

THE IMAGERY OF THE “WEANED CHILD” IN PSALM 131

I. THE TEXT OF PSALM 131

Psalm 131 is the second shortest psalm in the Psalter. Although the text is short – like most of the Psalms of Ascents –, its semantic problems would fill much more than one article: “This psalm has an enigmatic quality about it, due in part to its brevity”¹.

1	<i>A Song of Ascents. Of David.</i>	שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד 1
	<i>YHWH, my heart is not haughty, my eyes are not lifted up. I do not occupy myself with great matters and with things too marvelous for me.</i>	יְהוָה לֹא-גִבַּה לִבִּי וְלֹא-רָמּוּ עֵינַי וְלֹא-הִלַּכְתִּי בַגְּדֹלוֹת וּבְנִפְלְאוֹת מִמֶּנִּי:
2	<i>Indeed, I have calmed and quieted my soul. Like a weaned child on its mother, like the weaned child on me is my soul.</i>	אִם-לֹא שְׁוִיתִי 2 וְדוּמַמְתִּי נִפְשִׁי כְּגִמְלָא עָלַי אִמִּי כְּגִמְלָא עָלַי נַפְשִׁי:
3	<i>Wait, Israel, for YHWH, from now on and for evermore.</i>	יַחַל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יְהוָה 3 מֵעַתָּה וְעַד-עוֹלָם:

At first sight the psalm looks easy. It is – like Pss 16, 23 and 62 – an individual psalm of confidence². It contains elements of a royal psalm³ and of wisdom traditions⁴. Most exegetes classify it as post-exilic⁵.

1. L.C. ALLEN, *Psalms 101–150* (WBC, 21), Waco, TX, Word Books, 1983, p. 198.

2. See B.P. ROBINSON, *Form and Meaning in Psalm 131*, in *Biblica* 79 (1998) 180–197, p. 180; E. ZENGER, *Psalm 131*, in F.-L. HOSSFELD – E. ZENGER, *Psalmen 101–150* (HTKAT), Freiburg – Basel – Wien, Herder, 2008, p. 602. An earlier version of Zenger’s interpretation was published already 2006: E. ZENGER, “*Wie das Kind bei mir ...*”: *Das weibliche Gottesbild von Ps 131*, in I. RIEDEL-SPANGENBERGER – E. ZENGER (eds.), “*Gott bin ich, kein Mann*”: *Beiträge zur Hermeneutik der biblischen Gottesrede*. FS Helen Schüngel-Straumann, Paderborn, Schöningh, 2006, 177–195.

3. See M. DAHOOD, *Psalms III: 101–150* (AncB, 17A), Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1970, p. 238; ROBINSON, *Form and Meaning* (n. 2), pp. 192–193.

4. See ZENGER, *Psalm 131* (n. 2), p. 603. Of course, one has to consider the hypothetic and circular character of all these classifications described by ROBINSON, *Form and Meaning* (n. 2), p. 180: “There are no ancient handbooks of Hebrew rhetoric to tell us what the genres actually were. We have to deduce them from the text, and then read the text in the light of the hypothetical genres; a somewhat precariously circular procedure”.

5. See H.-J. KRAUS, *Psalmen 60–150* (BKAT, 15/2), Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 1989, p. 1052; K. SEYBOLD, *Die Psalmen* (HAT, 1/15), Tübingen, Mohr-

Theme of the psalm is an attitude of humility before YHWH. The whole body of the psalmist is involved in this humble attitude: his לב (heart), place of thoughts, his עין (eye) and the נפש (throat / soul / I) of the psalmist; הלך hints at the feet⁶. The roots פבה (high / haughty), רום (lift / make high), גדל (great) and פלא (marvelous) and their three-times negation (לא) in v. 2 open a “dynamic and relational”⁷ space between the two poles above and below, up and down.

At second sight the interpretation of the psalm, especially of v. 2, is not so easy. The repetition of פָּגַמְלֵי עָלַי in similar form is “the despair of translators and commentators”⁸. Like in every psalm, its interpretation depends on the contexts in which it is read.

Many interpretations have been influenced by the Septuagint version, which differs significantly from the Masoretic text: The Septuagint reads *ἰδοὺ ἡ ψυχή μου ἐπὶ τὴν οὐρανὸν ἀλλὰ ἔταπεινόφρονον* instead of *וְדוֹמַמְתִּי*, supposing an ו/ד- error: εἰ μὴ ἐταπεινοφρόνουν ἀλλὰ ὑψώσα τὴν ψυχὴν μου (*Indeed, I have humbled myself, but elevated my soul*). This translation stresses the difference between the I of the psalmist and his or her soul, marked by different verb forms and the ἀλλά. It continues the dialectic movement between up and down, above and below, exaltation and humiliation from v. 2⁹. The second major difference in the Septuagint translation concerns the last part of v. 2: ὡς ἀνταπόδοσις ἐπὶ τὴν ψυχὴν μου (*like a reward against my soul*)¹⁰. This reading opens another possibility for the meaning of גַּמַּל: “to do something to another person, to deal with someone, to give him what is coming to him, *in malam et in bonam partem*”¹¹.

While the Septuagint version established a separate tradition of interpretation, the following considerations concentrate on the Masoretic text. The problem of v. 2 is more a problem of semantics and translation

Siebeck, 1996, p. 11; E. ZENGER, *Die Komposition der Wallfahrtspsalmen Ps 120–134*, in M. EBNER – B. HEININGER (eds.), *Paradigmen auf dem Prüfstand: Exegese wider den Strich*. FS Karlheinz Müller (Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen, 47), Münster, Aschendorff, 2004, 173–190, p. 175; ALLEN, *Psalms 101–150* (n. 1), p. 198, admits that “there is no compelling linguistic evidence for this dating”.

6. Regarding body-language in the psalms and in the Hebrew Bible, in general, see: S. GILLMAYR-BUCHER, *Body Images in the Psalms*, in *JSOT* 28 (2004) 301–326; S. SCHROER – T. STAUBLI, *Die Körpersymbolik der Bibel*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005.

7. G.T.M. PRINSLOO, *The Role of Space in the שירי המעלות (Psalms 120–134)*, in *Biblica* 86 (2005) 457–477, p. 461.

8. ROBINSON, *Form and Meaning* (n. 2), p. 188.

9. This movement is typical to other biblical texts as well, e.g., Ps 113 and 1 Sam 2, 1–10.

10. For a detailed analysis of the Septuagint version and others see ZENGER, *Psalm 131* (n. 2), pp. 595–600.

11. See P.A.H. DE BOER, *Psalm CXXXI 2*, in *VT* 16 (1966) 287–292, p. 291.

than of textual criticism¹². The imagery of this verse raises big semantic questions:

What is the meaning of גָּמַל: Is it a suckling, a baby or a weaned child, a toddler? What does the preposition עַל mean in this context? How is the relationship to the נִפְטָשׁ? What does the whole image say about the situation of the people of Israel? How is Psalm 131 linked with its neighbor-psalms? Which perspectives does the interpretation of this small psalm open for the composition of the Psalms of Ascents? Do we find “female voices” here or even hints at maternal aspects of the god of Israel?

This article cannot answer all of these questions, but intends to concentrate on a few themes which are important to the interpretation of Psalm 131: the imagery of the weaned child, the role of v. 3 in the redaction process of the Songs of Ascents, Jewish interpretations which link Ps 131 with the life of David and the question of “female voices” raised in the recent discussion of the psalm.

II. THE IMAGERY OF THE WEANED CHILD

It is hard to understand the role of the mother-child- or parent-child-imagery in the context of the psalm. In parallelism to the first half of v. 2, the soul becoming quiet and calm, it seems probable to understand the image in the second half of v. 2 as a crying baby becoming quiet while being nursed by its mother¹³. But if we look at the passive form גָּמַל, it hints at a weaned child, a toddler, a child after the period of breast-feeding¹⁴. From 1 Sam 1,22-24; Hos 1,8; 1 Kings 11,20 and especially Isa 11,8 and Isa 28,9 where we find גְּמֹול in the passive *qal*-form, it is clear that גָּמַל means “to wean”¹⁵: Whereas the parallelism of

12. See M.D. KNOWLES, *A Woman at Prayer: A Critical Note on Psalm 131:2b*, in *JBL* 125 (2006) 385-389, p. 385.

13. See KRAUS, *Psalmen 60–150* (n. 5), p. 1052; ZENGER, *Psalm 131* (n. 2), p. 596: “gestilltes Kind”.

14. See ὡς τὸ ἀπογεγαλακτισμένον (*like the weaned child*) in the Septuagint; A. WEISER, *Die Psalmen II: Psalm 61–150* (ATD, 15), Göttingen – Zürich, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987, pp. 536-537; DAHOOD, *Psalms III: 101–150* (n. 3), p. 238: “infant”. W. BEYERLIN, *Wider die Hybris des Geistes: Studien zum 131. Psalm* (SBS, 108), Stuttgart, Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1982, p. 36, and L. RUPPERT, *Psalm 131 – Selbstüberwindung und Selbstbescheidung vor Gott*, in M. SCHMIDT – F.D. REBOIRAS (eds.), *Von der Suche nach Gott*. FS Helmut Riedlinger (Mystik in Geschichte und Gegenwart, 1/15), Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt, Frommann-Holzboog, 1998, 207-231, p. 209, translate “Entwöhntes”.

15. See L. KOEHLER – W. BAUMGARTNER, *Art. גָּמַל*, in L. KOEHLER – W. BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HAL), Leiden, Brill, 2000 (CD-Rom).

יִוֹק and גְּמֹל in Isaiah's visions of a peaceful time in Isa 11,8 can be understood either synonymous or as a climax, in Isa 28,9 it is obvious that גְּמֹלֵי מִחֶלֶב (*those who are weaned from milk*) hint at the time after nursing and after weaning. According to 2 Macc 7,28 in Biblical times children were nursed a long time and weaned at the age of three years.

Beside these semantic problems of גְּמֹל, some formal aspects of v. 2 in the Masoretic text are unusual, but it is possible to find explanations for them:

The repetition of כְּגֹמֵל עָלַי looks superficial to some exegetes¹⁶, but repetition can be explained as “a favourite stylistic device in the Songs of Ascents”¹⁷. Intention of this repetition is a climax¹⁸.

The unusual form עָלַי generated different proposals of change. The ideas of assimilation go in both directions: either changing עָלַי in v. 2b to עָלָיו and understanding it as 3rd person (“with him”) in the second case¹⁹ or an emendation of עָלַי to עָלָיו in parallel to the second occurrence: This small change of vowels can serve as an important argument in favor of Ps 131 as prayer of a woman: “Like a weaned child *on me* (עָלַי) its mother, Like the weaned child *on me* (עָלַי) is my soul”²⁰. Beside these – and other – proposals, it is possible to explain עָלַי as special poetic form instead of עָלַי, occurring here and there in poetic contexts²¹.

The עָלַי in the meaning of “on” or “upon” makes sense in comparison with iconographic evidence which shows small infants being carried by their father or mother²². This idea of YHWH carrying the people of Israel is visible in other biblical texts as well (Deut 1,31; Isa 46,3-4; Hos 11,3). Ps 131,2 puts this supportive care of YHWH from the communal to the individual level²³. If we imagine a child at the age of three it starts to become heavy and wants to move around. This consideration makes the translation “with” another possibility.

16. Thus, some exegetes interpret a meaning of גְּמֹל “doing something good to somebody”, following the Septuagint tradition: see, e.g., ROBINSON, *Form and Meaning* (n. 2), p. 191, and P.A.H. DE BOER, mentioned above (n. 11).

17. See C.J. LABUSCHAGNE, *The Metaphor of the So-Called “Weaned Child” in Psalm cxxxi*, in *VT* 57 (2007) 114-123, p. 118. Cf. K. SEYBOLD, *Die Wallfahrtspsalmen: Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte von Psalm 120–134* (Biblich-Theologische Studien, 3), Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 1978, p. 21.

18. ZENGER, *Psalm 131* (n. 2), p. 599, classifies the second half of v. 2 as “ein sich steigender Doppelvergleich”.

19. See, e.g., DAHOOD, *Psalms III: 101–150* (n. 3), pp. 238-239.

20. KNOWLES, *Woman* (n. 12), p. 387.

21. Gen 49,17.22; Deut 32,2; Ps 49,12.

22. See ANEP 49, p. 126; LABUSCHAGNE, *Metaphor* (n. 17); cf. in rabbinic literature: bHag 5b-6a.

23. See ALLEN, *Psalms 101–150* (n. 1), p. 199.

The process of weaning is characterized by a dialectic movement between dependence and independence, periods of symbiotic nearness between mother and child and distance. After the time of nursing, the child starts to make its own experiences. The praying person compares his or her soul to a weaned child of about three years. In this image of conflict between nearness and separation, the psalmist stresses the soul becoming quiet, calm and humble before God²⁴. Like the child knows that it gets from the mother all it needs, human beings of all ages can rely on God²⁵. Thus, despite some difficulties, it makes sense to understand the *גמל* in Ps 131 as a weaned child, about three years old, not a suckling.

It is possible to find support for this interpretation in the Jewish tradition, at David Qimchi (Radak), a medieval Jewish commentator: “*כְּגִמְלָא עָלַי אָמוּ*: That means: Like the baby (*התינוק*) that is weaned (*נגמל*) from the breasts of its mother, that starts to examine with interest his growing a little bit (*מעט מעט*) and walks little by little (*מעט מעט*), but still cannot rely on himself, but on his mother, who leads him and trains him little by little (*מעט מעט*) – so did I prepare and silence my soul, which cannot rely on its own wisdom in hidden and in wonderful things, but relies on the teachers (*המלמדים*) and on the tradition (*הקבלה*), that is its mother”²⁶.

Thus, in this explanation we find ideas of the process of weaning, little by little, step by step, a child becoming independent, but still being dependent on its mother. The repetition of *מעט מעט* (little by little) three times stresses the character of this weaning as a slow process, taking place in small steps. The commentator compares the relationship between child and mother to his own relationship to his teachers and to the Jewish tradition nourishing and training him.

Not only *גמל*, but also *נפש* is a key-word in Ps 131. It is remarkable that the praying person looks at his or her *נפש*, which usually stands for the whole person, as a counterpart, as something in relationship to him- or herself. Besides that, in the context of Psalm 131, the physical connotation of *נפש* is evident. Its location in the human body is visible. The

24. BEYERLIN, *Hybris* (n. 14), pp. 32-33, argues that the weaned child has educated his soul to be quiet.

25. See, in a similar way, K. SCHAEFER, *Psalms* (Berit Olam), Collegeville, MN, The Liturgical Press, 2001, p. 312: “The weaned child who is not dependent on but still has recourse to Mother is how life is with God”.

26. The Hebrew text is available in the edition of M. COHEN (ed.), *Mikra'ot Gedolot 'Haketer': Psalms, Part I. A revised and augmented scientific edition of 'Mikra'ot Gedolot', based on the Aleppo Codex and Early Medieval MSS*, Ramat-Gan, Bar-Ilan University, 2003, p. 201.

context of nursing and weaning shows an aspect of the hungry and thirsty *throat* as one meaning of נִפְשׁ²⁷. The needy throat, longing for drink, food and God's presence, links Ps 131 with other psalms, e.g. with Ps 42,2-3²⁸: "As a deer longs (תַּעֲרֹג) for flowing streams, so my soul longs (נִפְשֵׁי תַעֲרֹג) for you, O God. My soul thirsts (צָמְאַה נִפְשִׁי) for God, for the living God" (NRS).

In Ps 131, the psalmist is somehow in a self-reflective process with him- or herself. He or she compares the relationship to his or her soul to a child-mother-relationship and, in the following verse, to his or her relationship to God.

III. V. 3 AND THE REDACTION OF THE SONGS OF ASCENTS

Because of the different style of v. 3, v. 1 (beside the superscription) and v. 2 are usually considered as the original psalm. Probably v. 3 was added during the compilation of the Songs of Ascents (Ps 120–134)²⁹. V. 3 works in both directions: on the level of an individual psalm of confidence and in the context of the Songs of Ascents. Inside the psalm, the weaned child is used as a *simile* for the situation of the people of Israel, waiting for YHWH, between nearness and distance, running away and coming back to the mother like a toddler. At the same time, v. 3 links the single psalm to the composition of the Songs of Ascents: It repeats the appeal יְחַלּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יְהוָה (*Wait, Israel, for YHWH*) from Ps 130,7a and the closing formula מִעַתָּה וְעַד-עוֹלָם (*from now on and for evermore*) from Ps 121,8. These parallels might hint at a liturgical formula³⁰.

Ps 131 is linked well with its neighbor-psalms 130 and 132: The structure of Ps 131 and its neighbor psalm, Ps 130, is parallel³¹: Both psalms start with the experience of an individual. At the end of the

27. See BEYERLIN, *Hybris* (n. 14), pp. 30-31. For the wide semantic field covered by נִפְשׁ, see, e.g., SCHROER – STAUBLI, *Körpersymbolik* (n. 6), pp. 45-54; B. JANOWSKI, *Konfliktgespräche mit Gott: Eine Anthropologie der Psalmen*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 2007, pp. 204-214.

28. See ROBINSON, *Form and Meaning* (n. 2), pp. 185-186.

29. See ALLEN, *Psalms 101–150* (n. 1), p. 198; ZENGER, *Psalm 131* (n. 2), pp. 601-602. RUPPERT, *Psalm 131* (n. 14), p. 214, hints at the different style of vv. 1-2 compared to v. 3: While vv. 1-2 is a poetic text, in which the *parallelismus membrorum* is the main stylistic device and which is full of metaphors, v. 3 contains an admonition.

30. See DE BOER, *Psalm CXXXI 2* (n. 11), p. 287; SEYBOLD, *Wallfahrtspsalmen* (n. 17), p. 57. For a literary poetical analysis of the building structures of the Songs of Ascents see H. VIVIERS, *The Coherence of the ma'âlôt Psalms (Pss 120–134)*, in ZAW 106 (1994) 275-289.

31. ZENGER, *Psalm 131* (n. 2), pp. 602, 608, characterizes them as twin-psalms.

psalm, as a climax, this individual experience is widened to an appeal to the whole congregation of Israel. Both psalms start with an address to YHWH and end with an appeal to Israel. There are many themes common to both psalms: the נפש has a central role (Ps 130,5.6; 131,2 two times); the “I” of the psalmist making him- or herself low, speaking out of the depth (Ps 130,1; 131,1); the theme of hope and waiting for YHWH. Both psalms can be read as preparation for visiting the temple. At the same time, the theme of humility connects Ps 131 with 132.

The parent-child-imagery of Ps 131 fits the general preference of the Songs of Ascents for metaphors and comparisons in the semantic field of daily life. In the movement of walking up to the temple, Ps 131 describes a counter-movement of looking down to small issues. Thus, in this tension between the two poles above and below it shares the importance of space typical to the Songs of Ascents³². At the same time they place this dimension of individuals and small communities in the horizon of Israel (Ps 131,3) and – in other Psalms of Ascents – Jerusalem and Zion³³. Ps 131 was not originally written as a pilgrimage song, but it works as a pilgrimage song: It praises an attitude of humility when approaching the temple or – in a metaphoric way – looking up at Zion³⁴. Even if the idea of the Songs of Ascents as pilgrimage songs is only a hypothetical construct, they hint at a lively relationship to Jerusalem as a place of worship³⁵. Like in every psalm, the language of the psalm is open enough that people in different periods and times can make it their own³⁶.

IV. LINKS TO THE LIFE OF DAVID

Like every psalm, Psalm 131 can be read in different contexts. The superscription adds the psalm to the Songs of Ascents and links it with the life of David³⁷. Only three more Psalms of Ascents have David in their superscription: Ps 122; 124 and 133.

32. See PRINSLOO, *Role of Space* (n. 7).

33. See ZENGER, *Komposition der Wallfahrtspsalmen* (n. 5), p. 178.

34. T. WILLI, *שיר המעלות*: Zion und der Sitz im Leben der “Aufstiegslieder” Psalm 120–134, in B. HUWYLER, et al. (eds.), *Prophetie und Psalmen*. FS K. Seybold (AOAT, 280), Münster, Ugarit-Verlag, 2001, 153-162, pp. 155-156, stresses the importance of looking up (ראיה) at the temple.

35. See WILLI, *שיר המעלות* (n. 34), p. 157: “Wenn sie sich auch nicht einfach auf eine Wallfahrt sans phrase beziehen lassen, so verraten diese Beobachtungen doch ein durchgängiges und lebendiges Verhältnis zu Zion als gottesdienstlicher Örtlichkeit, [...] aus dem Umlkreis Palästinas und seiner Regionen”.

36. See ROBINSON, *Form and Meaning* (n. 2), p. 196.

37. Some versions, e.g. the Septuagint in the version of Lucian, delete David in the superscription.

In the medieval compilation Midrash Numbers Rabbah (NumR 4)³⁸ Ps 131,1 is linked with four events in the life of David. The composer of the midrash lays the words of the psalm in the mouth of David: “*YHWH, my heart is not haughty, at the time when Samuel anointed me [1 Sam 16,13]. My eyes are not lifted up, when I killed Goliath [1 Sam 17,40-41]. I do not occupy myself with great matters, when I was reinstated as king [2 Sam 5,1-3], and with things too marvelous for me, when I brought up the Ark [2 Sam 6]*”³⁹.

In NumR 4 David is interpreted as an example of humility. The concept of humility fits the biblical image of David (2 Sam 7,18-29)⁴⁰. This interpretation might be influenced by the second neighbor psalm, Ps 132, where David plays a prominent role, not in the superscription, but throughout the psalm. The attitude of humility is common to Ps 131 and 132. It can give support to the thesis of the royal character of Ps 131⁴¹.

In addition to that, in Midrash NumR 4, we find other lines of interpreting Ps 131: “*כְּנִמְלָל עָלַי גִּפְשִׁי Like the weaned child on me is my soul (Ps 131,2). As a suckling just out of its mother’s womb who is not too proud of spirit to drink at the breasts of its mother, so is my soul, for I am not ashamed to learn Torah even from the smallest in Israel*”⁴².

This midrash understands גַּמֵּל as the suckling immediately after birth, not as a weaned child. The rabbis create a new imagery: comparing the nursing to learning Torah. According to rabbinic tradition infants at the age of three, after the process of weaning, started learning the Tora. Thus, concerning the age of the child, this interpretation is oscillating between a baby, drinking from its mother immediately after birth, and a

38. NumR is a composite work – like most of rabbinic literature –, the first part of it being a haggadic treatment of Num 1–7: see G. STEMBERGER, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, Edinburgh, Clark, 1996, pp. 310-311.

39. The Hebrew text is available in the edition of M.A. MIRKIN, *Bemidbar rabah 1*, Tel Aviv, Yavneh, 1964. Radak follows this tradition: see COHEN, *Mikra’ot Gedolot: Psalms I* (n. 26), p. 201.

40. See RUPPERT, *Psalm 131* (n. 14), p. 209.

41. ROBINSON, *Form and Meaning* (n. 2), p. 193, uses this interpretation to underline the royal character of Ps 131: “The Psalm in its final form serves as a warning that kings should not be proud but should place all their trust in their divine Master and call upon their subjects to do likewise”.

42. Midrash Tehillim takes up these interpretations of Ps 131,2: see S. BUBER (ed.), *Midrash Tehillim*, Jerusalem, 1966, p. 515. Midrash Tehillim to Ps 131 is a late medieval collection of material found in other places originally. In Buber’s edition, we find a compilation of material from PesR, Sifre, NumR and the Babylonian Talmud. We do not have manuscripts of this text, but only the print version dating from Thessaloniki 1515: see STEMBERGER, *Introduction*, p. 323. For an English translation of Midrash Tehillim see W.G. BRAUDE, *The Midrash on Psalms* (Yale Judaica Series, 13), New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1959.

weaned child, an infant, learning Tora from the age of three on. The midrash reads Ps 131,2 as an example of humility: learning Torah from the children, from the smallest in Israel. Focus of the psalm is the “childlikeness”⁴³: In their attitude of learning and humility, the people of Israel should become like children. Another aspect of this childlikeness stressed by NumR 4 is that a weaned child is without sin (2 Sam 12,13).

These processes of contextualizing Ps 131 in the life of David which we see in the Midrash show connections of Ps 131 with Ps 132. The imagery of the weaned child can be combined with the פרי בטן (children / fruits of the body), the offspring promised to David, in Ps 132,11. In spite of the obviously secondary character of the superscription, לְדָוִד leads readers of different contexts to various links of Ps 131 with the life of David.

V. “FEMALE VOICES”

The imagery of a child and its mother makes it possible that Ps 131 reflects “female voices”. The concept of female voices does not say anything about female authorship – which is improbable for the psalms – but about female experiences that are preserved in the text⁴⁴. Especially the second עֲלִי makes it plausible that the literary speaker of the psalm is a mother. In the literary world the psalm reflects it can be the song of a woman. She uses her relationship to the child she carries as an image for her relationship to YHWH⁴⁵. Understanding Psalm 131,2 as a female voice gets support from another Psalm of Ascents: In Ps 123,2 the “we” of the congregation of Israel compares itself to עבדים and שפחה, male and female slaves⁴⁶.

On one hand, this concept is convincing, because the psalm reflects an experience that can be part of female reality: experiences of mothers. On the other hand, every interpreter has to be very careful not to confirm gender stereotypes. Psalm 131 has already created lots of interpretations

43. This is the superscription ALLEN, *Psalms 101–150* (n. 1), p. 196, adds to his commentary to Ps 131.

44. A. BRENNER – F. VAN DIJK-HEMMES, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Biblical Interpretation Series, 1), Leiden, Brill, 1993, pp. 6–11.

45. See SEYBOLD, *Psalmen* (n. 5), p. 495; ZENGER, *Psalm 131* (n. 2), p. 602. Other examples of women as speakers of psalms are Mirjam (Ex 15,21); Hanna (1 Sam 1,10–11; 1 Sam 2,1–10).

46. See SEYBOLD, *Wallfahrtspsalmen* (n. 17), p. 37.

which describe the idyllic character of this text and fix problematic gender stereotypes⁴⁷. The humility and “Selbstbescheidung”⁴⁸ towards YHWH which the psalm highlights is not typical to women, but an appropriate attitude, both of women and men.

At the same time it is remarkable that Psalm 131 uses an image of family life to illustrate this approach. The speaker of the psalm compares the relationship of a small child to his mother to the relationship of Israel to YHWH. The waiting of the thirsty and hungry throat for food is compared to the waiting of the soul of the individual and of Israel for YHWH. The relationship between YHWH and Israel oscillates between nearness and distance like the relationship of a toddler to his mother, running away and coming back⁴⁹.

If we try to understand the consequences of the imagery of Ps 131 for the relationship between YHWH and people, we see the maternal, nourishing, caring and patient side of the God of Israel in this psalm⁵⁰. Humility and patience as appropriate attitude approaching the temple on the human side go hand in hand with the supportive, comforting and patient care of YHWH.

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47. See, e.g., G. QUELL, *Struktur und Sinn des Psalms 131*, in F. MAASS (ed.), *Das ferne und das nahe Wort*. FS Leonhard Rost (BZAW, 105), Berlin, Töpelmann, 1968, 173-185, p. 178: “Man fühlt, ohne zu wissen warum, dass im Wortlaut das Lebensgefühl der Frau, nicht des Mannes im Spiel ist. Denn es müsste schon ein sonderbarer Mann sein, jedenfalls kein erfreulicher, der sich zu dem Gedanken aufschwänge, er sei ein unmündiges Kind”.

48. SEYBOLD, *Psalmen* (n. 5), p. 495.

49. This motive is well-known in other biblical texts as well, especially in prophetic literature (Isa 48,17-19 *et al.*).

50. See ZENGER, *Psalms 131* (n. 2), pp. 607-608; ALLEN, *Psalms 101-150* (n. 1), p. 199.