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OUR STORIES, GOD'S STORIES: RE-CONCEPTUALIZING THE STORIES WE LIVE BY
THROUGH A CLOSE READING OF THE PSALMS OF DAVID

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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ABSTRACT

People love stories. Not only that, a large body of psychological research suggests that people actually live by the stories they tell themselves. Stories are the way people make sense of a confusing world. The problem is, not all stories are true. Even among Christians, the reality of living as a sinner/saint means that one of the crosses a Christian bears is the constant struggle to live by God's stories rather than their own. Through a close reading of two Davidic psalms within the conceptual framework of narrative paradigm theory, narrative identity theory, and sensemaking theory, this study reveals how God uses suffering and Scripture to undermine the lies we tell ourselves and lead us to a more mature understanding of his truth.

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INTRODUCTION

Is it a rabbit or a duck? Is it a blue dress or a gold dress? Is it “Yanny” or “Laurel”? Human beings have always been fascinated by illusions. Why? What is so interesting about a recording that some hear as “Yanny,” and others, “Laurel”?¹

Illusions challenge our perceptions. In doing so, they reveal two interrelated truths about human experience: 1) Our brains have an inherent bent toward constructing meaning out of an endless flow of perceptions (or conceptualizing); 2) The concepts our brains construct shape reality as we understand it. “We all perceive the world a little differently based on our experiences,” concluded Nina Kraus, a professor of neurobiology at Northwestern University, in her explanation of the Yanny/Laurel illusion.² So much of what we see and hear depends on the perspective with which we begin.

People function from the smallest level to the greatest by mentally piecing together disparate aspects of human experience. We recognize a face as more than just a collection of nose, eyes, and mouth. We understand the world and how our lives fit into it. We make meaning out of the bare facts.

This study makes use of three theories: narrative paradigm theory, narrative identity theory, and sensemaking theory. All three suggest that human beings structure the meaning they

1. Merrit Kennedy, “‘Yanny’ Or ‘Laurel’? Why People Hear Different Things In That Viral Clip,” *NPR.Org*, n.d., <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/16/611701171/yanny-or-laurel-why-people-hear-different-things-in-that-viral-clip>.

2. Kennedy, “‘Yanny’ Or ‘Laurel’?”

make using stories. Narrative paradigm theory suggests that this is true of human communication in general. Narrative identity theory suggests that this is true of human identity. Sensemaking theory suggests how these stories are formed and re-formed.

For the purpose of this study, all three theories have relevance to the way people process difficult situations in their lives. Narrative paradigm theory's concept of *narrative rationality* explains how stories are challenged and changed. Narrative identity theory's concept of *narrative identity processing* offers a two-step process for effectively dealing with difficult events. In sensemaking theory, the process of *sensemaking* itself and its concept of deepening ambiguity show how suffering can engender growth.

The current study applies these concepts to the Word of God in order to better understand how Christians effectively process suffering. Using close reading as a methodological tool, the following examination of two Davidic psalms demonstrates the important place stories have in the lives of Christians. Christians must learn to continually revise and reinterpret the stories by which they live. They must at times bear the cross of denying the fairy tales their old self loves. They must constantly deepen their reliance on the stories God tells in his Word.

King David had the advantage of divine inspiration in his sensemaking. He wrote psalms under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. God has not blessed Christians today with this same gift. For them, sensemaking must entail a constant return to the divinely-inspired sensemaking of Scripture, allowing the Spirit's unmaking of meaning to give way to a more complex understanding of what their lives on earth mean. The following examination shows how David used poetry as a way of re-conceptualizing the stories he lived by, relying on God as the only reliable storyteller.

RELEVANT THEORY

Narrative Paradigm Theory

Narrative paradigm theory is a communication theory developed by Dr. Walter R. Fisher (1931-2018), a former professor of communication at the University of South Carolina-Annenberg.

This theory is currently considered one of the best explanations of how narrative works in human reasoning.³ It attempts to answer this basic question, “How do human beings come to believe what they believe about the world?” Fisher’s book *Human Communication as Narration*⁴ remains this theory’s definitive formulation.

A *paradigm*, as Fisher uses the term, is a formal model that attempts to give a basis for understanding some aspect of human experience. Fisher’s model is meant to explain how all human communication works rhetorically.⁵ When human beings communicate with one another, they are essentially sharing their view of reality, hoping that the person they are talking to will come to see things as they do. Most human communication, according to the narrative paradigm, is therefore persuasive.⁶ From there, the question becomes, “What makes any particular instance of communication more persuasive than another?” This is where narrative comes in.

3. Scott R. Stroud, "Narrative Rationality," *IECTP* 1:94.

4. Walter Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987).

5. In contrast to longstanding academic tradition which conceives of rhetoric as a particular type of discourse.

6. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 58-59.

According to the narrative paradigm, narrative is not just *a* form of discourse, it is *the* root form which shapes every other genre of discourse.⁷ When Fisher uses the term narrative, he is using it in a broad sense. He defines *narratives* as “symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them.” Stories, according to his model, are not just fictional creations made to entertain. They are what people live by and what guide the decisions they make and the actions they take. Stories are the vehicle by which people conceive of connections between different events in time and attribute meaning to them.⁸

Narrative functions as a tool for conveying values—another important term within the narrative paradigm. *Values* are “conceptions of the ideal.” A person’s values are about what they see as good or moral. Values reflect what a person believes *ought to be*.⁹

Traditional Western paradigms for rhetorical communication remove values from the field of viable arguments. Values are, according to any philosophy in the strain of logical positivism, “non-sense.”¹⁰ According to Fisher, one of the most important aspects of the narrative paradigm is that it not only allows values a place in rational argument, it gives them

7. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 65.

8. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 58.

9. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 132. In a postmodern society, it is important to realize that Fisher's theory does not see values as purely subjective. Values are valuable insofar as they correspond to universal moral truths. When personalized as values, these objective truths help and uplift people, cf. Fisher *Human Communication as Narration*, 76. From a scriptural standpoint, this is close to the truth. The values people hold are valuable insofar as they correspond to the immutable moral will of God. All people have access to these values in a limited way through the voice of conscience, but Christians have fuller access. First, they have access through the morality of God's revealed Word. More importantly, by faith they have access through the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Through Word and sacrament, the Spirit works both to create and motivate godly values in Christians.

10. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 8.

central place. People judge and adhere to stories they sense are cohesive with their values.¹¹ This is true whether one is a scientist or a second grader.

Practically speaking, the effect of the narrative paradigm is to bring rhetoric and reason back into the realm of everyday living. Or, put more plainly, it makes the day-to-day stories people tell and the judgments people make of those stories worthy of academic study.¹² What might that study examine?

Say there is a man named David. Every day, David wakes up, brushes his teeth, eats breakfast, drives to work, drives home, eats supper, goes to bed, and tomorrow does it all again. The events of his day-to-day life are formed by the decisions he makes and the actions he takes. This behavior is guided by the stories he believes reflect reality.¹³ As he goes about his day, other people communicate with him (at least hopefully they do). He listens to a podcast as he gets ready for work. His wife smiles winsomely at him across the table at breakfast. The billboards and advertisements on his route to work tell him what is cool, useful, or new. His boss texts him about his upcoming presentation. He finds funny memes on Tumblr. A myriad number of other symbolic actions take place. The effect of each of these actions (if they are in fact effective) is to convey a message to David. This message either affirms, reaffirms, purifies, or subverts his internal narratives.¹⁴ How effectively they accomplish their purpose depends on

11. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 48.

12. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 49.

13. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 62.

14. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 144. Affirmation, reaffirmation, purification, and subversion are the four "motives" of human rhetoric. Affirmation means the motive is to get an audience to accept a new idea. Reaffirmation is to confirm or reinforce a previously accepted idea. Purification is to correct or cleanse an idea. Subversion is to cause an audience to disavow an idea they had previously affirmed.

their *narrative rationality*, something that David intuitively assesses on the basis of each message's narrative probability and fidelity.¹⁵

Narrative *probability* is about coherence. In Fisher's terminology, coherence means how well a story "hangs together." There are three parts to evaluating this: 1) argumentative coherence is an evaluation of the internal structure of a particular narrative's arguments; 2) material coherence is about comparing and contrasting this story to other, related stories. 3) characterological coherence evaluates the characters involved, including the narrator who is telling the story. Fisher explains, "Whether a story is believable depends on the reliability of the characters, both as narrators and actors." This means looking at the decisions and actions a character tends to make and interpreting them. Characterological coherence comes from characters that behave characteristically.¹⁶

Narrative *fidelity* is about evaluating the "truthfulness and reliability" of a narrative and applying the logic of good reasons to its arguments. While narrative probability deals with form, narrative fidelity is interested in content. Evaluating narrative fidelity means asking critical questions that identify and weigh the story's underlying values. These are questions of fact, relevance, consequence, consistency, and transcendental issues.¹⁷ Questions of *fact* identify the values which are implicitly or explicitly contained within an argument. Questions of *relevance* ask if the underlying values of an argument are used in their proper context and if there are any omitted values that would also or better fit the context. Questions of *consequence* ask what it

15. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 64.

16. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 47.

17. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 47. These five types of questions are all modified components of the "logic of reasons" explained on page 108 of *Human Communication as Narration*.

would look like for a person to live by those values. Questions of *consistency* test the values on the basis of personal experience and the experience of respected others. Questions of *transcendent issues* measure the values argued for against ideal human conduct.¹⁸

Relevance to Current Study

Fisher's theory is heavily focused on the interpersonal aspect of human rhetorical communication. His primary goal was to understand not only how human beliefs and values are cognitively structured, but how these beliefs are judged when they are communicated interpersonally.

The focus of this thesis is, however, on applying what Fisher theorizes about interpersonal communication to intrapersonal communication. Fisher believed that both worked the same way.¹⁹ He touches on the intrapersonal aspect of his theory briefly, "People are reflective and from such reflection they make the stories of their lives and have the basis for judging narratives for and about them."²⁰

Consistent with a Lutheran hermeneutic, I approach Psalms 39 and 10, traditionally classified as "laments of the individual," from a personal-historical perspective.²¹ This approach entails viewing these psalms as written by David in response to actual events he experienced, and then adapted for use in the corporate worship of Israel.²² Viewed from this perspective, these

18. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 109.

19. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 108.

20. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 75.

21. J. Clinton McCann, *Psalms*, in vol. 4 of "The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary," edited by Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 643.

22. As opposed to being written for cultic purposes and speaking metaphorically of individual experiences.

psalms show the kind of intrapersonal reflection Fisher describes. In Psalm 39, David's reflection led him to identify and subvert a story of his own creation. In Psalm 10, upon reflection David was led by God to reaffirm God's story about a particular event. Bringing Fisher's concept of narrative rationality to these psalms reveals how they initially functioned. For example, one way in which David used poetry was to identify the values behind stories and test them according to God's revealed will about good and evil.

My intention, therefore, is not to begin by examining what effect David meant for these psalms to have on their general readership. Rather, I start by examining what effect David meant for them to have on himself. Derek Kidner articulates why approaching the psalms this way is so vital, ". . . any document which is known to be from life makes a different impact on the reader from one that is commissioned to meet a standard type of need. If we are intended to share the heart-searchings of a man as exceptional and as sorely tried as David, we shall be the poorer if we insist on treating his works as anonymous and divorced from his eventful life."²³

The ultimate goal of understanding how David was inspired by the Spirit to make sense of his experiences is to give Christians their own scripturally-grounded and Spirit-guided rubric for revising or retelling the stories by which they live. Revising or retelling means altering or abandoning one's self-created stories and deepening one's understanding of God's stories. Applying Fisher's concept of narrative rationality to the Psalms demonstrates the importance of digging down to the values that underlie the stories by which we live.

Narrative Identity Theory

23. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, Vol. 15 of *TOTC* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 17.

Like narrative paradigm theory, narrative identity theory is based on the assumption that “human beings are storytellers by nature.”²⁴ This theory, though, focuses especially on one particular aspect of that assumption. While Walter Fisher was interested in the narrative structures of human communication in general, narrative identity theorists focus in on how narrative helps to structure human identity, itself a form of communication.²⁵

The basic assumption that human beings conceptualize their lives as stories has been around a long time, but its formal organization as a theory is relatively recent. The idea was first formalized by philosophers in the 1970s and 80s.²⁶ Soon, psychologists picked it up and applied it to various psychological disciplines such as developmental, cognitive, cultural, and personality psychology. Since then, a vast body of research utilizing a wide variety of approaches and methodologies appears to have validated the hypothesis that human identity is narratively structured.²⁷

There are certain observations on which narrative identity theorists seek to elaborate: 1) human beings cannot properly function without some sense that their lives in the overall mean something; 2) psychological well-being depends on having some concept of how the past and future relate to the present moment, essentially what narrative identity theory defines as

24. Dan P. McAdams, "Personal Narratives and the Life Story" in *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research*, 3rd Ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2008), 244.

25. Human identity, being rooted and formulated in the language of thought, is a particular type of symbolic action (communication) about the self. Our identity as we conceptualize it is different from our objective identity. Our identity can only be grasped (albeit in a limited way) when put into language, symbolic action which puts boxes around a continuous stream of experience so that we are able to wrap our minds around it. From the Christian perspective, only God is able to number "the very hairs of your head" (Luke 12:7; have a fully "integrated" sense of our identity). N.B.: The center that holds our various self-conceptions together is Christ.

26. The best known and most influential of these theorists are Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and French philosopher Paul Ricouer.

27. Kate C. McLean, Andrea V. Breen, and Marc A. Fournier, "Constructing the Self in Early, Middle, and Late Adolescent Boys: Narrative Identity, Individuation, and Well-Being.," *JRA* 20.1 (2010), 170.

“identity;” 3) human beings have methods for making sense of their lives in ways that go beyond the basic observable facts of their experiences. Their success in making sense determines whether they live in a state of incoherence and confusion or stability and peace. Narrative identity theorists seek to answer the question, “How do human beings effectively make meaning of their experiences?” They find the answer in the concept of narrative identity, an “internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose.”²⁸

Having a coherent sense of identity is closely tied to meaning making. Dan P. McAdams, a psychology professor at Northwestern University and one of the most influential proponents of narrative identity theory, explained the “technical and delimited sense” in which narrative identity theorists define *identity*, “. . . identity is not synonymous with the ‘self’ or the ‘self-concept’ or even with ‘who I am’; rather, it refers to a particular quality or flavoring of people’s self-understandings, a way in which the self can be arranged or configured.”²⁹

Identity is about integration, that is, taking all of one’s self-understandings and organizing them in a way that makes sense of apparent contradictions or paradoxes. This integration must be both *synchronic* and *diachronic*.³⁰ Synchronically, it must account for the many roles and relationships of an individual in the present moment. For example, how is it that a person can be both a loving father and a ruthless businessman? Diachronically, it must account for how past self-conceptions relate to present self-conceptions. How is it that the person who once wanted to be an engineer now wants to be a pastor? Psychological well-being from late

28. Dan P. McAdams and Kate C. McLean, "Narrative Identity." *CDPS* 22. 3 (2013), 233.

29. Dan P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," *RGP* 5. 2 (2001), 101.

30. McAdams, "Personal Narratives and the Life Story," 244.

adolescence through adulthood is closely tied to how well an individual is able to sort out these disparate aspects of the self.³¹

Narrative identity theorists argue that individuals structure their identities (coherent systems of self-concepts) using narrative forms of varying complexity.³² The simplest definition of narrative used by narrative identity theorists is the one narrative paradigm theory uses: “A sequence of actions and reactions extended as a plot in time.”³³

Every developmentally-sound adult has some sense of narrative sequence on a biographical scale. Their understanding of where and who they are in the present moment is colored by the sequence of events that led them to where they are today. They are not amnesiacs constantly encountering the world as if for the first time. Rather, “one’s view of self in a given moment is fundamentally nonsensical unless it can be linked in some fashion with one’s own past.”³⁴

Many people, though, have organized narrative identities that go beyond this basic definition of narrative. They conceptualize their lives in the genre of narrative, not just as a sequence of events. They give their life its own settings, plots, characters, scenes, images, and

31. Tilmann Habermas, “Autobiographical Reasoning: Arguing and Narrating from a Biographical Perspective,” *NDCAD* 2011.131 (2011), 10.

32. Stories are the vehicle by which abstract concepts about the self are woven together in a way that is understandable. Taken away from a storied context, the concepts still stand, but may be difficult to reconcile with other aspects of the self. Stories are a way of structuring truth in concrete terms. For example, a person's self-concept "I am a smart person" is only understandable in the context of concrete situations.

33. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," 103.

34. Kenneth J. Gergen and Mary M. Gergen, "Narrative & the Self as Relationship," in *Social Psychological Studies of the Self: Perspectives and Programs* (Cambridge, MA: Academic Press, 1988), 19.

themes.³⁵ Through narrative, their various self-concepts and the disparate events of their lives begin to make sense.

Relevance to Current Study

There are a variety of approaches to the study of narrative identity. For the purposes of this paper, I have narrowed my focus to the work of those who study particular events of lives. That people conceptualize their whole lives as narratives will remain as a backdrop for understanding how particular events and the meaning made from them operate as building blocks for the larger stories of individual lives. What narrative identity theorists have found about how people process negative emotional events is especially relevant here.

When researchers examine life stories at the level of individual events, they code them for the type of story they tell and the way the story is processed. They focus on constructs such as *redemption* (a scene that moves from a negative beginning to a positive outcome), *contamination* (a scene that moves from a positive beginning to a negative outcome), *agency* (how a person's stories reflect an ability to effect change and influence others), *communion* (how a person's stories emphasize connection to other people), *meaning making* (the lesson a person is able to glean from an event), *exploratory narrative processing* (how deeply a person reflects and explores the self), and *coherent positive resolution* (how well the tensions of the story are resolved).³⁶

35. McAdams, "Personal Narratives and the Life Story," 243.

36. McAdams and McLean, "Narrative Identity," 234. For the rest of this paper, the term *narrative identity processing* is used to encompass all of these terms.

Researchers have found that in psychologically mature adults, there is a major difference in how people process negative events versus positive ones,

Negative events produce more cognitive activity in general and more efforts to engage in causal reasoning, compared to positive events. At the level of the life story, negative events seem to demand an explanation. They challenge the storyteller to make narrative sense of the bad thing that happened—to explain why it happened and perhaps why it may not happen again, to explore the consequences of the negative event for later development in the story. . . .

Many researchers and clinicians believe that the cognitive processing of negative events leads to insight and positive consequences for psychological well-being and health.³⁷

Negative events are best processed by reflection.³⁸ Positive events are best processed by simply savoring them. Studies have identified a two-step process as most effective and fruitful in growing from negative events: 1) *exploratory narrative processing* – “The narrator explores the negative experience in depth, thinking long and hard about what the experience feels or felt like, how it came to be, what it may lead to, and what role the negative event may play in his or her overall understanding of self.” 2) *coherent positive resolution* – “The narrator articulates and commits the self to a positive resolution of the event.”³⁹

This insight seems to be borne out in the psalms. Negative events, such as a serious illness or realization of a particularly grievous sin, provoke much more reflection, while positive events, such as deliverance from a dangerous situation, provoke simple praise and thanksgiving.⁴⁰ This study takes a closer look at several scriptural examples of the concept

37. McAdams, "Personal Narratives and the Life Story," 253.

38. Psychologists note the importance of distinguishing between reflection and rumination. While reflection is healthy, "repetitive ruminating about the same negative aspects of the past is a symptom of depression;" Habermas, "Autobiographical Reasoning," 11.

39. McAdams and McLean, "Narrative Identity," 254.

40. The former are traditionally categorized as *individual laments*, the latter as *individual thanksgiving songs*.

narrative identity theorists term *narrative identity processing*. This examination will show the benefits of pairing the two-steps for processing negative events with reflection on God’s Word and prayer.

Sensemaking Theory

“Sensemaking is the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations.”⁴¹

Sensemaking theory seeks to identify how the sensemaking process works. It operates under similar assumptions as the two previously-mentioned theories, especially in that it understands narrative as the structure around which people build meaning.⁴² It furthers the current argument by providing a conceptual model for how the process of changing one’s stories is initiated. It also shows how sensemaking should operate when done effectively.

The above quotation summarizes what type of event typically initiates sensemaking. What narrative identity theorists call a negative emotional event fits within this category. Karl Weick, whose book *Sensemaking in Organizations*⁴³ is still considered the foundation for all contemporary research into sensemaking, suggests that effective sensemaking depends on how people react to ambiguous situations.⁴⁴ When people encounter such situations, they either fall

41. Sally Maitlis and Marlys Christianson, “Sensemaking in Organizations: Taking Stock and Moving Forward,” *AMA* 8.1 (2014), 57.

42. Karl E. Weick, “Ambiguity as Grasp: The Reworking of Sense,” *JCCM* 23.2 (2015), 122.

43. Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations: Foundations for Organizational Science* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1995).

44. Ambiguity means something is open to more than one interpretation.

back on the stories they already know, or, better, they “act *within* ambiguity and deepen it momentarily.”⁴⁵

This process of deepening ambiguity has to do with the distinction between perception and conception. Weick quotes philosopher William James on this point, “The intellectual life of man consists in his substitution of a conceptual order for the perceptual order in which his experience originally comes.”⁴⁶ In other words, people organize everything they experience with their five senses (perceptions) by making connections that give structure and meaning to those perceptions (concepts). To deepen ambiguity is to sense that the stories one is operating by need to be converted “back into indeterminate situations that could be re-conceptualized more pragmatically with different labels.”⁴⁷ Said another way, “human beings experience ‘cognitive gaps’ when they are trying to make sense of the things they have observed while recognizing that their current understanding of events has been inadequate.”⁴⁸

Relevance to the Current Study

The study of sensemaking is primarily done by organizational scientists, but has a great deal of relevance to the current study. I especially make use of the idea of deepening ambiguity. David appears to do this quite often in the psalms. Both Psalms 39 and 10 demonstrate this. Rather than ignoring apparent contradictions, David takes them on. In some cases, the confrontation leads

45. Weick, “Ambiguity as Grasp: The Reworking of Sense,” 117.

46. William James, *Writings: 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 1008-9; quoted in Weick “Ambiguity as Grasp: The Reworking of Sense,” 120.

47. Weick, “Ambiguity as Grasp: The Reworking of Sense,” 122.

48. Mark A. Paustian, “I’m Proud of the Person in the Story” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Central States Communication Association, Minneapolis, 2014), 4.

him to abandon stories God's Word shows to be false. In others, David's wrestling with God leads him to a deeper understanding of God's stories for his life.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Narrative Art in the Bible

This study examines the psalms from the perspective of both rhetorical and narrative criticism. Both types of biblical criticism are a subset of literary criticism. The main purpose of literary criticism of Scripture is to study a particular text as a coherent whole. This type of criticism became popular in the 1970s in response to a century of historical-critical approaches to Scripture. Historical critics were more concerned with breaking the biblical text apart and identifying the world behind the text. Literary critics focus instead on appreciating the Bible as a work of literature.

Narrative criticism of the Bible is especially focused on how the Bible tells stories and what those stories were meant to do. There have been a number of studies on biblical narrative over the last forty years. The oldest and most influential book on narrative criticism is Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, an examination of biblical type-scenes, conventions, dialogue, characterization, artful redaction, and concepts of knowledge.⁴⁹ Another influential book is Shimon Bar-Efrat's *Narrative Art in the Bible*, which focuses on traditional aspects of narrative such as narrators, characters, plots, time and space, and style.⁵⁰ These studies are primarily focused on the genre of narrative. The same is true of the many studies that follow in

49. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Revised Ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

50. Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

their footsteps. As such, they are primarily examinations of the historical or prose portions of Scripture.

The present study blends this narrative approach with aspects of rhetorical criticism on the basis of Walter Fisher's argument that most human communication is both narrative in form and rhetorical in nature. Rhetorical criticism is similar to narrative criticism in that its goal is to identify the effect a text is meant to have on its audience and how a particular text achieves that effect. This type of approach to the Bible has been in use for centuries. It was common during the Reformation. In a general sense even Martin Luther studied the Bible this way at times.⁵¹

Studies of the Psalms

Since 1970, a renewed literary focus on the book of Psalms (and biblical poetry in general) has resulted in a proliferation of studies with a wide variety of approaches and methodologies, including many which fit into the category of rhetorical criticism. These studies have analyzed the macrostructure of the entire book and the microstructure of individual psalms.

Microstructural studies have especially focused on syntax (how biblical poetry arranges words, lines, and sections), semantics (how biblical poetry conveys meaning), and poetics (how biblical poetry uses art).⁵² Especially relevant to the current study is *The Art of Biblical Poetry*,⁵³ a companion piece to *The Art of Biblical Narrative* by Robert Alter.

51. Paul O. Wendland, "Important Rhetorical Features in the Letters of Paul," *WLS Essay file*, 2015, <http://hdl.handle.net/123456789/4117>.

52. David M. Howard, Jr., "Recent Trends in Psalms Study," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1999), 31.

53. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, Revised Ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

Place of this Thesis

At first glance it might seem strange to take a narrative approach to a portion of Scripture in which narrative as a genre is rarely, if ever, utilized. A little explanation and exploration of the form of biblical poetry, however, shows how fruitful such an approach can be.

One of the most prominent features of biblical poetry is its use of parallelism. There has been much analysis and speculation on the purpose of this parallelism. Most relevant to the present study is the assessment made by Robert Alter in *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. Alter proposes that biblical poetry makes use of parallelism in a “dynamic” way, so that while words remain almost synonymous, they are never entirely so. Parallelism works to show a familiar object in a new light. Alter calls this *semantic parallelism*.⁵⁴

In biblical poetry, there is movement from one verset⁵⁵ to the next, from one verse to the next, and from one unit to the next. This poetic parallelism develops or intensifies sequentially, so the second half of a verset parallels but intensifies or further develops the first. Alter puts it this way, “In the abundant instances . . . in which semantic parallelism does occur in a line, the characteristic movement of meaning is one of heightening or intensification . . . of focusing, specification, concretization, even what could be called dramatization.”⁵⁶

That observation leads to this important one: biblical poetry, though not narrative in form, does contain a “narrative impulse” driven by semantic parallelism. Alter notes, “A good

54. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 15.

55. Alter uses the word "verset" for each of the two or three phrases which make up a verse of biblical poetry. The word "colon" is commonly used and synonymous.

56. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 10, 12, 19.

many poems are worked out through a consequentiality of images and ideas that is incipiently narrative and may include brief sequences of explicit narrative development.”⁵⁷

Alter compares this movement to the way movies work by showing a series of images in rapid progression. Each subsequent image, though barely distinguishable from the one before it, is not exactly the same. The difference is enough to create sequentiality. All those nearly synonymous images combine to tell a story. In the same way, biblical poetry uses nearly synonymous lines and its tendency toward development and intensification to tell an incipient narrative. These narratives, because they progress by such tight parallelism, are particularly well-suited for depicting a “minute sequence of events.”⁵⁸

The incipient narrativity of the psalms lends itself well to the current study. As previously mentioned, narrative identity theorists often examine particular incidents and the meaning people make of them. This is exactly the type of narrative Davidic psalms often recount. David describes an incident and struggles to understand what it means. This struggle leads to a lesson learned which is then applied to life in general.

Another important purpose of poetry is to defamiliarize the familiar. Poetry uses difficult or unusual phrasing and unfamiliar or even foreign words to force the reader to see a familiar object in a new light: “. . . the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception”⁵⁹ Interestingly, defamiliarization is also integral to the process of sensemaking.

57. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 29.

58. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 40.

In Psalms 39 and 10, poetic defamiliarization and sensemaking come together. David uses a variety of techniques to deconstruct his initial view of an incident. After deepening the ambiguity in dialogue with God, David is able to make sense of his situation by seeing it differently.

The current study uses what literary critics have uncovered about the narrative and rhetorical features of the psalms to apply the concepts of narrative rationality, narrative identity processing, and sensemaking to the two chosen Davidic psalms. This examination will show how these and similar psalms worked as meaning making devices to help David make sense of the uncertain realities of life on earth.

59. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 4.

EXPLORING LIFE NARRATIVES IN THE PSALMS

Approach and Methodology

This study approaches its chosen texts from a literary-critical perspective as a text to be studied for its own sake. Specifically, I approach these texts from both a rhetorical and narrative-critical perspective.

As previously mentioned, the goal of *rhetorical criticism* is to examine what effect a text is meant to have on a reader and how the author accomplishes that effect. *Narrative criticism* shares the same goal. In fact, most secular scholars would consider it a type of rhetorical criticism.⁶⁰ For the purposes of the present study, I kept in view narrative criticism's attention to details such as plot, character, point-of-view, time, and space.

This study uses theory as a loose conceptual frame which pays attention to particular features of a text while still allowing the text to speak for itself.⁶¹ The concepts I made use of were narrative paradigm theory's *narrative rationality* (identifying aspects of narrative probability and fidelity), narrative identity theory's concept of *narrative identity processing* (coding for—or reading with a view toward identifying—narrative identity constructs such as agency and meaning making), and the process of *sensemaking* (identifying how David interacts with ambiguity). Approaching the chosen psalms this way meant using a circular movement

60. Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 19.

61. Mark A. Paustian, "The Beauty Within the Veil: Validating the Strategies of Kierkegaardian Indirect Communication Through a Close Christological Reading of the Hebrew Old Testament" (Virginia Beach, VA: Regent University, 2016), 77.

from text to theory described by rhetorical critic James Jasinski in this way, “It proceeds more through a process of abduction which might be thought of as a back and forth tacking movement between text and the concepts that are being investigated simultaneously. . . . Conceptually oriented criticism proceeds through a constant interaction of careful reading and rigorous conceptual reflection.”⁶²

The methodology I made use of in this study was close reading with the concepts previously mentioned kept in view. Close reading consists of “mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to a deeper understanding of its meanings.”⁶³

I chose to use the psalms for this study because many of them are personal. They deal directly with an individual’s relationship with God. I chose Psalms 39 and 10 because both psalms recount negative incidents in David’s life which created ambiguity and led him to engage in sensemaking. I use the word “incident” intentionally. Stories involve incidents, either *actions* or *events*.⁶⁴ Psalm 39 is a unique example of an action psalm. Psalm 10 is an example of an event psalm, which is much more common in Scripture. Primarily what I looked for in choosing these psalms was a progression from perplexity to trust.

A caution should be added here. Biblical literary critics see their central task as examining a text of Scripture for its own sake, but this does not mean they have rejected a historical-critical approach to Scripture. Many fully embrace this approach. Robert Alter, for example, assumes the Bible has two types of narratives, “historicized fiction” and “fictionalized

62. James Jasinski, “The Status of Theory and Method in Rhetorical Criticism,” *WJC* 65.3 (2001), 256.

63. Barry Brummett, *Techniques of Close Reading* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010), 9. Quoted in Mark A. Paustian, “The Beauty Within the Veil,” 84.

64. Actions are things characters *do*. Incidents are things that happen *to* characters, cf. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 93.

history.”⁶⁵ These critics simply see literary criticism as a different, but complementary discipline. For them, the art displayed in the Scriptures is further proof of the Bible’s lack of historical reliability. An artful retelling seemingly requires that an author would go beyond the historical facts.

Perhaps the best illustration of this idea is the omniscience of the narrator in biblical accounts. Under normal circumstances, it would be strange for a historian to include details about the mindsets and motives of the characters involved. If they did so, it would have to be based on things those characters said. Biblical narrators, on the other hand, are often deeply aware of characters’ mindsets and motives.⁶⁶

Understanding the Holy Spirit’s inspiration of Scripture clears this up for confessional Lutherans. Still, it is important to know that many biblical critics consider the historicity of the events they study irrelevant. For them, the word “story” means, to some degree, “fictional.” For the current study, each “story” is still affirmed as “history.”

It was important to this study to examine these psalms in their original language. This was the most effective way to identify form (sequence, flow of thought, key words, tone, point of view, etc.) and content (plot, characters, explicit and implicit values, key concepts, meaning made, etc.). Making my own strict literal translation into English was helpful for examining form. Dynamic translation was helpful in identifying content.

65. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 36–37.

66. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 40.

August Pieper once observed that “the poetic parts of Scripture . . . excel in a clear, logical line of thought.”⁶⁷ I spent a great deal of time working to understand the sequence of each psalm. I found this examination to be extraordinarily fruitful in understanding their overall structure and meaning. What at first may seem a loosely-connected sequence of thoughts always turns out to have a tight progression.

Psalmody and Story

The value in seeking to understand how meaning is made through difficult circumstances is obvious. People want to know how to process difficult experiences so that they can move on from them and even grow. They want to recover psychological well-being and find some redeeming quality in the suffering which they have experienced.

Research into narrative identity has shown that “the ability to engage narrative processes to manage and resolve negative experiences is critical to positive functioning.”⁶⁸ In other words, when people suffer, their ability to revise their stories in a way that makes sense of that suffering is critical to personal growth.

For the Christian, this revising takes a specific form. By God’s grace, Christians know the story which objectively corresponds to reality. At least, they know its overall form in the narrative of sin and salvation in Christ. They also know that every aspect of their identity and life story is somehow tied to that story of Jesus. Therefore, they want to 1) know that the stories they

67. August Pieper, "Outline of Psalm 22," *Theologische Quartalschrift* Vol. 2.1, January 1905, translated by Wilbert Gawrisch in "Introduction to the Psalms," *WLS Essay File*, 1981, <http://hdl.handle.net/123456789/1753>.

68. McLean, "Constructing the Self in Early, Middle, and Late Adolescent Boys," 170.

operate by are God's stories, not just their own; 2) grow in their understanding of God's stories for their lives.⁶⁹

The present study applies current theory to the ancient poetry of the psalms. This examination will show how fruitful the painful events of our lives can be when we use them as scripturally-grounded sensemaking opportunities.

The form and content of the Davidic psalms justify this study. They are poetry, which utilizes defamiliarization to challenge previous conceptions and semantic parallelism to tell stories. The Davidic psalms are often personal, written from David's own point-of-view. They are often reflective writings written on the level of particular incidents. These incidents are often ones that cause meaning making. David ends a psalm having learned a lesson that answers the quandary with which the psalm began.

In the moment, as people go about their lives and interact with others, there is little time to think about the motivations and values that underlie their actions. They often act in ways that in hindsight they may struggle to understand.

When people are left alone with their thoughts, however, they are left to ponder the past and ask what they should have said or done, or to consider the future. It is this reflective time that David seemed to have found so valuable in evaluating the stories by which he lived. He seemed to understand how easy it is to slip back into old, familiar stories even after knowing and experiencing God's stories for himself. This, of course, is the reality of living under the cross. The Christian is at one and the same time eager to live by God's true stories and tugged by a

69. Another way of expressing these two points is that Christians want to 1) *subvert* their own stories and *affirm* God's stories in their place; 2) *Reaffirm* God's stories when events threaten to *subvert* them.

nagging desire to go back to the old, easy fictions. To bear the cross is to constantly deny the old self the right to claim authorship over our stories.⁷⁰

David's time reflecting often led him to compose poetry. This poetry, in David's case inspired by the Holy Spirit, was a way of meaning making. Through the process of describing events, David was able to examine the stories by which he was operating. He subverted the ones that were his own creation, and he affirmed and re-affirmed the stories God had told. The type of events that provoked the most intense reflection were those initially charged with powerful negative emotions. Positive events exhibit a different type of reaction.

The present study examines two psalms to exemplify two types of incidents. Psalm 39 was written in response to an action that subverted the invented stories by which David had been living. Psalm 10 was written in response to a negative event which threatened to subvert one of God's stories. I begin by exploring the form and content of each psalm. In the "Findings and Conclusion" section, I analyze what this exploration uncovered. What follows will show how these psalms work to "un-tell" and retell David's stories, leading him to a more mature understanding of God's purposes for his life.

Psalm 39 – De-conceptualizing Our Self-Stories

In Psalm 39, David explores the breakdown of his intentions in the face of truths much bigger than himself. This psalm demonstrates how a discrete event in David's life challenged the very stories he lived by. It shows how he resolved the tension between his desire for meaning and his need to find a story that was both meaningful and true.

70. "The essence of the cross . . . is this: *Self* denial." Daniel M. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Pub. House, 2008), 13.

This psalm can be broken down into four parts: 1) David recounts a decision about a certain type of event, how he carried it out, and its breakdown (verses 2–4); 2) David prays to God and God’s answer gives him a new perspective (verses 5–9); 3) David returns to the beginning of the event and accounts for what happened from a God-centered perspective (verses 10–12); 4) David feels the weight of his self-narratives being crushed by God’s law (verses 13–14). These four parts are broken down in detail below.

Part One: The Breakdown of the Idolatrous Self

לְמַנְצֵחַ לְיְדִיתוֹן מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד: ¹
 אָמַרְתִּי אֲשַׁמְרָה דְרָכַי מִחַטָּא בִלְשׁוֹנִי אֲשַׁמְרָה לְפִי מִחֶסֶם בְּעַד רָשָׁע לְנִגְדִי: ²
 נִאֲלַמְתִּי דוּמְיָה הַחֲשִׁיתִי מְטֹב וְכַאֲבִי נִעְבָּר: ³
 חֶסֶם-לְבִי בְקַרְבִּי בְהִגִּי תִבְעֵר-אֵשׁ דְּבַרְתִּי בִלְשׁוֹנִי: ⁴

¹ For the director of music. For Jeduthun. A psalm of David.

² I said, “I will keep my ways from sinning with my tongue; I will keep a muzzle on my mouth, as long as the wicked are in front of me.”

³ I was mute in silence; I did not even say anything good, but my anguish was stirred up.

⁴ My heart was hot within me; while I mused, fire consumed; I spoke with my tongue. (Psalm 39:1–4)⁷²

The psalm begins with David confiding to the reader a decision he had made. “Human intentionality is at the heart of narrative”⁷³ David’s intention is to be guarded about the way

71. This and all subsequent quotations of the Hebrew Bible taken from *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: SESB Version*. Electronic Ed. (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 2003).

72. The translations of Psalms 39 and 10 in this paper are my own. They are based on my own study of these verses, which included reference to current English translations as well as the translations of professional Psalms commentators. All other passages are taken from the NIV.

73. McAdams, "Personal Narratives and the Life Story," 250.

he speaks in a particular situation. The implication is that he regularly finds himself with wicked people standing in front of him. In the past, this has consistently resulted in an impulse to say things he knows he should not. He makes this decision because he does not want to say anything wrong, or “sin.” He does not specifically say that he would be sinning against God. Although this is obviously the case, his main concern is to do the right thing.

Commentators have found various interpretations for what the subject of David’s sinful speech might have been. Many suggest it is a physical, mental, or spiritual affliction David fears complaining about in front of God’s enemies.⁷⁴ Others say that the sinful speech would be provoked by the wicked themselves.⁷⁵ This interpretation seems preferable. It is not as if David would be okay speaking sinfully when wicked people *are not* around. In this moment he does not seem to be so concerned that the wicked person would hear him speak sinfully. He seems to be recognizing that the presence of a wicked person always provokes in him a strong emotional reaction that causes him to speak in ways he should not.⁷⁶ With the removal of the wicked person, the temptation is presumably removed.

The context of this interaction is not explicitly stated. There seems to be an element of judgment implied. There is evidence from other biblical accounts that Israelite kings performed a judicial role.⁷⁷ The word פָּנָיָהּ [*in front of*] is sometimes used in a judicial context.⁷⁸ Add to this the

74. Cf. Brug, Wilson, and Leupold.

75. Cf. Kidner, VanGemeren, Craigie, and Delitzsch.

76. Cf. Peter C. Craigie "Psalms 1–50," *WBC* 19, edited by Bruce M. Metzger, David Allan Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 308.

77. cf. 2 Samuel 15:1–4; 1 Kings 3:16–28 where in v.16 וַתַּעֲמֹדְנָה לְפָנָיו "and they stood before him" the concept of "standing before" is used in a courtroom context.

use of *לְפָנָי* [*in front of*] again in verse six. In that verse, God looks at David's whole life and judges it as nothing. Although lacking in specific details that would tie this psalm to a formal judicial setting, David's anger seems to stem in part from a judgmental attitude toward the wicked. He has lost sight of his own sinfulness and dependence on God's mercy.⁷⁹ In self-righteous wrath, all he can see is the wickedness of the person standing before him. His prayer for perspective appears to back up this interpretation.

In verse three⁸⁰ David goes on to record a specific incident in which he puts his decision into practice. He carries it out perfectly. He remains absolutely still. But this physical lack of motion belies inner turmoil, as David hints at the inner implications of his external inaction.⁸¹

The transition from verse three to four illustrates a pattern David follows for most of the other verses of this psalm. Normally, lines in Hebrew poetry are *dyadic*—they consist of two versets. Most of the lines of this psalm, however are *triadic*.⁸² As he transitions from one point in the narrative to the next, David uses the third verset to give a general summary of what is about to come next. Here, he writes *וּכְאַבִּי נִעְבְּרָה* [*but my anguish increased*] and the next verse

78. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, B. K. Waltke, "לְפָנָי," *TWOT* 550. This word typically implies "conspicuousness." Whatever is "before" someone is the object of their attention. When sin is in view, it often includes also the idea of judgment. In this case, David's attention is arrested by the wicked, who are conspicuous for their wickedness. Cf. Is 59:12; Hos 7:2; 1 Sa 12:3; Gen 31:37.

79. If this interpretation is correct, David's situation would be analogous to the situation of the person addressed in the Apostle Paul's diatribe in Romans 2. A person like David with an acute sense of what is just (cf. 1 Samuel 24:5) is always in danger of forgetting his real condition and judging those whose sinfulness is externally obvious.

80. The Hebrew verse numbering is being used. The psalm heading is considered verse one. Also note that Psalm 10 does not have a heading, so the verse numberings are the same in Hebrew and English.

81. This contrast between silence and motion is thematic. It continues throughout the rest of the Psalm.

82. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 137.

gives further detail. This will be useful to keep in mind in the latter half of the psalm, where the logical progression becomes more difficult to follow.

Verse four shows how the narrator's outer silence leads to inner chaos. Notice how the semantic parallelism intensifies from "heat," to "fire." This intensification contains a narrative impulse. David's silence makes his inner emotional state progressively more painful, until he cannot contain himself anymore. He finally must take back his earlier decision and speak. This sequence also has an element of what rhetorical critics call *iconicity*: "An icon, according to semiotic theory, is a sign that has a nonarbitrary relation to what it represents. As opposed to a symbol, an icon is a representational mark (signifier) bearing an actual resemblance to whatever it signifies."⁸³ The intensification from "heat" to "fire" imitates the intensification of emotional turmoil in David's head.

Part Two: An Appeal to God

5 הוֹדִיעֵנִי יְהוָה | קֹצֵי וּמַדַּת יָמֵי מִה־הִיא אֲדַע מִה־חֹדֶל אָנִי:
 6 הִנֵּה טְפָחוֹת | נִתְּתָה יָמֵי וְחַלְדֵי כְּאִזְנוֹ נִגְדָּד אֵד כֹּל הַבֶּל כֹּל־אָדָם נֹצֵב סֵלָה:
 7 אֵד־בְּצֶלֶם | יִתְהַלֵּךְ־אִישׁ אֵד־הַבֶּל יִהְיֶה יֶצֶר וְלֹא־יִדַע מִ־אִסְפָּם:
 8 וְעַתָּה מִה־קִּנִּיתִי אֲדַגֵּי תוֹחַלְתֵּי לִךְ הִיא:
 9 מִכָּל־פֶּשַׁעִי הֲצִלֵּנִי חֲרַפְתָּ נָבֵל אֵל־תִּשְׁיַמְנִי:

⁵ "Make known to me, LORD, my end,
and what the measure of my days is;
then I will know how fleeting I am.

⁶ Look! You have made my days handbreadths;
my whole life is like nothing in front of you;
surely all humankind is a mere breath,
even at its best. *Selah*.

83. Michael Leff and Andrew Sachs, "Words the Most like Things: Iconicity and the Rhetorical Text," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54.3 (1990), 258. An example from the cited article of iconicity would be to say someone is "very, very, very tall," rather than "very tall." Multiplying the word 'very' extends the sentence, representing linguistically the physical extent of the person's height.

⁷“Surely a man lives as an illusion;
surely as a breath he bustles about;
he heaps up stuff,
although he does not know who will gather it.
⁸“But now, what do I wait for, Lord?
My hope is in you.
⁹Deliver me from all my rebellions;
do not make me the reproach of a fool. (Psalm 39:5–9)

The narrative takes an unexpected turn as David transitions to verse five. Rather than speaking out sinfully as his emotions had previously caused him to do, David directs his speech upward. He speaks to God, who up to this point has not entered the narrative. The request he makes is perplexing at first. How would seeing his death and the number of his days solve his problem?

This is a good place to touch on David’s narrative identity. There are two narratives David has been operating by so far. The first is a narrative of *agency*, “I am in control.”⁸⁴ When David sees his emotions interfering with his behavior, he finds a simple solution, “I will just have to control myself.” He does, but the results undermine his sense of agency. His outer control leads to inner turmoil. He sees that even if he can control his outward behavior, he has little control over his emotions or his thoughts. This realization in turn shows how ineffectual his will is. This lack of control is acknowledged in verse five. David knows what he needs, but does not know how to get it. He purposefully allows his crumbling narrative to be further dismantled.

The other narrative, closely tied to the first, is one of *righteousness*, “I am a righteous person.” His initial intention was all about acting the right way in a particular situation. His narrative of self-control had also led him to a narrative of self-righteousness. In David’s mind, he not only can think, speak, and act as he wants, he can and will think, speak, and act righteously. The inner anguish caused by his outward avoidance of sin hints at the flaw in this narrative.

84. "Agency refers to motivations to assert, expand, and control the self." Dan P. McAdams et al., "Continuity and Change in the Life Story: A Longitudinal Study of Autobiographical Memories in Emerging Adulthood," *JOP* 74.5 (2006), 1380.

Righteousness is not just a matter of outward self-control, but of the heart. David's heart is found to be corrupt.

Verse five introduces by implication a third narrative, one of *immortality*, "I will never die." David's problem is shortsightedness. Obviously David knows consciously that he is mortal, but unconsciously he lives as if his today would be followed by another, similar day, and so on forever. The fact that David knows he is thinking this way, but cannot help it, indicates that the problem is with his mindset. The structure of his thoughts lies far beyond his ability to control. David's narrative of personal agency is further undermined by this realization.

David's prayer to God, then, is a prayer for perspective. Were he able to look ahead to his death and count the number of his days, then he would be able to think more effectively. Notice, too, that in this prayer, David is not at all focused on the wicked, but entirely on himself. While in other psalms, he might have prayed to see the end of the wicked, here he prays to see his own end. Then he states what the result would be if God answered this prayer. The last few words also serve to summarize the content of the next verse.

הִנֵּה [look], the first word of verse six, is used to create "a sense of immediate witnessing."⁸⁵ God answers David's prayer by lifting him up to heaven to view his life as God sees it. David's startled reaction records him actually seeing the whole tapestry of his life as God sees it in eternity. Notice the shift in focus here from David's personal agency to the agency of God. David goes from saying, "I am in control," to "God is in control." *God* has set the measure of his days. *God* looks at the whole span of his life as nothing.

85. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 194.

Notice also David's shifting place in the psalm. He began in his role of king looking at the wicked לְפָנַי [in front of me, v.1]. Now the LORD sits on his eternal throne with David בְּפָנָי [in front of you]. David's sitting in judgment shifts to a larger view in which he sees God sitting in judgment over his entire life on earth. David has an out-of-body experience. He sees the span of his life as God sees it. This leads him to learn something that is true not only of him but of all humankind.

כִּי [surely] “often introduce[s] with emphasis the expression of a truth (or supposed truth) newly perceived.”⁸⁶ David repeats the word two more times in verse seven and once more later on as he repeats the truth of humanity's brevity. Following the pattern of the final words of a verse summarizing what happens next, this first exclamation states the general truth, the next two occurrences of כִּי [surely] give specific examples.⁸⁷

Moments ago, David was feeling impressed with his own strength and righteousness. Now he sees as only God could show him what meaningless lives human beings live even at their best. הַבֶּל [breath] calls to mind the image of a breath on a cold day, which appears for a moment then disappears.⁸⁸ The word expresses here both the brevity of life and the fact that once it is over it leaves nothing behind.

David goes on to give specific illustrations of this truth. The first is visual. As a man goes about his everyday life, he is nothing more than a זָלָזָל [illusion], a phantom or a mirage. From

86. Brown, "כִּי," *BDB* Electronic Ed.

87. Note the shift from מְדָרָה [mankind, v.6] to אִישׁ [man, v.7] which marks this change.

88. Peter Schlicht, "Can Meaning Exist Without God: A Close Reading of Qohelet in Light of the Secular Social Imaginary," *WLS Essay File*, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/123456789/4311>, 23.

God's perspective, David sees all at once a man living and dying, leaving nothing behind. The next image, יִהְיוּ מְרִיזִים [they rush about], is auditory. The general sense is one of steady noise, in this case, the noise of people going about their business.⁸⁹ All the noise a human being makes as they strive to make their impact felt on this world ends in the silence of death, with no one to remember anything they have said. The final clause of verse seven expresses what this living and noise-making amounts to, a person simply gathering up stuff that in death will not go with them.

Two words just mentioned establish David's theme and hint at what sin he is confronting in himself: שֶׁלֶם [illusion] and רֵבִיבָה [breath]. Both words are used in the Old Testament for idols.⁹⁰ Idols are ineffective. They are unable to make any kind of impact on life in this world. Could this choice of words hint that David is struggling with a form of self-idolatry? Has he been blasphemously ascribing to himself qualities that only rightfully belong to God? This fits perfectly with the narratives David has attributed to himself so far in the psalm. "I am in control." "I am righteous." "I am immortal." What do all those narratives have in common? They are narratives that only perfectly describe God. Nevertheless, they are narratives human beings naturally adopt. In the course of this psalm, David recognizes and asks God to uproot those narratives from his thinking, whatever the cost.

In verse eight, וְעַתָּה [but now] marks a return to David's present situation. He compares his own situation to the rest of mankind. While all of humanity busies itself working to heap up as much stuff as they can—wealth, fame, respect, anything to justify their self-idolatrous stories—David considers his own purpose in life in view of its end.

89. Brown, "הִמְרָה," *BDB Electronic Ed.*

90. שֶׁלֶם: Amos 5:26; 2 Ki 11:18; 2 Ch 23:17; Ez 7:20; 16:17; 23:14; Nu 33:52. רֵבִיבָה: Je 8:9; 10:8; Dt 32:21.

Again there is the contrast between motion and silence that first marked the contrast between David's physical and psychological activity. Now David is reminded of a marked contrast between humanity and himself that should have prevented him from having these idolatrous thoughts in the first place. The first verb in verse eight, a form of קָוָה [to look for], denotes waiting, looking eagerly for something or someone.⁹¹ The second, תִּוְהָלַתִּי [my hope], has the nuance of lingering longer than intended.⁹² It is as if David were part of a large crowd made up of all humanity. As the rest go off to make their mark on the world (from their perspective at least), David simply stands there. He asks himself, "What am I waiting for?" With the end in mind, David answers, "You, LORD." He asks, "For whom am I lingering here?" "For you."

As the pillars of human hopes crumble around him, this verse, in the very middle of the psalm,⁹³ sounds a note of eternal gospel hope. David expects that when he leaves behind everything he has heaped up in this life, he will encounter an everlasting treasure: his God. This verse calls to mind Job 19:25–27. Job, who had actually experienced the loss of everything he had "heaped up" without experiencing death, says, "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (Job 19:25–27 NIV). David may have had these words in mind as he wrote. Much of the language of this psalm echoes the language of Job,⁹⁴ as well as anticipating the language of

91. Brown, "קָוָה," *BDB Electronic Ed.*

92. Harris, "תִּוְהָלַתִּי," *TWOT* 373.

93. The key thought in biblical psalms is often in the middle line of the psalm; John Brug, *A Commentary on Psalms 1–72* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005), 60.

94. cf. especially Job 7.

Ecclesiastes.⁹⁵ The second verset of verse eight shifts from a general confession of truth to a direct address to God. The final three words again anticipate and set up the verse that follows.

In verse nine, the narrator expresses why he waits for the Lord. The first verset expresses the truth generally applied to his whole life. In the second he applies that truth to the situation that began in verse three. As in the rest of the psalm, the focus is on David alone. David's sin is the ultimate cause of what has happened. The whole story of his life is one of constant rebellion and deliverance. He continues to undermine his own stories of agency and personal righteousness and to replace them with accounts of the Lord's agency and deliverance from rebellion.

In the second verset of verse nine, David takes the reader back to the beginning.⁹⁶ He begins to re-conceptualize his initial account of what happened, now with God in view. Once again, these words summarize what will be explained more fully in the next verse. Now David sees his initial silence before the wicked as an example of the Lord's deliverance. Had he allowed his emotions to get the best of him, his rash words would have left him utterly ashamed. They would have given the נָבֵל [immoral and irreligious fool]⁹⁷ standing in front of him opportunity to confront him with his obvious wrongdoing. It is crucial to understand that what follows is a retelling of the same story David has already told.

Part Three: The Story Re-conceptualized

95. This is especially evident from the use of נְשָׁמָה [breath] as a leitwort, a word used in a similar way in Ecclesiastes.

96. "The reflections in vv.9–13 parallel the thoughts expressed in vv.1–8." Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in Vol. 5 *EBC*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2008), 315.

97. Brown, "נָבֵל," *BDB Electronic Ed.*.

10 גַּאֲלַמְתִּי לֹא אֶפְתַּח-פִּי כִּי אַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ:
 11 הִסַר מֵעָלַי נִגְעָךָ מִתְגַּרְתִּי יָדְךָ אֲנִי כָלִיתִי:
 12 בְּתוֹכָחוֹת עַל-עֲוֹן יִסְרָתָּ אִישׁ וַתִּמָּס כְּעֶשׂ חֲמוּדוֹ אַךְ הִבֵּל כָּל-אָדָם סֵלָה:

¹⁰ I was mute;

I did not open my mouth,
because you did this.

¹¹ Remove your scourge from me;

I am ended by the hostility of your hand.

¹² In rebukes for iniquity you discipline a man,

and you melt his desire like a moth

surely all humankind is a breath. *Selah*. (Psalm 39:10–12)

Verse ten begins with the same word, גַּאֲלַמְתִּי [*I was silent*], that began David's account in verse three. In the first telling, David kept his mouth shut because of his own intentions. Now the Lord has caused him to stay silent.

Verse eleven appears to parallel verse four. Understanding this, it becomes evident that the Lord's "scourge" is that overwhelming emotional turmoil that his outward silence caused. David now interprets this anguish as the Lord's discipline for his sinful self-idolatry. His mental anguish is both the natural result of his initial lack of perspective and the tool by which God works behind this natural event to show David his sin. David begins to see God in every aspect of his story.

Even though David has realized his error, the LORD's discipline remains. The emotional turmoil is still there. So his prayer is that God would grant him inner peace. David will refer to this prayer again in verse thirteen.

For now, his perspective shifts again in verse twelve. Again he sees things from God's point-of-view. The word אִישׁ [*man*], which first appeared in verse seven, is repeated to mark a lesson David has learned as he reflects on this experience. The Lord works through painful

circumstances to discipline his people when the stories by which they operate are faulty. This general truth explains why the Lord allowed David's desires for control, personal righteousness, and immortality (i.e. to be God) to melt away. אֶל [surely] marks again David's recognition of the law aspect of this truth. The truth of humanity's brevity applies not only to him but to every last human being on the face of the earth. The Lord's everlastingness must inevitably uncover humanity's smallness.

Part Four: David's Conclusion

שְׁמַעֲנָה תִפְלִתִי | יְהוָה וְשׁוֹעֲתִי | הֶאֱזִינָה אֶל־דַּמְעֹתַי אֶל־תַּחֲרֹשׁ כִּי גַר אֲנִי עַמֶּךָ תוֹשֵׁב בְּכָל־אֲבוֹתַי:¹³
הַשָּׁע מִמְּנִי וְאֶבְלִיגָה בְּטָרִם אֱלֹהִים וְאֵינְנִי:¹⁴

¹³“Hear my prayer, LORD,
and incline your ear to my cry;
do not be deaf to my tears.
since I am a foreigner with you,
a stranger, like all my ancestors.

¹⁴Look away from me, and I will smile,
before I depart and am nothing.” (Psalm 39:13–14)

Verses thirteen and fourteen are an epilogue to David's narrative. Although he has come to see God at work in his life and God as the end of all he will experience on earth, this has not been a painless process. The devastation of unmaking everything he thought his life meant weighs heavily on him. This verse shows how David applies the truth that אֵל הַכֹּל בְּל־אָדָם [surely all humankind is breath] to himself. His own mortality leaves him in tears.

David uses a vivid metaphor to portray this realization. Earth is a house built by God. God, as its builder and as the one who has been there from beginning and will be there at earth's end, is the only one who can really call earth his home. Everyone else must realize that they are God's temporary guests on earth. Everything they heap up over the years must ultimately be

given back. Every story humanity naturally lives by is based on the idea that this world is their home. What David realizes he calls on his readers to recognize, too: “This world is not your home. It is better to realize that devastating truth now, than to be forced to realize it when death comes and you are left with nothing.” Verse fourteen shows what a heavy truth this is.

This final, seemingly despairing, note should not be taken in isolation, however. Verse eight must be in view even here. Even as David despairs of his own ability to make meaning of his life, he has hope. David’s closing note reveals “something of the bewilderment about man that was only finally dispelled when the Word became flesh, and when the gospel brought life and immortality to light.”⁹⁸

David feels the pain of the believer’s cross: “. . . for many a saint the closer one comes to a life of cheerful submission to the will and Word of God, the heavier and more painfully the cross presses and oppresses as the old *self* struggles to reassert itself and regain its control.”⁹⁹ Yet that pain drives him to another cross, before which he confesses, “But now, what do I wait for, Lord? My hope is in you” (Psalm 39:8).

Psalm 10 – Re-conceptualizing God’s Stories

Psalm 39 detailed an incident that called into question the believability of David’s own self-narratives. In contrast, this psalm details a type of event which David witnessed often enough to call into the question the believability of one of *God’s* narratives.

98. Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 156.

99. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 35.

This event always involved a particular type of character: רָשָׁע [the wicked]. Although singular, the Hebrew word denotes a class of people who think and behave the same way. In this case, the type of wicked person David describes is a powerful person who uses his strength and influence to oppress.

There is also a type of character the wicked person especially oppresses: עָנִי [the weak]. This word denoted a person in Israel who “financially . . . live[d] from day to day, and [was] defenseless and subject to oppression.”¹⁰⁰ The widow, the fatherless, and the hired servant are all examples of what the book of Deuteronomy deems עָנִי [the weak].

God’s express command concerning these vulnerable members of society is touched on a number of times in the Pentateuch. For example, in Exodus 22:22–24, where the verbal form is used, God says, “Do not take advantage [תַּעֲנֶה תַעֲנֶה] of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.” Deuteronomy 24:14–15, also says, “Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor [עָנִי] and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor [עָנִי] and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin.” These passages shed light both on the height of the wicked person’s arrogance and the reason for David’s distress. Wicked people are doing something the Lord had explicitly said not to do. It seems, though, that God is

100. Harris, "עָנִי," *TWOT* 683.

unable or unwilling to stop them. This discrepancy instigates the careful reevaluation David makes in this psalm.

The psalm starts with an initial question concerning God's ability and desire to do what he has promised. From there, David presents his case to God. He describes the oppressive, terroristic attitudes, words, and actions of a wicked person in defiance to God. As he does so, his perspective shifts. He begins to question the wicked person rather than God. Then he appeals to God to react and punish those who defy him. He confesses the truth that leads him to such a plea. He uses this truth to comfort those who are caught in the traps of wicked people.

Part One – Where is God When the Wicked Oppress?

¹ לָמָּה יְהוָה תַּעֲמֹד בְּרָחוֹק תִּתְעַלֵּם לְעֵתוֹת בְּצָרָה:
² בְּגִאֲוֹת רָשָׁע יִדְלַק עֵגִי יִתְפָּשׂוּ | בְּמִזְמוֹת זֹו חָשְׁבוּ:
³ כִּי־הִלֵּל רָשָׁע עַל־תְּאֲנוֹת נַפְשׁוֹ וּבִצְעַ בְּרֹדֶךְ נֶאֱמָר | יְהוָה:
⁴ רָשָׁע כְּגִבָּה אָפוּ בַל־יִדְרֹשׁ אֵין אֱלֹהִים כָּל־מִזְמוֹתָיו:
⁵ יִחִילוּ דְרָכָו | בְּכֹל־עֵת מְרוֹם מְשַׁפְּטֵיךָ מִנְּגִדוֹ כָּל־צוֹרְרָיו יִפְיַח בְּהֵם:
⁶ אָמַר בְּלִבּוֹ בַל־אֶמּוֹט לְדָר וְדָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא־בָרַע :

¹ Why, LORD, do you stand at a distance?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

² In his pride the wicked person hunts down the weak person,
he is caught in the schemes the wicked person thinks up.

³ Because the wicked person praises the desire of his soul,
and he blesses the greedy,
he despises the LORD.

⁴ In his arrogance the wicked does not seek him;
in all his schemes there is no God.

⁵ His ways prosper at all times;
your judgments are too high for him to notice;
he snorts at all who harass him.

⁶ He says in his heart, "I will not be moved.
I will never encounter disaster." (Psalm 10:1–6)

The psalm opens with two questions. David uses two images to describe what God appears to be doing whenever trouble comes. The first, standing far away, calls into question God's ability to help (his omnipotence). The second, hiding, questions his desire to help (his love). "In times of distress" sets the scene for the event David is about to describe.

From these questions addressed to God, David moves on to a thorough characterization of the type of character causing distress in this particular situation. He begins in verse three with a general summary of the characters involved (the wicked person and the weak person), the attitude of the wicked person (arrogance), his intentions (to catch the weak person), and how he carries those intentions out (chasing and catching the weak person).

Verses 3–5 describe the values that typically lie beneath the wicked person's attitudes. In verse three, הִלֵּל [he praises] and בֵּרַךְ [he blesses] are words typically used in the psalms for the attitude human beings are supposed to have toward the LORD. Instead, the wicked person praises his own desires and blesses those who use their power to get what they want from others.¹⁰¹ He is his own god, bowing to his evil urges and his physical, intellectual, and social power. As a natural result, he despises the LORD, the real God. The stories he lives by intentionally leave God out.

According to verse five, his life seems to confirm his attitude. All his intentions put into action go smoothly every time. So he puts God's judgments farther and farther from view. It does not seem to matter. Some try to stop him, but him simply scoffs.

101. The phrase וּבִצְעַת בְּרִיךְ נֶאֱמָר יְהוָה [and the greedy he blesses. He despises the LORD.] and a number of other phrases in this psalm are difficult to interpret and translate. There are a number of ways this particular phrase has been interpreted. It is possible that this is intentional on David's part. The disjointed style and difficulty of interpretation imitates the perplexity and dismay David feels as he observes the wicked oppressing the weak. The difficult language also serves as a way to defamiliarize the situation, so that David may also fully experience the appropriate outrage at what is going on.

In verse six, David uses the phrase אָמַר בְּלִבּוֹ [*he says in his heart*] for the first of three times. This phrase is used widely in Scripture when “characters wish to convince themselves that the action they are taking, rather than an alternative course, is the right one.”¹⁰² The wicked person must constantly work against his conscience to convince himself to continue acting wickedly. Here, as others condemn him, he justifies his arrogant disregard for God, and wholehearted pursuit of his own desires and power by telling himself that what he sees now will always be the case. His plans will always be successful. No one will ever touch him.

How might the phrase “he says in his heart” work rhetorically? Could it be that the brazen unreality of this thought begins to chip away at the story David has almost bought into? At the heart of the wicked person’s story is a blatant lie obvious to anyone, “I will live forever.”¹⁰³

Part Two – The Wicked Act

7 אֱלֹהִים פִּיהוּ מְלֵא וּמַרְמוֹת וְתַדְתַּח לְשׁוֹנוֹ עֲמַל וְאָוֶן:
 8 יֹשֵׁב בְּמַאֲרָב חַצְרִים בְּמַסְתָּרִים יִהְיֶה נֶקִי עֵינָיו לְחַלְכֵּה יִצְפְּנוּ:
 9 יֹאֲרָב בְּמַסְתָּר בְּאֵרֶיָהּ בְּסִכָּה יֹאֲרָב לְחִטּוֹף עֲנִי יַחֲטֹף עֲנִי בְּמִשְׁכּוֹ בְּרִשְׁתּוֹ:
 10 וְדָבָה יִשָּׁח וְנִפְלַל בְּעֵצוֹמָיו חֲלֻכָאִים:
 11 אָמַר בְּלִבּוֹ שֶׁכַח אֵל הַסְתִּיר פָּנָיו בַּל־רְאָה לְנִצָּח:

⁷ His mouth is full of curses and deceit,
 trouble and sorrow are under his tongue.

⁸ He lies in wait near the villages;
 in secret places he murders the innocent.

His eyes watch in secret for the unfortunate person;

⁹ He lies in wait in the secret place like a lion in a thicket.

He lies in wait to catch the weak person;

102. Bar-Efrat, "Narrative Art in the Bible," 63.

103. Verse sixteen hints that this is the case. David subverts the wicked person's story of immortality by saying, "the nations will perish from his land."

he catches the weak person and drags him off in his net.

¹⁰ And the weak person is crushed, he collapses;
he falls under the strength of the wicked person.

¹¹ The wicked person says in his heart, “God forgets;
he hides his face. He never sees.” (Psalm 10:7–11)

The sequence continues with a piling up of descriptions for the evil words the wicked person loves to speak. David pictures the wicked person’s mouth filled with them. With every negatively-charged word, he also expresses wholehearted condemnation for who this type of person is. He invites himself to feel the full extent of the distress of seeing such a person experience prosperity with no one to oppose him.

In verse eight, the wicked person springs into action. The repetition of the image of him waiting in hidden places and pouncing on unsuspecting victims brings to life the terror such a person must be to the society in which they live. He is a terrorist, preying on innocent people for no reason other than the thrill he gets out of exerting his power over helpless victims and causing people to dread him. David has watched countless times as this character has wantonly torn apart people who had no power to fight back. The power of the wicked person is placed in stark contrast to the absolute vulnerability of his victims.

This sequence is followed in verse eleven by the second occurrence of אָמַר בְּלִבּוֹ [*he says in his heart*]. A wicked person must justify his evil words and terroristic lifestyle to himself. From the first to the third of these occurrences, there seems to be a progression in audacity. At first, the justification centers on the wicked person himself. The second time, the wicked person shifts to talking about God as if he were not listening. The third time the phrase occurs, the wicked person defiantly addresses God directly with his self-justifying thoughts. Perhaps this portrays rhetorically the hardening of the wicked heart with the passage of time. The longer God

is patient with his wickedness, the more his hostility toward God grows. With this defiant inner monologue, David has had enough.

Part Three – The LORD is King (verses 12–18)

קוּמָה יְהוָה אֵל נְשֵׂא יָדְךָ אֶל־תִּשְׁכַּח עַנְיִים: ¹²
 עַל־מָה | נֶאֱזַק רָשָׁע | אֱלֹהִים אָמַר בְּלִבּוֹ לֹא תִדְרֹשׁ: ¹³
 רָאֵתָה כִּי־אָתָה | עָמַל וְכַעַס | תְּבִיט לְתֵת בְּיָדְךָ עֲלֵיךָ יַעֲזֹב חִלְקָהּ יְתוֹם | אָתָה | הֲיִיתָ עוֹזֵר: ¹⁴
 שִׁבַר זְרוּעַ רָשָׁע וְרַע תִּדְרוֹשׁ רִשְׁעוֹ בַל־תִּמְצָא: ¹⁵
 יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ עוֹלָם וָעֶד אֲבָדוּ גוֹיִם מֵאֶרֶץ: ¹⁶
 תִּצְוֹת עַנְיִים שָׁמַעְתָּ יְהוָה תִּכְיֶן לְבָם תִּקְשִׁיב אֲזוּנֶיךָ: ¹⁷
 לְשֹׁפֵט יְתוֹם וְיָדְךָ בַל־יִסְיֵף עוֹד לְעַרְץ אֲנוּשׁ מִן־הָאָרֶץ: ¹⁸

¹² Arise, LORD God! Lift up your hand.

Do not forget the weak.

¹³ Why does the wicked person despise God?

Why does he say in his heart,

“He will not seek me”?

¹⁴ You do see, God, trouble and anger;

you consider grief and take it in your hand.

The unfortunate person abandons himself to you;

you are the helper of the fatherless.

¹⁵ Break the arm of the wicked person;

seek the evildoer to avenge his wickedness

that would not otherwise be found out.

¹⁶ The LORD is King for ever and ever;

the nations will perish from his land.

¹⁷ You, LORD, hear the desire of the weak;

you establish their heart.

You incline your ear to them,

¹⁸ defending the fatherless and the oppressed,

so that mere earthly mortals

may no longer terrify. (Psalm 10:12–18)

Interestingly, David’s urgent plea in verse twelve assumes both God’s ability and desire to act.

David began the psalm by questioning these qualities of God. His question has been answered.

More remains to be said about *how* his question has been answered in the course of the psalm.

That discussion can be found in the “Findings and Conclusion” section.

David calls on the LORD to intervene. The imagery progresses from the LORD standing to the LORD lifting his hand to strike the wicked person. The arm of God, for now, is left poised to strike. With this expression, no longer of dismay but trust, David asks the initial “Why?” once more.

This time, in verse thirteen, the question is addressed to the wicked person. The problem is not with God, but with the wicked person whose very being defies God. The self-justifying answer is given, “You do not seek (me).” The wicked person does not שׂרַף [seek] God in worship (verse four), so he assumes that God does not שׂרַף [seek] him to punish him for what he is doing.

David immediately contradicts this statement. In doing so, he flips the point-of-view from the activity of the wicked person to the activity of God. What is God doing while all this goes on? To the wicked person’s horror (if he could only see!), the LORD is watching him. He is considering the trouble the wicked person is causing and preparing to act. Not only that, but he, the only one powerful enough to act, acts *on behalf* of those who cannot help themselves. David’s gaze shifts from the character of the wicked person to the character of God. God is benevolent toward those who are weak. God punishes those who take advantage of others. God is the defender of the powerless. Those who are helpless find help in him.

Following this powerful confession of trust, in verse fifteen David returns to his plea to God. The LORD’s hand, left poised to strike, now comes down. David calls on God to break the arm of the wicked person. Arm is used metaphorically for the wicked person’s ability to act. David urges God to prove the wicked person wrong when he says, “He will not seek (me),” by doing just that, seeking out and punishing his wickedness.

Following this plea, David looks again at the broad scope of eternity. He sees the unending reign of God as king and in contrast the end of the wicked person in death. He sees an end to oppression.¹⁰⁴ As in Psalm 39, David's answer comes by seeing life from God's perspective.

In verses seventeen and eighteen, David brings back two words he has used before: תַּאֲוָה [desire] and לֵב [heart]. The irony of the wicked person's seemingly limitless power and arrogance is that his headlong pursuit of his own תַּאֲוָה [desire] and his own self-justifying לֵב [heart] will perish, while the תַּאֲוָה [desire] and לֵב [heart] of those he oppresses will be heard and established by God. David's answer comes by seeing beyond the present moment.

For the oppressed, the LORD's coming in judgment is a longed-for day. On that day, they will no longer have to fear anyone. Even now, as they look forward to that day, the power and terror of those who oppress them dwindles in view of God's ultimate justice.

104. The ongoing relevance of the truth David learned in Psalm 39 is evident here. Humanity's brevity is comforting when people live in open rebellion against God.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this study, I set out to explore how the Davidic psalms worked as meaning making devices for their author. Meaning making is primarily about growth. It is identifiable by a progression from confusion to clarity. If meaning has been made, a story concludes with a lesson learned. This progression is evident in both Psalms 39 and 10.

Identifying *how* this meaning is made, though, proves more difficult. There is not always an obvious logic to how David works from his initial understanding of an incident to his final conclusion. Psalm 10, for example, moves from David's initial question to God to his final expression of trust by simply describing the actions and attitudes of the typical wicked person. Yet there must be *something* in David's poetry that argues for his story to be retold. Applying the concepts of narrative rationality, narrative identity processing, and sensemaking offers a compelling answer to this issue. This section summarizes the findings from Psalm 39 and 10 and suggests a number of applications.

Psalm 39

"Stories are fundamentally about the vicissitudes of human intention organized in time."¹⁰⁵ This story begins with such an intention. David intends to avoid speaking sinfully when provoked by the presence of a wicked person. A wicked person comes into his presence. He carries out his

105. Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986), 16.

intention, neither saying nor doing anything. Meanwhile, inwardly, he burns. How does such a discrete sequence of events lead to such a profound inner struggle?

In seeking to answer that question, it is important to distinguish David's *recounting* of the event and his *accounting*. Recounting is simply a relaying of the facts involved. Accounting involves semantics, or the meaning a person constructs out of the bare facts. In Psalm 39, the facts do not change, but David's interpretation of those facts does.

These are the facts. David made a decision to hold his tongue to keep from speaking impulsively with the wicked in front of him. As a result, he experienced an upsurge of emotion so strong he was finally compelled to speak. Rather than speaking sinfully to the wicked person, though, he offered a prayer to God for perspective.

An attempted reconstruction of David's initial account of those facts might look like this: "I am a just and powerful king. Therefore, whenever a wicked person stands in front of me, I am overwhelmed with emotion by their arrogance and unjust ways. But I am more than a match for them. I must simply control myself so that I do not speak rashly, undermining my perfect reputation as a righteous king. As I reign over Israel for the foreseeable future, the wicked will not triumph in Israel." By the end of the psalm, David has come to see things differently. The following uses the chosen concepts to examine how he gets there.

Narrative Rationality

Narrative rationality is made up of *narrative probability* and *narrative fidelity*. Narrative probability is about how well a story "hangs together," and has three components: argumentative coherence, material coherence, and characterological coherence.¹⁰⁶ In this case, the intense self-

106. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 47. Cf. also page 6 of this paper.

focus of this psalm seems to indicate that characterological coherence most challenges David's initial story. As the event unfolds, he is confronted by inconsistencies in who he claims to be and who, in reality, he is. He conceptualizes himself as a righteous and powerful king, but his attempt to control his tongue undermines both self-concepts. However much he may control his outward behavior and avoid sinning that way, internally he has no ability to control sinful emotions.

With his own characterological coherence in tatters, another character enters the scene: God. The real demolition of David's story begins. David's ingrained sense of immortality is imploded as he looks at himself from God's eyes. God has no beginning or end. David's entire existence on earth becomes a blip. David's notions of self-righteousness and merciless rage are obliterated as he shifts his gaze from his own throne to the throne of the LORD in heaven. He sees what it truly looks like to be just. From God's eyes, he sees in himself only transgression and an incredible need for mercy. David's sense of agency gives way to an absolute helplessness. He sees a lifetime's efforts leaving nothing to show. He sees his utter reliance on God for a meaningful existence. How can any story of his own be true when this is who he is and this is who God is? God's holiness devastates David's idolatrous fairy tale.

What does this mean for our stories and our meaning making? The only true stories are those in which God is ultimately the hero. To paint myself as the hero of my story will only result in me looking silly. Christian meaning making despairs of a personal ability on one's own to effect any positive change on this world. Christian meaning making strives to see God at work more and more in every aspect of life (because he *is* at work!). Christian meaning making strives to see God at work *in Christians*: “. . . it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13). Christians are empowered to live boldly not by inflated egos, but by the Spirit himself working powerfully in their hearts. Christian agency

becomes infinitely more effective when it is based in the infinitely holy character of the God who has redeemed them by the cross.

Narrative Identity Processing

There are additional insights to be gleaned by considering this account from the standpoint of how people narrate suffering. According to narrative identity psychology, the two steps to effectively dealing with negative experiences are to 1) explore it in depth and 2) articulate and commit oneself to a “positive resolution of the event.”¹⁰⁷ David appears to do both.

First, he recounts the emotional agony he experienced, the cause of that agony, and the implications for his life on the whole. As I coded for *agency*, I found that David initially sees himself as highly agentic,¹⁰⁸ but gradually cedes this control to God. God’s agency becomes supreme. As I coded for *communion*, I found no initial emphasis on connection to anyone, but as David re-conceptualizes his story, communion with God is brought into the forefront.

Second, he articulates what the positive ending to his problem is: to see the LORD as the true eternal, righteous, omnipotent king. He re-conceptualizes his story around the twin realizations of humanity’s limitations and the LORD, “who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light” (1 Ti 6:16). In this way, the ending is a mix of both the positive and the negative. David begins and ends in an emotionally negative state. The difference from beginning to end is less emotional and more a spiritual and semantic one. The story codes high for *meaning*

107. McAdams and McLean, "Narrative Identity," 234. The technical terms for each step are: 1) exploratory narrative processing and 2) coherent positive resolution.

108. "Highly agentic stories privilege accomplishment and the ability to control one's fate," McAdams and McLean, "Narrative Identity," 254.

making.¹⁰⁹ The primary lesson David learns is marked by the repeated phrase, “surely humanity is a breath.” The corresponding lesson is that meaning exists only in God. He alone is truly significant. His is the one relationship that persists even as death separates one from everything they have ever known. The truth about humanity is devastating law. The truth about God is, for David, rooted in the Gospel. In the form of narrative both are allowed to stand side by side.

Sensemaking

David is confronted with potential ambiguity by the unforeseen consequences of his initial intention and his subsequent loss of emotional and cognitive control. He does not fall back on familiar conceptions and simply affirm his agency over the situation despite this ambiguity. Instead, David deepens the ambiguity in a way similar, but distinct from the way suggested by sensemaking theory. For David, seeing this situation anew depends on God’s showing it to him.

As his emotions boil over and he is forced to speak, David prays. His prayer to God is not for restoration, but annihilation. He could have asked for strength to overcome his emotional turmoil. He could have asked that God would cast the wicked person out of his presence. He could have found a solution that would have allowed him to move on easily, but instead he prays that God would let him see the truth. As Kidner puts it, “This seems to be a deliberate act of facing unwelcome facts as God’s facts, and seeing them as He sees them.”¹¹⁰ He prays that God would unmake his stories and allow him to see his own vulnerability, sin, and death. God’s answer to this prayer is what allows David to interpret his story differently. His prayer

109. A story codes *high* for meaning making if it contains a “deep insight about life”; McAdams and McLean, “Narrative Identity,” 234.

110. Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 156.

encapsulates what it means to deepen ambiguity in order to make better sense of a clearly flawed conception of reality.

Findings

Although there are certainly more, here are three conclusions to draw from the study of this psalm when it comes to how David's meaning making works.

First, David learns by letting God be God. He senses that the source of his anguish is his own tendency to blasphemously ascribe to himself qualities only God has (absolute control, righteousness, and immortality). Ironically, he has so little control that he is not even able to change those misconceptions on his own. He demonstrates his faith by praying to God for perspective. The lesson is learned when God answers David's prayer. God allows David to see what it *actually* looks like to be God. Believers make meaning by looking at the world through the eyes of God. This is only possible through continual interaction with the inspired Scriptures.

Secondly, David learns by exploring in depth what the flaw in his intentions was. He is not too quick to try to move on. Instead, he reflects on what lesson there is to learn from his mistake. This is a simple principle, but one too easily neglected: if you are going to learn a lesson, you have to acknowledge that there is a lesson there to be learned.¹¹¹ We neglect to do so because it is painful. It is much easier to say, "I do not want to think about it," than to confront painful truths about ourselves. David's simple mistake, explored to its depths, unmask his sinful nature's true hideousness. He cannot bear to see it. The psalm ends with David's plea to God to

111. Narrative identity psychologists call this *coping openness*: "The extent to which people are open to and tolerant of . . . the negative, ambiguous, and complex thoughts and feelings generated by difficult experiences;" Jennifer L. Pals, "Narrative Identity Processing of Difficult Life Experiences: Pathways of Personality Development and Positive Self-Transformation in Adulthood," *JOP* 74.4 (2006), 1084.

look away. The law cuts like a knife, but cut it must. The more we delve into the darkness of our own hearts, the brighter the light of Christ appears.

Thirdly, David learns by sensing ambiguity, deepening it, and coming to tell a new story. This truth is closely related to the second. If the second lesson learned is to be open to reflecting on mistakes, this truth explains how that reflection should work. When a situation does not make sense, deepening ambiguity means trying to see it with fresh eyes. Like David, this is an issue of mindset. Our conceptions are deeply ingrained in us. So, like David, deepening ambiguity has to involve study of the Scriptures. We let God tell his story. It is a much better story than our own. Deepening ambiguity will also involve prayer. We ask God to unmake our stories and remove any obstacle that keeps us from taking to heart the truth of his Word. We involve ourselves with the Holy Scriptures.

Psalms like Psalm 39 can be a useful aid in this revising process. Not only do they teach us *how* to retell our stories, they give us examples of stories that need to be retold. Working through them can be an effective way to mature in our faith, even if we are not facing that particular situation at the moment. If we are, it will be all the more helpful.

Psalm 10

In Psalm 10, two pairs of questions embody the change in David's thought throughout the course of the psalm. In verse one, he asks, "Why, LORD, do you stand at a distance? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" In verse thirteen, he asks, "Why does the wicked person despise God? Why does he say in his heart, 'He will not seek me'?" David learns that when wicked people oppress the weak, the problem is not with God, but with the wicked. Once again, the

question is: how do the words between these two pairs of questions lead David to learn this lesson?

Narrative Rationality

The previous discussion of Psalm 39 focused especially on the aspect of narrative rationality called narrative probability. Here the discussion shifts to *narrative fidelity*. Narrative fidelity is about evaluating the “truthfulness and reliability” of a narrative and applying the logic of good reasons to its arguments.¹¹² This evaluation centers on the *values* that lie beneath a story. Values are judgments about what is good and bad. Values are what make one story more convincing than another, according to narrative paradigm theory.¹¹³

What led David to the questions that begin this psalm? According to the narrative paradigm, people reevaluate the stories they live by when confronted with an apparent lack of coherence. The incoherence here was a disparity between statements of God like the one previously mentioned from Exodus 22:22–24 and the reality David saw before him. The reality of divine inactivity suggested to David either a lack of ability or desire in God to help. Who, though, suggested this particular story to David?

The initial question and the story implied by it (God cannot act against the wicked nor does he want to act) were not David’s own interpretation of the events he describes. This story was suggested by those who enacted these events: the wicked. Narrative paradigm theory suggests that all human communication is rhetorical, even if it is non-verbal. In every form, it

112. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 109. Cf. also page 6 of this paper.

113. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 48.

invites a person to adopt a certain view of the world.¹¹⁴ In this case, David originally took the LORD at his Word that wickedness and oppression would be punished. By their words and behavior, however, wicked people had been communicating to David an alternative story to explain the world.

The progression of the psalm appears to be a reversal of the way things must have happened as this event unfolded. The psalm begins with the central question. Then, David explores what has led him to ask this question. He moves from a summary of how wicked people are causing him distress (verse 2) to the values wicked people live by (verses 3–5), to the words they speak (verse 7), to the actions they take (verses 8–10).

In reality, the process would have been reversed. David would have observed the words and actions of the wicked. By interpreting them, he would have understood the values they held. This is exactly how narrative paradigm theory suggests stories are evaluated: by moving from words and actions to an assessment of underlying values.¹¹⁵

That these wicked people praise their desires and bless the greedy is an interpretation David has made based on what he has seen and heard from them. As he came to understand the way the wicked view the world,¹¹⁶ he waited for God to act. With the passing of time and no apparent reaction from God, the story of the wicked began to hold more sway, to the point where David was led to actually wonder if they were right.

114. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 58-59.

115. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 48.

116. Their self-narratives and the values imbued in them.

So he asks the question of God: *Are they right?* Then he reflects back on the values, the words, and behavior that have led him to this point. As he does so, three times he adds the phrase “He says in his heart . . .” Why? What do these little interjections do for David?

These statements summarize how the wicked person justifies his stories to himself. They are keys to understanding how David begins to reaffirm God’s story. Take the first statement in verse six for example, “I will not be moved. I will never encounter disaster.” The same realization that called into question David’s own stories in Psalm 39 does the same with this phrase. What does this statement imply? The wicked person is living as if they will never die and are in absolute control of the world around them. David knows by his own experience¹¹⁷ how these claims are nullified not only by death, but by the lack of control human beings have even over their own inner life. The addition of these statements chips away at the foundation of this momentarily convincing story.

Considering narrative probability also brings up something interesting here, especially concerning characterological coherence.¹¹⁸ David reasons through all he has witnessed and struggles to make sense of it in the context of God’s story. He begins to recognize that the story he is considering adopting is the creation of a type of character who is reliable only in being thoroughly evil. The wicked live according to values that are repulsive to David. Why should he believe their self-justifying story of God’s indifference toward evil? As David measures these values against the ideal for human behavior,¹¹⁹ he recognizes that for him to believe this about

117. *Consistency in the logic of good reasons*; Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 109.

118. Whether or not a story is believable depends on the reliability of the characters, both as narrator and actor; Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 47.

119. *Transcendent issues in the logic of good reasons*; Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, 109. For the Christian, these ideals are, of course, God’s ideals (derived from Scripture).

God would undermine core values he lived by: that oppression is evil, that people should not speak in oaths, lies, and troubling words, that people should worship the LORD, and not their own desires and feeble power. What do all of these considerations lead David to do?

He finds a different question to ask. “Why do the wicked despise God?” David makes meaning out of this event by recognizing the lack of narrative rationality in the stories the wicked have told by their behavior. The problem is not with God, but with the wicked. God has promised to punish those who oppress the weak. He will. The psalm becomes a trust-filled prayer to God to do as he has promised, rather than a question that wonders if God has already failed. David reaffirms God’s account and his timetable.

Narrative Identity Processing

This instance is a good example of a redemptive sequence. David begins in a state of emotion distress. By the end, he has come to terms with God’s power and love. He again seems to follow the two-step process narrative identity theorists suggest is most effective in dealing with negative events. He begins by fully exploring the cause of his distress, expressing in a number of ways the attitudes, words, and actions of the wicked. The heightened language of poetry adds additional emotion to this process. Finally, he comes to a positive resolution.

Sensemaking

David is confronted with ambiguity because of an apparent contradiction between God’s promise and the wicked person’s claim. What is fascinating is that his initial conception of reality was one spoken directly by God and therefore unquestionably true. Yet, rather than simply falling back on past conceptions, David once again deepens the ambiguity. He puts his doubts about

God into words. Then he systematically recounts all the ways in which the wicked seem to be proving God wrong.

David does so in a poetic way, using defamiliarization as a tool for unmaking this story and seeing it again. He uses poetry to, “recover the sensation in life; . . . to make [himself] feel things, to make the stone stony.”¹²⁰ He paints a vivid picture, encouraging himself to fully experience the awfulness of the situation. He piles up descriptions of the wicked person’s speech and depictions of the wicked person’s terroristic lifestyle.

In this case, rather than coming to believe a new story about God’s justice and the wicked, he is led to a deeper and more mature understanding of this truth. Sensemaking done in faith is a way toward a more robust understanding of God’s stories.

Findings

Psalm 10 reaffirms the usefulness of narrative identity theory’s two-step process for working through negative experiences. It also illustrates two additional truths about how David’s meaning making works.

First, David learns by identifying values. He knows how to get to the heart of a story. At the heart of every story are value judgments about what is good and what is bad. David clearly knew what God’s values were. He knew them from meditating on what God had said in his Word. Knowing them enabled him to judge the truthfulness of any new story. What does this story say about what is good and what is bad? How do these values line up with God’s Word? The proliferation of stories that exist today means that being able to identify values is equally important for Christians today.

120. Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," 4.

Second, David learns by taking his questions to God. When another's story seems more convincing than God's, he asks the question of God. It is important to engage in reflection, prayer, and meditation when faced with events that clearly contradict what God has expressly stated in his Word. It is an expression of faith to take God at his Word and to be like the persistent widow by crying out to God, "You promised!" It is not as if God does not see the apparent contradiction. He is not oblivious. He challenges us to test us for our own sake. His desire is that his people would know what he has promised, be able to recognize apparent contradictions, and talk to him about them.

By engaging God in conversation with doubts and fears, Christians mature. By attempting to deny ambiguities, the doubt remains, even if the stories are true. The Christian life becomes a constant battle to ignore lingering doubts. At the very least, our faith becomes disengaged from reality and abstracted from the concrete situations of everyday life. Engaging God in a faith-oriented way is a God-pleasing way to react to seeming contradictions between what God has said and what we see.

Conclusion

There is a postmodern school of thought among narrative identity psychologists which emphasizes the subjective nature of our stories. They believe that the stories human beings live by are social constructs. These stories are so numerous that they are impossible to fully integrate in the way mainline narrative identity psychologists suggest is necessary. To a certain extent, they are on to something. Psalm 39—and Scripture as a whole—acknowledges 1) the vast limitations of human understanding, and 2) the propensity of human beings to create stories that do not accurately reflect reality. It is true that human identity is so complex we will never

achieve complete integration of every aspect of our life on earth. It is true that even the integration we do achieve is often based on false conceptions of who we are. The point of departure, however, is in the solution to this dilemma.

Christians do not have to believe that they will every fully understand themselves. Christians should *not* believe that they are capable of accurately understanding the world on their own. Instead, Scripture teaches us to look to God for meaning. It teaches us that God is the only one who truly has the story straight.

The Christian metanarrative of God's justice and his love meeting in Christ's cross is not one Christians can simply tack on to the stories we lived by apart from Christ. Our own stories are at best only half truths. Scripture teaches us to retell them.

Scripture teaches us to deepen the ambiguity of the difficult situations of our lives. This is so even when those ambiguities are caused by promises God has made that seem to contradict what we see. Think of all the instances in Scripture where the sufferings Christians face are compared to precious metal refined by fire.¹²¹ God's intention is not for Christians to simply ignore or sweep under the rug the suffering they face or the injustice they see in the world. Christians are not simply to fall back on old ways of viewing things, even if these understandings are correct. They are to engage the ambiguity and wrestle with meaning, at times in order to subvert the stories they have made up for themselves. They are to pray, meditate, and strive to adopt God's stories as their own. Engaging ambiguity and reflecting on suffering is a way of growing in their understanding as they make sense of their lives in conversation with God. They move from simple truths to more mature understandings. They momentarily embrace uncertainty

121. For a few examples, cf. 1 Peter 1:6–7; Isaiah 48:10; Proverbs 17:3; Psalm 66:10.

in order to grow more certain. This is true even if that certainty means simply saying, "Lord, you know this story better than I."

In this way, Christians are able to acknowledge their doubts and fears, rather than pretend they do not exist. They can maintain the complexity of living as a Christian. Like David saying in one breath, "But now, what do I wait for, Lord? My hope is in you" (Psalm 39:8), and in the next, "Remove your scourge from me; I am ended by the hostility of your hand" (Psalm 39:11), they can acknowledge that even though they have hope for the future, the pain they feel now is still real. Life under the cross feels this way. This truth enables Christians to seek psychological well-being without thinking that an absence of it means an absence of spiritual peace with God in Christ.

The methods suggested by narrative paradigm theory, narrative identity theory, and sensemaking theory for dealing with difficult situations, paired with the Psalms, give Christians guidelines for engaging ambiguous situations in a godly way. Not only that, but the Psalms provide a vast repertoire of lessons to explore and apply to their own lives.

Christians today do not have the same access to the Holy Spirit which David enjoyed. David's psalmodic sensemaking was Spirit-inspired. Ours will not be. Even so, David's psalms are a perfect model to return to as we retell and revise the stories by which we live. They also remind us of an important truth.

If Christians are to make sense and grow from the difficult situations of their lives, they *must* do so by engaging the Scriptures. Done alone, this sensemaking will only mean a deepening self-deception. Done alone, this amounts to simply finding better lies to tell ourselves. Done with a deep engagement with the Scriptures, however, Christian sensemaking can lead to spiritual maturity. This hints at the most important implication of this study.

Christians are not little gods. Their faith in Christ has not given them an intellect free from the limitations of sin. We are still quite capable of coming up with new fictions by which to live. David evinces this in Psalm 39. This is a not a reason to despair, however (unless we are despairing of our own ability to get our stories straight). Instead, it is a reason to redirect our gaze: “While we stumble along in our weakness and in the perversity of our still remaining fallen nature, this rock-solid truth sustains us at the foot of his cross and under our own: Since the sin of the world has been paid for, so too has my sin been paid for; it is true because God says so . . .”¹²² God is the author of all true stories. He is the one who imbues every instant of our lives with actual significance. Our ever-reliable storyteller invites us in his Word to see things from his own perspective. God’s is the one view from which we can actually see reality. From that perspective, we see a God who is constantly at work in our lives and in our hearts. David’s realizations of truth in these two psalms were always encountered by being enabled by the Spirit to see *God’s* activity from *God’s* perspective.

The unique gift we have through the Scriptures is the ability to see what our life means. We see, as for the first time, God’s story for our lives. Contrary to all our expectations, we see a story that reaches its climax not at the height of a corporate ladder, in the collection of rare and costly items, or the completion of a master’s thesis, but in the silence of an empty tomb long ago, and in an empty tomb yet to come: your own and my own. As we struggle to make sense of a world much bigger than ourselves, our comfort is that the story has already been told. The end has already been written.

“For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” (1 Cor 13:12)

122. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 61.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There is a great deal more that could be done with narrative and Scripture. These theories could be applied to other psalms or other first-person sections of the Bible, such as the first-person sections of Paul's epistles. In my mind, an examination of the book of Job would be particularly interesting. They could be applied to a particular type of psalm, such as a study of the conventions of psalms which start with confusion and end with trust.¹²³ There could also be value in doing a narrative analysis of the whole life of a Biblical figure such as David while making use of concepts from narrative identity theory.

123. For more on this, see p.55 of Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* and what he says about convention in biblical narrative. Understanding the conventions of a certain genre or type is helpful because it allows the reader to identify how a particular story, in this case a psalm, compares and contrast to other stories of its kind.

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