and by the repetition of the imperative ‘remember’ in vv. 48 and 51. While the questions in vv. 47-49 relate to every man, the question and admonition in vv. 50-52 relate to David alone. Verses 50-52 return to the themes developed before in the psalm, as is visible in the repetitive use of the terms האמון and חסד (in vv. 2, 3, 15, 25, 29, 34, and v. 50), the name of David (in vv. 4, 21, 36 and v. 50), the reference to ‘my/your anointed one’ (in vv. 20, 21, 39 and v. 52), and the verb שבע ‘swear’ (in vv. 4, 36, and 50). Therefore, this final section returns to and unfolds the lines developed before, but directs them in another direction.

Attention to syntactic details of this section will pay out. The question expressed in v. 50 consists of two clauses, a nominal clause with interrogative and a relative verbal clause (איה is implied) with a Niphal of שבע “Where are your former actions of steadfast love, o Lord, [which] you swore to David in your faithfulness?” Verse 51a opens with the imperative זכר (just like v. 48) followed by the vocative אדני (also comparable to the independently set אני in v. 48) and the direct object “the abuse of your servants”.
The next clause in v. 51b is remarkable in many respects: it is set in first person singular. Who is the speaking instance? David, the psalmist, or YHWH? If it were YHWH, he was the one who held his people out of all peoples and lifted them at his bosom. In that case, v. 51b is an elliptic construction, implying "you (=YHWH) said". If it were the psalmist, the question arises whether he could have said that he held people(s) in his bosom. Finally, when David is the speaker, the psalmist quotes him. This is possible, since David is introduced by name again in v. 50b. Also the last line of this implicitly quoted speech refers to David as the anointed one, because v. 52b marks “the footsteps/tracks of your anointed one” as the mistreated party. Although no absolute certainty can be acquired, the last option seems to be the most plausible, so that v. 51b refers to David’s care for his people. These verses could then be translated as follows: “(v. 51a) Remember, o Lord, the abuse of your servants, (v. 51b) that I hold in my bosom [from] all the many peoples, (v. 52a) how your enemies abused, o YHWH, (v. 52b) abused the tracks of your anointed one.”

A semantic analysis of Psalm 89,50–52

The palmist characterises in v. 50a YHWH’s behaviour as חסדحرمאות, that is, as something he used to do in the past, but is not doing anymore. This ‘something’ is expressed by the noun חסד, a word that has been subject of intensive semantic study. Gordon Clark made a corpus-linguistic study of חסד and of related terms in the same semantic field, and concluded that חסד “is not merely an attitude or an emotion; it is an emotion that leads to an activity beneficial to the recipient.” It may be described as a beneficent action performed, or

44 In twentieth century lexicographical studies of חסד, the study made by N. GLUECK, Das Wort הָרָאשָׁנָה im alttestamentlichen Sprachgebrauche als menschliche und göttliche gemeinschaftsgemäße Verhaltungsweise (BZAW 47; Gießen 1927) was very influential. According to Glueck, the secular meaning of the word חסד designates conduct between humans, based on a mutual relationship of rights and duties, and this meaning has much in common with the concept of berît ‘covenant’. The theological meaning describes God’s actions towards humans driven by an obligation towards the community according to the covenant. These two characteristics, the connection between חסד and covenant and the reciprocity that lies at the base of חסד and berît have had an impact on dictionaries (HALOT and DCH) and many other studies. In 1978 K.D. SAKENFELD, The Meaning of חסד in the Hebrew Bible. A New Inquiry (Missoula MT 1978) presented a new study on חסד. She does not regard חסד as a reciprocal action but rather as something that is based on a personal relationship or a previous act on the part of the recipient of חסד. The latest extensive study is G.R. CLARK, The Word חסד in the Hebrew Bible (JSOTS 157; Sheffield 1993), who builds on the previous studies but expands it with a corpus linguistic study of a number of lexemes related to חסד. I follow Clark’s study here.

45 CLARK, The Word חסד, 267, and he continues: “The relative status of the participants is never a feature of the act, which may be described as a beneficent action performed, in the context of a deep and enduring commitment
better still, as an enduring mutual commitment that YHWH performs through beneficent actions. The word חסד can therefore best be translated with ‘(acts of) steadfast love’, and this love includes notions of care, support, and shelter. Clark also made visible that אומנה and אומנות are essential components of חסד. The word אומנות, also used here in v. 50, designates trustworthiness or faithfulness made perceptible through actions. It is faithfulness that shows: you can have confidence in this deity, because he will offer support and help you out in distressing situations. The steadfastness of this commitment is further marked in v. 50b by the verb שבת (Niphal): ‘you swore’ it to David.

However, by applying the termheiroאשנים and by posing the question ‘where are your acts of steadfast love of old’?, the speaker places the entire complex of confidence and trust between brackets. He wonders what has happened with YHWH’s steadfast love. It seems something of the past. Was his trust in the deity ill-founded? Can he no longer rely on his God? Now we notice the sharp contrast between the everlastingness and endurance confirmed over and over again in the psalm and the limited time scale in this verse. All good things seem to belong to the past and not to the present. In this sense, this section is closer related to the previous section that speak of short lives followed by death and of the powerful hand of the sheol.

The next two verses, vv. 51-52, contain twice the verbחרף and once the nounחרפה. The dictionaries and lexicons explain the verb as ‘to reproach, revile, taunt, mock’. In his comprehensive study ofחרף andחרפה James Aitken demonstrated that in addition to this meaning one should discern that these terms do not denote speaking, but are performative speech acts. That is to say, they designate acts of verbal denigration, ‘mocking with disdain’, and are a distinctive way of acting. “It is striking how in the

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46 Ibid., 259-260.
47 In vv. 2 and 3 YHWH’s חסד is established forever, in v. 4 an enduring covenant is made with David, in vv. 5, 30, and 37 David’s line is established forever, in v. 5, 30, 37 David’s throne is confirmed for all generations, in v. 37 David’s throne is as enduring as the moon, established forever.
majority of occurrences the subject of the verb הָרֵף II is an opponent of the speaker, God or Israel, indicating that it is a negative action performed by enemies” 49. It seems to be more than speaking abusive words, and involves the expression of superiority and defiance. The noun הָרֵפה denotes both a reproach and an object of reproach, as well as shame or an object of shame. And in many instances the noun denotes an abstract condition of ‘disgrace’, such as that arising from a situation that contravenes social convention 50.

Earlier on, in v. 46, the very same idea of shame or disgrace brought upon YHWH’s anointed one was mentioned, when the speaker accuses YHWH of covering him with ‘shame’ (בֹּשָׁה). In a fascinating study, Yael Avrahami discusses the verb בֹּש and synonymous roots found alongside בֹּש in the book of Psalms that belong to the larger semantic field of ‘worthlessness’ 51. She concludes that the verb בֹּש does not denote ‘shame’ but rather ‘to be disappointed’ or ‘to fail’. She also objects against the widespread idea that shame should be understood within the honour–shame framework. Conversely, she proposes the central opposition to be trust/confidence vs disappointment/frustration/disgrace. Disappointment and disgrace are not simple emotions, but are experiences that follow on social rejection and go as far as to the point of despair. Avrahami concludes: “it is worthwhile to define בֹּש as an experience that emerges from a break between expectations and reality” 52. In this context, the verb בֹּש describes the undesired fate of the believer, which is the fate he wishes upon his enemies.

49 Ibid., 174.
50 Ibid., 185.
51 Y. AVRAHAMI, "בֹּש in the Psalms—Shame or Disappointment?", *JSOT* 34 (2010) 295-313. The common translation of the root בֹּש to mean ‘to shame/to be shamed’ is found in dictionaries and most Bible translations. But AVRAHAMI also mentions that “the equation בֹּש = shame’ has been challenged in the past, yet dictionaries and translations have not fully adopted these suggestions” (303) And she refers to: W. GESENIUS, *Hebräisch-Deutsches Handwörterbuch über die Schrift des Alten Testaments* (5 vols.; Leipzig 1810–12), I, p. 91, and to H. GUNKEL, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (trans. D. NOGALSKY; Macon, GA 1998) 190, with regard to the root בֹּש. [AVRAHAMI remarks with regard to GUNKEL: “Interestingly, however, Gunkel consistently uses the word Scham to translate the root in Psalmen: übersetzt und erklärt (Göttingen 1968).” (303, n. 37).]
52 Ibid., p. 304; AVRAHAMI refers to GESENIUS who also described בֹּש in terms of failure in hope and expectation.
The verb חָרַף and the noun חָרְפָה occurring in vv. 51a, 52a and 52b figure in the same semantic field and are often paired or clustered with הביש חָרְפָה in the book of Psalms, also in Psalm 89. Indeed חָרַף and חָרְפָה do include notions of social rejection, and point at an experience that emerges from a break between a positive expectation and the reality of failure. More specifically, these lexemes denote the verbal abuse that leads to a loss of confidence and trust, and they figure in the same framework of confidence vs frustration/disappointment. They express an intense sort of disappointment that leads to a feeling of failure and worthlessness, which is the effect of the behaviour of other people, especially enemies. This experience of failure is mentioned three times in vv. 51-52 and it is contrasted with the promise of divine aid and shelter that is called into memory in v. 51b.

A very positive image of protection is expressed in v. 51b by the phrase “I hold in my bosom”. In it, the noun חִיק ‘bosom’ with a pronominal suffix first person singular and the verb נשא ‘bear, hold’ refers to David’s carrying his people in his bosom. The same combination of noun and verb occurs three times in the Hebrew Bible. In Num 11,12 Moses protests against YHWH, saying “Did I conceive all this people, did I bear it, that you should say to me, ‘carry/hold it in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant.’”53 The direct object “it” is expressed by a pronominal suffix (singular) attached to נשא. The word combination of “carrying” ( נשא ) and “bosom” ( חיק ) with a pronominal suffix designates care and support, while the reference to the nurse and child has the connotation of dependence of the weaker party. In Isa 40,11 the metaphor of God as shepherd is used, in which the shepherd “gathers the lambs in his arms and carries [them] in his bosom.” In this verse, the direct object of the carrying or holding is not mentioned and also not needed grammatically. The meaning is clear again: the verse expresses the great care the shepherd takes for his flock. The very same syntactic construction is visible in Ps 89,51. Here, too, the direct object of the carrying in one’s bosom is implied: David holds in his bosom [one people out of] many peoples. This is confirmed by the fact that the term חיק ‘bosom’ points at intimacy, support, and care, and always in a one-to-one relationship. In conclusion, in v. 51 David reminds YHWH of the abuse flung on his servants as well as of his (=David’s) great care for his people (=YHWH’s servants).

53 The similarity between Num 11,12 and Ps 89,51 should be noted: while in Ps 89,51b David is the subject of “carrying his people in his bosom”, in Num 11,12 Moses is the subject of “carrying” his people in his bosom.
The results of the syntactic and semantic analyses lead to the following translation in which the ellipses are marked by brackets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psalm 89, 50–52</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>אֲדֹנִי אַחֲרֵי חֵסֵד יְמֵי לֹא (50a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>נָשַׁבֵּת לֹא הָאָמֶנוֹת (50b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>וּכְאֶפֶן חַרְבֶּד עַבְדֵּךְ (51a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>שָׂאוֹת בְּדִיקָת בִּלְרָבִים עָנָי (51b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אַשֶּׁר הָרָע הָאֶבֶּס (52a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אַשֶּׁר לֹא חַרְבֶּד עַבְדֵּךְ (52b)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A rhetorical analysis of Psalm 89,49-52

Psalm 89 is not only a textual composition, but it is also embedded in a rhetorical context. In the rhetorical situation of Psalm 89,47–52 the psalmist attempts to persuade YHWH to respond in a time of extreme crisis. The thrice repeated vocative YHWH and the once (or, if the masoretic text’s אֲדֹנִי is amended to אֲדֹנִי, twice) addressed אֲדֹנִי, my Lord, expresses clearly that YHWH is the addressee in the final sections. In the preceding sections the Israelite assembly is addressed, as well. The question then is: what does the psalmist wish to achieve in Psalm 89 in general, and the last two section in particular? In order to answer this question, we have to turn to rhetorical studies, more specifically to the notion of ‘eloquent reticence’.

In three recent studies, Jan Joosten introduces the notion of ‘eloquent reticence’ and defined it as the absence of an express request. The omission of a central point seems to be a frequent feature in biblical speeches, which Joosten demonstrated in his analyses of Gen 44, Lev 18, and 2 Sam 2,5-7. In the last text, David uses indirectness as a rhetorical strategy, overtly congratulating the people of Yabesh while covertly conveying to them his wish to extend his

rule. He could have said: “and I would be happy to rule over you as well”, but this would have spoiled the effect. In biblical rhetoric, eloquent reticence is used as a deliberate technique and it is inflected in various ways depending on the circumstances and the strategy of the speaker: some things cannot be said, others are better left unsaid, and some do not need to be said in order to be heard. By leaving the central request unsaid, the audience or recipient(s) is invited to produce the thought that will persuade them of the central issue.  

The syntactic analyses have clarified the various ellipses in Psalm 89’s final sections. The omission of the noun דַּלֶּת “lifespan” in v. 48 was syntactically acceptable because of the word’s inclusion in the immediately preceding clause, where it was placed in a front position. It appears to be a deliberate rhetorical technique not to accuse YHWH directly of arbitrariness in the distribution of lifespans over humankind. Nevertheless, to mark this action with the verb בֹּרָא in combination with to שָׁוָא, ‘vanity’, ‘ungrounded’ is a clear enough negative qualification. All these verses deal with trust and failed trust. Is YHWH’s support of David’s throne equally based on שָׁוָא, on futility? Can it also evaporate, as is the fate of all human beings whose lifespans are based on an arbitrary distribution of life portions? Is the care that YHWH showed in the past for David and his servants also transient, based on vanity? Upon this implicit or indirect accusation of fickleness YHWH has to react. If YHWH does not respond, he proves to be untrustworthy. Its up to YHWH to demonstrate that his actions and attitude towards Israel are not based on arbitrariness.

Two arguments support this rhetorical strategy of eloquent reticence in Psalm 89’s final sections. First, the twice repeated imperative to remember (in v. 48a and v. 51a), in close relation to the respective topics lifespan and abuse: “remember, o lord, what a lifespan is” and “remember, o lord, what the abuse [afflicted on] your servants is”. Second, the repetition of כל־בני־אדם and כל־רבים עמים in v. 48b and 51b. It invites for a link between the differentiation in lifespans of all human beings and the differentiation in favour of the anointed one and all many peoples. Both actions by YHWH are based on ungrounded partiality, be it the lucky fate of a long life or the favoured role of the anointed one. But now, the anointed king whom was promised enduring protection and steadfast love, has been failed. Silenced is the question whether YHWH’s loyalty was also based on futility and silenced is the indirect request (for it is embedded in questions) to YHWH to disambiguate his position. This is the central

request in this psalm: “YHWH, show that your acts of steadfast love do not belong to the past, that it does not go the way all human beings go, namely to the grave. Please demonstrate to us, that the election of David out of all peoples is not over”. In short, the silence request is: “Make his and our election come true again”.

**Conclusion**

The main conclusion of this study is that the final two sections in vv. 47-49 and 50-52 represent in a nutshell the contrastive lines addressed in the entire psalm. Set in the framework of confidence and disappointment, Psalm 89 sketches the oppositions between YHWH’s enduring and passing love for Israel, his election of his anointed king and his rejection of him, his making of a covenant with David and his repudiation of that covenant. These oppositions return in the last two sections, yet the timescale has changed. The enduring love seems to belong to the past and appears to be something YHWH has to be reminded of. The limited lifespan of human beings is set on the foreground, with death always nearby. Still, one new element is added to it, namely that of arbitrariness. The general disappointment is specified in the description of YHWH’s fickleness. Verse 48 refers to it in two questions: מה־חלד “what is a lifespan?” and עלימדה וראת מלאכי־ישראל “on what futile ground did you set apart [the lifespans of] all human beings?”. Is the steadfast love that YHWH swore in the past for David and his servants also transient, based on vanity? Upon this implicit or indirect accusation of arbitrariness YHWH has to react.

In Psalm 89 the psalmist does offer praises and reproaches, and a silent request as well. He asks YHWH to demonstrate that his steadfast love is not based on futility or arbitrariness. By confronting YHWH with his inconsistencies, the psalmist hopes in these two final sections to reverse the reversal of fate the entire psalm testifies of. Distinguishable is the deliberate rhetorical strategy of eloquent reticence. In it the accusation of vanity and the consequent request to YHWH are left unspoken: will he please show that his preference for Israel was not based on futility and fickleness, will he please alleviate the experience of failure that oppresses the psalmist and his audience? Now it is upon YHWH to demonstrate that his actions and attitude towards Israel is not based on unfounded disparity.

Ellen van Wolde
Summary

In Psalm 89,47–52 the psalmist raises his voice in angry protest against YHWH. He accuses him of abandoning his anointed one. Even worse, YHWH’s action of בָּרָא with regard to all human beings is mentioned ‘futile’ or ‘based on random grounds’ (שָׁוָא). This combination of terms is quite unique. By introducing ‘arbitrariness’ in connection with YHWH’s actions towards all human beings, the psalmist injects doubt in the mind of his audience. Is the steadfast love that YHWH showed in the past for David and his servants also transient and based on vanity? Upon this explicit and implicit accusation of fickleness YHWH has to react.

Key words: Psalm 89, rhetorical strategy of eloquent reticence, שָׁוָא, and בָּרָא