



Uio • University of Oslo

The Hebrew Bible as a Pastoral Resource

*Reinterpreting the Psalter with the Bereaved:
A Reader-Oriented Exegesis of Psalm 139:1-18*

Anders K. Nordvik

Candidatus theologiæ: professional studies in theology
30 ECTS credits

Faculty of Theology

6th August 2020

Table of contents |

Acknowledgements	4
Abstract	5
Preface	6
1 Introduction	8
1.1 On text and context.....	8
1.2 Overview of theoretical framework.....	8
1.3 Research question and hypothesis	10
1.4 Structure of the thesis	11
1.5 Theoretical mappings	12
1.5.1 Reader-oriented exegesis.....	12
1.5.2 Existential challenges faced by bereaved parents	19
2 Psalm 139: 1-18.....	22
2.1 On choosing the pericope:	22
2.2 Psalm 139:1-18	24
2.3 Lost in translation	25
2.4 An overview of some previous scholarly interpretations	27
3 Empirical research methods	29
3.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	29
3.2 Developing a hypothesis.....	30
3.3 Developing the interview guide.....	30
3.4 Selection criteria, recruitment and number of interviews.....	31
3.5 Interview process	32
3.6 Analysis	33
3.7 Research ethics	34

4	A reader-oriented exegesis of Psalm 139:1-18	36
4.1	Structure and overview	36
4.2	Psalm 139: 1-6: God as always vigilant	37
4.3	Psalm 139:7-12: God as always present	38
4.4	Psalm 139:13-18: God as Creator.....	39
4.5	Preliminary conclusions	41
5	Findings and discussion: Reading Psalm 139 with bereaved parents	43
5.1	The overall message and function of Psalm 139	44
5.2	Ps. 139:1-6: God as always vigilant	46
5.3	Ps. 139:7-12: God as present, when God is gone	46
5.4	Ps. 139:13-18: God as creator, and the will of God	50
5.4.1	Ps. 139: 13: Created in my mother's womb	50
5.4.2	Ps. 139: 16: In your book were all days written: The Will of God?	53
5.5	The importance of experience	57
6	Conclusions	60
6.1	The need for a reader-oriented approach to biblical texts	60
6.2	The reader's experience and its influence on interpretation.....	61
6.2.1	Psalm 139:7-12: God's presence and God's absence.....	62
6.2.2	Psalm 139:13: God as loving or incompetent Creator	62
6.2.3	Psalm 139:16: The Will of God, a comfort or an evil?	62
6.3	Consequences for the field of biblical exegesis.....	63
	References	65
	Appendices	68
	Appendix 1: Interview guide.....	68
	Appendix 2: Information sheet (including consent form).....	70
	Appendix 3: Norwegian translation of Psalm 139:1-18.....	74

Acknowledgements

This thesis project would never have been conceived nor completed without the support and encouragement of many individuals. First and foremost, I owe my deepest gratitude to the research participants trusting me with their stories and deeply personal reflections. Without their contributions, this thesis would not exist.

Secondly, I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. Terje Stordalen for believing in me and this project idea, for guiding me through the thesis process and always having an open door to his office.

Thirdly, my gratitude is owed to my secondary supervisor and qualitative research method mentor Dr. Nina Hoel for invaluable help on developing the empirical component of this thesis.

A special thanks goes to Benjamin Isachsen and Ólafur Hersir Arnaldsson for providing feedback in the final stages of my thesis writing.

I would also like to acknowledge the Faculty of Theology at the University of Oslo for creating a nurturing and inspiring academic environment, full of staff members and fellow students ready to listen and share their insights.

A heartfelt thanks goes to my sister Sofie for proofreading the thesis draft and keeping me company on my last hectic night of work before the thesis deadline.

Finally, a loving thanks to my wife and best friend Luisa, for critical perspectives, patience during this long process and caring reminders about the deadline.

Abstract

This thesis seeks to investigate how Psalm 139, and biblical texts in general, can be interpreted to facilitate a meaningful reading by bereaved parents after the early loss of a child. By using in-depth interviews with bereaved parents, this study emphasises the reader's perspective in its exegesis to produce a responsible, contemporary interpretation.

I applied insights on the existential challenges of bereaved parents to a reader-oriented exegetical approach to Psalm 139, imagining a hypothetical reader's creative engagement with the biblical text. To investigate the merit of this approach, the resulting interpretation was then compared to findings from interviews conducted with bereaved parents about their experiences of reading the psalm.

This study finds that the individual experience of the reader is hugely influential in the creative process of interpretation. Depending on the reader's past life and personal convictions, Psalm 139 can be immensely comforting or disconcerting. I conclude that the reader-oriented approach to exegesis is a valuable tool for any biblical scholar and minister, as it can unearth a wealth of relevant, contemporary interpretations inaccessible to the historical approach to exegesis. This thesis contends that scholarly biblical studies, homiletics and pastoral would all benefit greatly from an increased focus on the contemporary reader's perspective.

Preface

Motivation

I am interested in the Hebrew Bible and how it can be a resource in pastoral work, especially pastoral care. More specifically I want to explore how the Book of Psalms can be used in this context in the most productive and responsible way, a competency I reckon to be highly useful for my future work as a theologian and ordained minister.

The Church of Norway encourages students who have completed the BA level of Theology to serve as substitutes for the ordained ministers during the summer. After some summers spent substituting, I have realized the importance of the funeral as an arena for pastoral work, both through my interaction as a substitute minister with the bereaved during preparations for the funeral, and through preaching at the funeral service itself. The close contact between minister and the grieving, combined with the liminal space the funeral service represents, gives the minister a unique opportunity to bring the Scripture into the congregation's lives.

My interest lies in finding an appropriate way of interpreting Scripture to facilitate effective and responsible preaching in the funeral service. The primary goal of this preaching is to communicate the Bible as a resource for finding meaning and consolation in a grief process. I have often been frustrated with the apparent self-centeredness and rigidity of the historical approach to biblical studies. The one-sided pursuit of a reconstruction of the historical author, reader, context of use and "original" meaning of biblical texts has made them foreign for most people and their daily lives. I believe that a focus on the contemporary reader's perspective should be part of any sound exegetical foundation. Such a focus could help massively in the preparation of sermons for funerals (or any other occasion) and could be an important factor when creating and conveying a message accessible to those who grieve.

Thesis work under challenging circumstances

For me, as for everyone else, 2020 has been a very strange and challenging year, and the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected this thesis project, as most of this paper was written after it broke out. On a personal level, enduring a global health crisis has been a constant distraction and drain on my mental and emotional capacity. On an academic level, the long term closing of libraries and the University of Oslo has limited my access to literature to what is freely available through online resources. My opportunities to confer with fellow students and teaching staff, including my supervisors were also reduced. The level of quality and

variety of perspectives of this paper suffers from the fact that I have done a substantial amount of my work in practical isolation from most other voices both living and written. I have also had to reign in my ambitions for the scope of this project, as recruitment of participants to the empirical component was abruptly brought to a halt by travel restrictions and social distancing.

1 Introduction

1.1 On text and context

Through my experience I have noted the dominant role the Psalter plays in the funeral service of both the Church of Norway and other denominations, and my tendency to base many sermons upon the Psalms that are available as suggested readings in the liturgy. This, along with the unique nature of the Psalter with its sometimes raw and unfiltered language of hope and despair, praise and lament, combined with its rich reception history from Antiquity until today makes them ideal objects for my thesis.

It is obviously impossible to write about the whole Psalter in a single semester, so I have had to complete the most daunting task of all thesis candidates: to narrow down my scope. The scope of this thesis has been narrowed down on two different levels: text and context, and my criteria for choosing the former is derived from the latter.

As mentioned above, I have garnered an interest for the funeral service as a context for pastoral work, how the Biblical readings therein can be a resource to those in grief and how the sermon can facilitate this process. More specifically this means I am interested in the recently bereaved as reader. To further limit my scope, I have chosen to focus on a specific group of bereaved that I through my experience have seen especially struggle with existential and theological questions; the recently bereaved parents after the death of a child. As research central to the theoretical framework of this thesis will show, there is a focus on spiritual needs of bereaved parents in health care. I want to explore the role of exegesis in meeting these spiritual needs in the phase directly following the loss of a child: the preparing and performing of the funeral service.

1.2 Overview of theoretical framework

There are three sources that have been central to this project for gaining insights on the existential needs of bereaved parents and develop a theoretical framework for exploring how these affect the interpretation of biblical texts. The first of these is Edgar McKnight's book *Postmodern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* published in 1988 that criticises the pitfalls of the historical approach to biblical texts. He claims historical-critical paradigm has turned biblical literature into distant museum objects with little relevance for contemporary readers. McKnight's project is to revitalise biblical interpretation

by applying an emphasis on the reader's perspective from literary criticism, rediscovering these texts and their meaning for those who encounter them today.¹

The second is Louise M. Rosenblatt's transactional theory of the literary work. In her 1978 book *The Reader the Text the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* she criticises different schools of literary criticism and their tendency to exaggerated one-sided focus on either the author, the text as an independent unity or the reader. She suggests a balanced approach to reader-oriented criticism that emphasises the reciprocal transaction between text and reader. Rosenblatt describes the reading experience as an event where the reader guided by the words of the text create an experience that gives them new knowledge and helps them reflect on their lived life.²

The third and last of the essential sources for the theoretical framework is a study from 2017 by Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue named "The Spiritual and Theological Challenges of Stillbirth for Bereaved Parents". They conducted a series of interviews with mothers and their partners about their experience of losing a child to stillbirth, identifying and cataloguing the difficult existential questions this experience left them with. The three overarching themes identified were those of creating meaning, maintaining hope and questioning core beliefs.³ Together these three provide the theoretical framework necessary to gain an understanding of the situation of bereaved parents and therefore the perspective they bring with them as they encounter biblical texts. The same framework also informed my development of a research method for the empirical component of this thesis wherein I interviewed bereaved parents about their readings of Psalm 139. We will shortly return to these three and other sources in a more thorough survey of relevant research in the subchapter "Theoretical mappings".

¹ Edgar V. McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible : The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988).

² Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader the Text the Poem : The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).

³ Daniel Nuzum, Sarah Meaney, and Keelin O'Donoghue, "The Spiritual and Theological Challenges of Stillbirth for Bereaved Parents," *Religion and Health (needs verification)* 56 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-017-0365-5>.

1.3 Research question and hypothesis

So far, I have outlined the different core components of my motivation and what I wanted to explore when writing my thesis. Like every other research project, the curiosity of the researcher needs to be guided by a more precise definition of the core objective. As is the norm, this guiding principle has been formulated in the following research question:

How to conceive a responsible reading of the Psalter in children's funeral service when taking bereaved parents' existential needs into consideration?

This question identifies the core objective of this thesis as developing and testing a method of conceiving a responsible reading of the Psalter. What I mean by conceiving a "responsible" reading becomes clearer by the emphasis bereaved parent's existential needs and the children's funeral service as reading context. My goal is to achieve a synthesis of two types of responsibility: The first responsibility is towards the critical and educated approach to the biblical text, avoiding the possible anarchy of interpretation that can result from an unbridled and naïve emphasis on the reader's individual perspective. The second responsibility is towards the situation of the intended audience; bereaved parents who have been through a life changing traumatic experience, meeting them with care and empathy with an objective of helping them process this experience.

I have further summarised my confidence in the reader-response approach to biblical texts as a method to conceive such a responsible reading in a two-part hypothesis:

How a reader interprets a text depends on the reader's life situation.

Therefore, insight into the reader's life situation will contribute to responsible interpretation and communication of texts.

In this paper I will attempt an informed reader-oriented exegesis of Psalm 139 applying insights on bereaved parent's existential needs. A comparison between my own interpretation of the psalm and those of my interview participants will serve to test the merit of this hypothesis.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This paper is organised in six main sections, the first one being this introduction (1) outlining the objectives, questions and hypothesis of this research project as well as mapping out its theoretical framework consisting of reader-response exegesis and the existential needs of bereaved parents. The second (2) presents my choice of pericope, translation of Psalm 139:1-18 and a short overview of some relevant biblical studies. The third (3) outlines the qualitative research methods used in the empirical component of this study, presenting the interview guide, selection criteria and recruitment of participants, interview process and analysis, as well as research ethics.

In the fourth main section (4) I perform a reader-oriented exegesis of Psalm 139:1-18 based on the perspective of a hypothetical historical reader, and a contemporary reader. The fifth (5) and longest section consists of a presentation and discussion of findings from the interviews conducted with bereaved parents. Here I compare my own interpretation of the psalm with theirs, reflection on the importance of experience for interpretation of biblical. The sixth (6) and final section summarises the findings of this research project and reflects upon its contributions to scholarly bible studies.

1.5 Theoretical mappings

1.5.1 Reader-oriented exegesis

Biblical exegesis, the science and art of critically interpreting scripture, has a history that stretches over millennia, has been subject to many debates and changes, and has incorporated tools from a plethora of fields of study. It is therefore a daunting task to situate an exegetical thesis project among all other scholarly work previously done, and decide what tools are the most appropriate for the occasion. An attempt to list exegetical tools in 1987 mentions nine different criticisms: (1) textual, (2) historical, (3) grammatical, (4) literary, (5) form, (6) tradition, (7) redaction, (8) structuralist and (9) canonical.⁴ In their introduction they describe the central purpose of exegetical task as “learning to interrogate the text”.⁵ While this describes exegesis as an eclectic and thorough endeavour (which it is), the lengthy list camouflages the one-sidedness of the historical-critical paradigm and its almost exclusive focus on the reconstruction of a historic author, reader and context of use of ancient biblical texts. Such a long list of well-established methods can also easily start to seem exhaustive, likely to result in methodical rigidity, loss of creativity and dynamism, and an exclusively dense academic discourse hard to access for the lay person.

While it is important to recognise the invaluable insights from previous scholarly work, I have many times been frustrated with the historical-critical paradigm, because it has both diverted biblical scholars from contemporary perspectives and created distance between the minister and the congregation. This is because an imbalanced focus on the historical context can make us lose sight of our own, present day context. I am not the first to think along these lines, as this frustration was an important motivating factor for Edgar V. McKnight’s work on the book *Postmodern use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism*. In his introduction he writes:

The critical distancing of the text in the historical approach, however, has gradually transformed biblical writings into museum pieces without contemporary relevance. [...] This book is not only designed for those who, on a personal level, have become less and less satisfied with the meanings that historical criticism is capable of discerning. It is

⁴ John Haralson Hayes and Carl L Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis : A Beginner's Handbook* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 3.

⁵ Hayes and Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis*, 23.

also designed for those whose retreat from history and move to relationships strictly within the text has not resulted in satisfying meaning.⁶

McKnight's mission is to revitalise biblical interpretation by acknowledging and lifting the perspective of the reader as an integral element in the creative and critical exercise of exegesis. The first half of his book is dedicated to tracing the historical development of biblical hermeneutics, before presenting some of the newer developments within literary sciences, specifically in the structuralist tradition. About the view on the individual reader he writes: "In the early stages, the role of the reader was assumed to be that of the autonomous critic who was able to analyse the autonomous text in a disinterested way. The historicity of the text and the historicity of the reader were ignored."⁷ He further writes that while the reader has not been completely forgotten in literary studies, "the contribution of the reader has been seen as interfering with literature and as a variable to be discounted."⁸

Hayes and Holladay in their introduction to biblical exegesis recognise the exercise both as science and an art that requires creativity and imagination, but they seem to echo this view of the individual reader's contribution. The biblical interpreter should maintain an academic "objectivity" as they go about "examining different aspects of the passage, whether they are historical, grammatical, literary, [...] "breaking down" the passage into its component parts and problems and examining them as discrete units and issues."⁹

For some, this approach to reading is completely foreign, like Justo L. González explains in his contribution to Joel B. Green's *Methods for Luke*: In his Latino perspective, the starting point for exegesis is not a discussion of method for interpretation or exegetical tools, but the reading and interpretation itself. He describes a three-step process starting with (1) the first time they hear a text read and explained to them, continuing (2) with the creeping suspicion that there might be better interpretations as they struggle to relate the text to their own life experience, and finally (3) ending on the discovery of a new meaning that makes sense to their identity and life situation.¹⁰ González further explains how not only the starting point is

⁶ McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible*, 14.

⁷ McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible*, 153.

⁸ McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible*, 155.

⁹ Hayes and Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis*, 29.

¹⁰ Justo L. González, "A Latino Perspective," ed. Joel B. Green, Kindle version. ed., *Methods for Luke* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Subchapter: "The Circularity of Interpretation". (Since the Kindle version has no page numbers, I must refer to the heading of the relevant subchapter instead).

different from typical Western exegesis, but that the perspective also is different. Biblical interpretation is not an activity that primarily is done by an individual at his desk consulting commentaries, but is primarily undertaken as a communal activity: “The first step is the gathering of the community that hears and interprets the text from its own perspective and out of its own experiences and struggles”.¹¹

A similar approach to the Latino “interpretación en conjunto” (communal interpretation), is the Contextual Bible Study developed by Gerald West at the Ujamaa Centre in South Africa. West’s goal was to create a way of reading the Bible “with” rather than “to” or “for” a community of readers, facilitating empowering interpretation within their own context.¹² This method has found its niche as a tool to explore and develop interpretations of biblical texts among diverse marginalised groups. Some examples include Elia Shabani Mligo’s doctoral dissertation reading the Gospel of John among people living with HIV/AIDS in Tanzania¹³, Susannah Cornwall and David Nixon’s study among homeless and vulnerably housed people in South-West England¹⁴ and a research project conducted by Alison Peden among the inmates of Cornton Vale Women’s Prison in Stirling, Scotland. Peden’s goals was exploring Contextual Bible Study as a way of empowerment by the women’s interpretation of biblical readings suggested by feminist theology of embodiment.¹⁵ One rare example from the Norwegian context is Marta Høyland Lavik’s study on the use of Isaiah 41:10 in times of incurable illness, where she used an empirical approach to bible studies interviewing patients suffering from incurable cancer.¹⁶

The approaches described above are similar to that of reader-oriented exegesis, as they all emphasise the reader’s perspective and experience. The biggest difference is that these are focused on the community of readers, while the reader-oriented exegesis used in this thesis is

¹¹ González, "A Latino Perspective," Subchapter: "Interpretación en conjunto".

¹² Gerald West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993).

¹³ Elia Shabani Mligo, "Jesus and the Stigmatized : Reading the Gospel of John in a Context of Hiv/Aids-Related Stigmatization in Tanzania" (Degree Philosophia Doctor, University of Oslo, 2009).

¹⁴ Susannah Cornwall and David Nixon, "Readings from the Road: Contextual Bible Study with a Group of Homeless and Vulnerably-Housed People," *The Expository Times* 123, no. 1 (2011). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524611417668>.

¹⁵ Alison Peden, "Contextual Bible Study at Cornton Vale Women’s Prison, Stirling.," *The Expository Times* 117, no. 1 (2005). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524605058718>.

¹⁶ Marta Høyland Lavik, "'Do Not Fear for I Am with You": The Use of Isaiah 41:10 in Times of Incurable Illness," in *New Studies in the Book of Isaiah : Essays in Honor of Hallvard Hagelia*, ed. Markus Zehnder (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2014).

more concerned with the individual. As McKnight writes, the view of the reader as a passive recipient is being left behind as we gain new knowledge about how the human mind functions, and contemporary structural psychology contends that humans neither passively respond to their environments nor carry “innate ideas that automatically unfold”.¹⁷

This new understanding of the human mind has found its way to literary criticism. One example is cognitive poetics, an emerging field of literary criticism that according to Peter Stockwell tries to combine the insights from cognitive psychology with those of poetics. This method endeavours to understand the way a reader comes up with a given understanding of a text in a given context by utilising recent discoveries about the inner workings of the human mind.¹⁸ One example of cognitive poetics applied to biblical studies is Kirsten Marie Hartvigsen’s doctoral dissertation given at the University of Oslo exploring how the audience engaged with the world of the gospel of Mark. The basic premise was that the gospel was proclaimed aloud to a listening crowd, rather than a written text read in private by individuals. Making use of insights from cognitive poetics Hartvigsen reconstructed a hypothetical ancient audience to the Gospel of Mark, imagining their process of meaning-creation and involvement with the characters and settings of the Markan world.¹⁹ Another example more closely related to this project was a reader-oriented study conducted by Francis, Smith and Corio on interpretations of Psalm 139 among Anglican deacons. This study was based on Jungian psychological type theory applying the SIFT-method, an acronym denoting the four lenses that embodies this approach; sensing, intuition, feeling and thinking. Their study showed how deacons of different personality types responded differently to the various parts of Psalm 139, expressing a wide range of interpretations and attitudes.²⁰

Returning to McKnight, what the reader in summary does is to actively take part in creating meaning as they encounter texts and thus “play a role in the conception of functions of biblical texts that match their experiences and needs”.²¹ This interaction between the text and the reader has been conceptualised in Louise M. Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of the

¹⁷ McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible*, 156.

¹⁸ Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics : An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1-11.

¹⁹ Kirsten Marie Hartvigsen, ""Prepare the Way of the Lord" : Towards a Cognitive Poetic Analysis of Audience Involvement with Characters and Events in the Markan World" (University of Oslo, 2009).

²⁰ Leslie J. Francis, Greg Smith, and Alec S. Corio, "Exploring Psalm 139 through the Jungian Lenses of Sensing, Intuition, Feeling and Thinking," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.5058>.

²¹ McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible*, 161.

literary work. She too begins her book with a historical summary of how the reader has been ignored, first in favour of the literary work in classical and neoclassical periods, before shifting the focus on the author in the eighteenth century, and again in the twentieth century reverting the attention to the “work itself as a self-contained pattern of words”, all the while regarding the reader as a passive recipient.²² In Rosenblatt’s case, the discovery of the reader’s active role was the result of her own research, where she observed the interpretation of poems as an active process. She points out how the text brings forth elements from the readers’ experience, showing how their inner life is integral to the literary process. The role of the text in this transaction is twofold: firstly, it provides “stimulus by activating elements of the reader’s past experience” and secondly, functions as a blueprint by regulating “what shall be held in the forefront of the reader’s attention”. This brings us to her conceptualization of the poem as event: literature does not exist in and of itself but is brought to life as an experience shaped by the reader and guided by the words of the text.²³

Rosenblatt also gives us a useful distinction between two different kinds of reading, the “efferent” and the “aesthetic”, describing what the readers do depending on what they are looking for in a text. Efferent (coming from Latin *effere* meaning to “carry away”) reading is when the primary concern is what you take away from a text, e.g. when you go browsing a brochure or Wikipedia for a specific piece of information. Aesthetic reading, on the other hand, is the kind of reading this thesis will concern itself with. Here the primary concern is what happens during the reading experience as “the reader’s attention is centred directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text”.²⁴ The former, then, is the most common where the reader simply expects to retrieve information from the text. The latter is a rarer more “poetic” and “spiritual” mode of reading concerned with aesthetics, melody, imagery and so on. The former will be what most modern readers are used to, but the latter will be the mode of reading that comes into play in the funeral service. This might give us a clue as to what is required in preparation of the funeral to facilitate such spiritual reading of Scripture.

The common theological conception about biblical texts being authoritative sources to knowledge about the divine has led to important concerns regarding applying reader-oriented

²² Rosenblatt, *The Reader the Text the Poem*, 3-4.

²³ Rosenblatt, *The Reader the Text the Poem*, 11-12.

²⁴ Rosenblatt, *The Reader the Text the Poem*, 25.

approaches to exegesis. Wouldn't this new paradigm with exclusive focus on the reader make the same mistake as the former, just in reverse? If historical-critical criticism taken too far might take away agency from the modern reader, then reader-response theory taken too far might take away agency from the text. Mark A. Pike raises this point in his article *The Bible and the Reader's Response*, warning that too much individual interpretation and emphasis on the immediate personal response can lead to "interpretive anarchy" and irresponsible Bible reading.²⁵ However, Pike (who regrets reader response theory's limited impact on exegesis), points out how Rosenblatt's transactional theory is a balanced approach where "authorial intention and original context is respected but where personal relevance and meaning in the life of the reader is also found".²⁶ He continues to suggest how this transactional theory can be integrated in a framework for teaching responsible Bible reading in schools and churches.

Returning to McKnight's project of creating a reader-oriented criticism specialised for biblical exegesis, we can see that he is equally concerned with the importance of being both reader-oriented and text-oriented, maintaining the integrity of both. To him, taking the text seriously is not the same as keeping our distance so that it becomes "ancient and strange", but rather positioning the text so that it makes sense to the reader in their given context. While McKnight doesn't use the same words as Rosenblatt, he seems to use the same distinction between the different kinds of knowledge that can be gained from reading the Bible as literature or as history. An active reader attempting what Rosenblatt would call aesthetic reading of the Bible might gain a kind of knowledge that "may influence the reader more intimately than conventional biblical information."²⁷

In the final chapter of his book, McKnight outlines the role of the reader in their actualisation of biblical discourse; the text is brought to life in a way that has relevance to the modern day, thus making the reader's inner and outer world integral to this process.²⁸ A key to this process is coherence, meaning that a reader will look for internal logic in a text and try to find a coherent overarching message that makes sense to him. This happens progressively as the reader encounters different segments of the given text: because it does not itself explain how

²⁵ Mark A. Pike, "The Bible and the Reader's Response," *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 7, no. 3 (2003): 40-41.

²⁶ Pike, "Bible and Reader's Response," 42.

²⁷ McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible*, 174-76.

²⁸ McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible*, 220.

the different segments belong together and relate to each other, the reader will have to fill the gaps.²⁹

While the text contains many potential uses and messages, it is up to the reader to make a decision as to what of this potential is actualised, and create a meaning that is relevant to them. This includes deciphering the genre of a text, whether it should be read as e.g. history, realistic narrative or poetry. This decision will have consequences for how the text is read, as all readers are to some degree bound by the conventions of any given genre. A reader-oriented approach also acknowledges that it is up to the reader to identify the central themes of a biblical text, and these will supposedly be of the kind that illuminates the reader's context.³⁰

Lastly, McKnight envisions a reciprocal influence where the reader can be actualised by the message of the text, just as the text is actualised by the reader. As someone engages in what we may describe as aesthetic reading, they will not merely actualise the text itself, but also the worlds which it contains. This process of world building requires much imaginative creativity as the reader fills in all the details that have not been provided by the text. Such a world created from the text will make sense to the reader only because it encounters the reader's world. There is always a certain degree of overlap between the two worlds, an overlap that exists because the meaning actualised by the reader is relevant to their context. There is, however, also a clash between these worlds, a clash of different ideologies and cultures due to the text's ancient origin. This means that the reader's world might be both challenged and changed by that of the text, as it enables the reader to gain new perspectives and create new worlds for themselves.³¹

In summary, to conceive a responsible reading of the Psalter, this thesis will use reader-response exegesis as a way of ascertaining an interpretation that is relevant and constructive for bereaved parents. Utilising the above terms, the goal of a minister preparing a funeral sermon must be to facilitate a constructive aesthetic reading of scripture for the congregation. However, this does not mean that a minister should abandon all the traditional exegetical tools that were taught at the seminary. Though the inclusion of McKnight's polemics against the historical approach might make it seem to be the case, this section does not seek to discredit traditional exegesis. Rather, I wish to criticise its tendencies to methodical rigidity and self-

²⁹ McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible*, 234-41.

³⁰ McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible*, 241-50.

³¹ McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible*, 254-63.

centeredness and show the need to broaden the exegetical horizon by including the perspective of the contemporary reader.

Lastly, I would contend that it is not as difficult to bridge the gap between the historical and the reader-oriented approach to exegesis as it might seem. In fact, there are many similarities, because both are concerned with investigating biblical texts and how they impact those that read them. A synthesis of the two paradigms can be suggested when acknowledging that both explore the reader's imagination: One focuses on discovering and applying knowledge about ancient cosmology, symbology, authorship and context of use (etc.) to reconstruct the imagination of the historical reader. The other focuses on mapping and understanding the imaginations of different individuals and groups of contemporary readers. There is a lot to be learned from comparing the way our contemporaries understand ancient texts to how such an imagined historical reader might have understood them. This thesis will endeavour to apply some elements of this suggested synthesis between the historical and contemporary reader-oriented approach.

The contemporary readers included in this thesis are bereaved parents. Knowledge of their world is required to be able to facilitate an encounter between the text's world and that of bereaved parents. In the following section I will be presenting a clinical study as one potential source to such knowledge:

1.5.2 Existential challenges faced by bereaved parents

I have earlier stated that the context chosen for this thesis is interesting and important due to the challenging existential questions that must arise as part of the experience of being a recently bereaved parent. This is a claim that is restated in a paper written by Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue in 2017 titled "The Spiritual and Theological Challenges of Stillbirth for Bereaved Parents": "The death of a baby through stillbirth is [...] one of life's most challenging bereavements".³² This study wanted to catalogue the various existential questions and challenges that were posed to parents who experienced losing their child to stillbirth. They performed qualitative interviews with 12 different mothers and some of their partners and categorized the main themes that appeared in these interviews.³³ Even though this study concerns the bereaved parents after stillbirth, I am certain that much of the questions faced by these parents are shared by those who have lost children in the first months of their lives. The

³² Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth.", 1081.

³³ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth.", 1083-1084.

findings of this study will be highly relevant for future reference, because I am interested to see whether the same existential topics will arise in the interviews with my own respondents.

Before giving a summary of the findings of this study, it is important to reiterate how precarious the loss of a child is for the parents' beliefs, faith and existential wellbeing, as Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue explains well in their introduction: Expecting and having a child involves a huge investment in the imagined future that the parents wish to construct for their child. During a pregnancy there are intense feelings of hope and expectation, and these are crushed by the unexpected death of a child. Birth is the beginning of life, and death is the end of it. Thus, the death of a child, and especially stillbirth where birth and death come at the same time, is a tremendous contradiction. In the words of Nuzum et al. "[i]n stillbirth, the "natural order" of birth, life and death is disrupted raising existential questions".³⁴

Their data revealed three main themes related to faith: searching for meaning, maintaining hope and questioning core beliefs. Of these three, I will offer less attention to the second one about maintaining hope because it pertains to the time during the pregnancy, while this thesis's subject matter pertains to the loss of a child some several months after birth. Starting with the first theme about creating meaning, parents expressed the need to understand why this had happened to exactly them, and especially mothers tended to answer this question with a feeling of having "been chosen". The mothers imagined that their child, that was not going to grow up, had chosen that particularly strong mother to perform the special role of caretaker. The parents also reported a need of reassurances that the baby's life had value, even though this whole life was lived before birth. This was done by creating memories out of the experiences made during the pregnancy, and here I believe planning and performing a funeral service can contribute greatly as a part of the process of memory creation. Lastly under the subordinate theme of "spiritual significance", the parents speak directly to the importance of having funerals or similar ceremonies that "helped them to attribute spiritual significance and value to their baby's life". Interestingly, one of the parents also mentioned that it was just as important to write the service as having the service, showing us the value of actively participating in forming the funeral. Here there is likely a parallel to the goal of this thesis, which is to facilitate the bereaved parents' meaning creation as they encounter the biblical text.³⁵

³⁴ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth.", 1081-1082.

³⁵ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1084-87.

The third overarching theme was “questioning core beliefs”, that tries to summarize in what way the death of their baby brought the parents to existential reflection. The first underlying topic is one of the most common and difficult struggles of both theologians and laypeople, namely that of theodicy. In the case of some of these bereaved parents, theodicy expressed itself as a feeling of injustice at the fate of their innocent baby, and it challenged their faith in a caring God. They all reported the experience as challenging to their faith, and for most it involved great feelings of anger towards God who they saw as responsible. This resulted in a strange ambivalence where this anger had to be balanced with a continued feeling of dependence upon God. Not only was the divine blamed for the situation, but it was also a place the parents looked to for help and comfort.³⁶

Anger can be destructive, when it creates permanent distance between the parents and God, like it might have done for one father who reported that their church denied the baby a funeral due to not having been baptised. But, as another mother said, it can also lead to growth; she learned that it is okay to be angry with an understanding and patient God, and that anger is a legitimate response to the death of a child. Especially of note for anyone planning and leading a funeral is the importance of creating a ceremony that gives room for the legitimate anger the parents experience and communicates the fact that both church and God can take it. Lastly, I would like to mention that many parents had asked themselves the question “where is my baby now?”. One mother commented that repeated mentions of her baby having gone to heaven was of great relief, giving yet another indication of what to emphasise in our funeral preaching.³⁷

³⁶ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth.", 1088-1089.

³⁷ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1090-91.

2 Psalm 139: 1-18

2.1 On choosing the pericope:

Choosing the funeral service as context, means that I choose to limit myself to the recommended readings suggested in the liturgy of the Church of Norway's funeral rite. As mentioned above, among the suggested readings from the Hebrew Bible most are Psalms, and because of their unique nature I tend to base many of my funeral sermons on these readings. The final step to limiting my scope is choosing only one Psalm for analysis, and I have decided to focus on Psalm 139 based on the following criteria:

First and foremost, Psalm 139 is one of the recommended readings that appear in the Church of Norway's Ordinance for Funerals. Secondly, Psalm 139 is recommended specifically for funerals after the death of a child both by the Church of Norway³⁸ and the Danish Evangelical Lutheran church³⁹, which is the specific reading context that I will focus on in my thesis.

Thirdly, in reading commentaries and other scholarly work, I find that many of these focus heavily on the psalm's "original meaning" and use in its historical context, which leads to interpretations that I find hard to reckon are suitable for the context of a funeral service after the death of a child. I do not wish to pass judgement on these readings, but it shows the potential for different interpretations and a discussion on which ones are legitimate and adequate for my chosen context.

Fourthly, both the Danish and Norwegian churches recommend reading a very shortened version of Psalm 139; the Danish liturgy suggests 139:1-12 for all occasions⁴⁰, whereas the Norwegians normally read verses 139:1-12, 23-24, but changes the recommendation to verses 139:1-6, 13-18 for funerals for children.⁴¹ Because reading only these excerpts dramatically changes the meaning potential of the text, there's an interesting discussion to be had about the choice of excerpt, its consequences for meaning, and whether the context justifies this practice.

³⁸ Church of General Synod of the Church of Norway, "The Order for a Funeral," (Church of Norway, 2003), https://kirken.no/globalassets/kirken.no/om-troen/liturgier-oversatt/funeral_2003.pdf. 12-13.

³⁹ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, "Funeral Liturgy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark," *Hymns in English - A selection of Hymns from the Danish Hymnbook* (Det Kgl. Vajsenhus' forlag, 2009), https://www.interchurch.dk/_Resources/Persistent/7/1/6/4/7164f9e588d00bd9b0ebb78c703dcaceb0719ca2/Funeral%20and%20committal.pdf. 3.

⁴⁰ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, "Funeral Liturgy," 3.

⁴¹ Church of Norway, "Order for a Funeral," 12-13.

The most relevant example here are the excerpts used in the Norwegian funeral liturgy, which are much shorter than the full Psalm. Since they want three readings in the funeral⁴², this is understandable from a practical point of view as the readings cannot be too long, but they show awareness of the consequences for the message, since the recommendation changes when the occasion is a child's funeral. The reason might be obvious, for by omitting Ps. 139:13-18 we would be missing verses filled with beautiful body symbolism about God knowing us and shaping us in our mother's womb and before.

As Holladay states, in most readings of the text today, we tend to omit vv. 19-22 because we are not comfortable uttering these phrases cursing our enemies, asking God to strike them dead and declaring our burning hatred towards them. He further writes that this omission is particularly grave, as he claims that these verses were the climax of Psalm 139 in its probable original use as a declaration of innocence by someone accused of idol worship.⁴³ This might as well be the case, but as also Holladay says at a later point, omissions are legitimate when the omitted clearly contradicts basic Christian teaching.⁴⁴ For instance, Christ's command to love our enemies is clearly in conflict with the Psalmist's declaration of hate and wish that God would kill his enemies, and this according to Holladay "render these verses unusable without careful reinterpretation"⁴⁵. The funeral service for a child that requires an even more empathetic and careful approach to preaching than a regular funeral service is not the right context for such a reinterpretation where the congregation is intellectually and theologically challenged to harmonize such utterances with what most recognise as the overall message of Christ... Then, considering thematic cohesion and pastoral care, omitting the most jarring and disconcerting verses of Psalm 139 for the better of the mourning congregation, I am left with my chosen pericope: Psalm 139: 1-18.

⁴²Church of Norway, "Order for a Funeral," 7.

⁴³ William Lee Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years : Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 44.

⁴⁴ Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 311-13.

⁴⁵ Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 305.

2.2 Psalm 139:1-18

1. To the choir leader, a Psalm of David.
Lord, you search me and know me.
2. You know whether I sit or stand, you follow my thoughts from afar.
3. My journey and my rest you behold, and you acquaint yourself with all my ways.
4. For even with no word on my tongue, Lord, you have heard it all.
5. You surround me on all sides, and you keep your hand around me.
6. This is too wonderful for me, so exalted I do not fathom it.

7. Whither would I go from your hand? And whither would I flee from your presence?
8. If I rise to the heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in the underworld, you are also there.
9. If I spread the wings of dawn and settle at the ocean's rim,
10. even there your hand guides me, your right hand keeps hold of me.
11. I may say: "Let the darkness take me, so the night is all the light I see."
12. Even darkness is not dark for you, the night shines like the day, the darkness is like light.

13. For you have created my inside, you have weaved me in my mother's womb.
14. I praise you, for you are frighteningly wonderful.⁴⁶ Wondrous is your work, my soul knows it well.
15. My bones were not hidden from you when I was created in secret, woven in the deep of the earth.
16. When I was without form your eyes saw me. In your book were all days written, they were formed before a single one came to be.
17. To me, your thoughts are precious, God, endless is the sum of them!
18. If I count them, they are numerous like sand, when I awake, I am still with you.

⁴⁶ I follow here a reading found in the LXX, the Syriac and Jerom – and now also documented in 11QPs^a.

2.3 Lost in translation

Translating Psalm 139:1-18 for this thesis project has been unusually challenging due to its bilingual nature: I have conducted interviews with Norwegian readers asking for their interpretations of the text, and I have chosen to write this paper in English for a potentially international audience. Translating Hebrew terms to any Western language is a challenge to begin with, but I have suffered the constraints of two languages and a two-step translation process. First, I had to produce a Norwegian text to be read by my participants⁴⁷, and then I had to create an English translation that both match the Hebrew and the Norwegian texts. Even though I probably would have made different choices translating only to English, I had to remain loyal to the wording of the Norwegian text to have valid comparisons and an honest presentation of my findings. As a bonus, all interview quotes included in this paper had to be translated to English. In this section I will comment on some of the difficult decisions made in the translation process of Psalm 139:1-18.

Following the order of Psalm 139 we arrive at the first challenging term in verse 5: “צָרָה־נִי”⁴⁸. The English translation is straightforward, and I ended on the term “surrounded” as suggested in HALOT. The Hebrew root has military connotations, as it can also be translated to “besiege” and “attack”⁴⁸, and the difficulty with this term comes as a result of Norwegian semantics. While the English “surround” leaves room for both aggressive and caring connotations, the Norwegian translation forces you to choose between “omgi” and “omringe”. The former has an almost exclusively positive and caring meaning, while the latter is wholly military of nature, being equivalent to “surround (with enemy soldiers)”. Considering that the objective of this study is conceiving a responsible reading for grieving parents, it would not make sense to choose the exclusively military sense of the Hebrew word.

One aspect that the ancient reader would be able to appreciate, but is hard for a contemporary reader to understand, is the ancient Hebrew cosmology at play in this psalm, especially in the second stanza. Among these concepts, the most prominent is that of “שְׁאוֹל”⁴⁹ or Sheol in verse 8, which is the name of the Hebrew underworld where someone went after death.⁴⁹ The central issue here lies in the modern Christian concept of hell that is very different from the ancient concept of the underworld. While hell is a place of suffering where damned souls are

⁴⁷ The Norwegian translation of Psalm 139:1-18 is available in appendix 3.

⁴⁸ “צָרָה,” HALOT, 3:1015.

⁴⁹ “שְׁאוֹל שְׁאוֹל,” HALOT, 4:1368.

sent as a punishment, Sheol is a place of darkness where all the dead go.⁵⁰ Earlier English translations, like the King James' version, chose to translate this as hell, which is highly problematic because of the distance between this and the original sense of the word. It would also be problematic from the perspective of responsible readings for bereaved parents. Many modern English bibles like the English Standard Version and World English Bible opt for using its Latinised name Sheol but this has its own issues because it requires specialist knowledge about the ancient Hebrew world view to understand. Therefore, I chose the more neutral translation "underworld" that leaves the interpretation of this concept up to the imagination of the reader.

Another aspect that is difficult to translate for a contemporary Western audience is the rich body symbolism found in the Hebrew Bible, and Psalm 139 is full of references to the psalmist's various body parts. To exemplify this, I will highlight one important term found in verse 13 "כְּלִיָּהּ". The literal meaning is "kidneys", but the more important symbolic sense of the word is "the innermost, most secret part of man".⁵¹ I chose to translate this into the more symbolic sense as "my inside", because the contemporary reader most likely only will have access to the literal meaning of "kidneys". There is a big difference between reading that God has created my inside, and that he has created one specific internal organ. As the goal is to facilitate creative reading, it makes sense to choose a translation that opens for more possible interpretations, rather than one that greatly narrows it down.

One last word that is worth noting comes towards the end of the pericope in verse 16, that I have translated to "without form". The Hebrew "בְּלִיָּהּ" also has a suggested modern equivalent in the English "embryo"⁵², but this is not a viable option when translating into Norwegian. While the English language distinguishes between "embryo" as the shapeless initial stage of pregnancy and "foetus" as the baby beginning to take form, there is no such distinction to be found in the everyday speech of Norway. Embryo might well be used by those medically trained, but most use the word "foster" to denote everything from the moment of fertilisation to the moment of birth. Thus, the Norwegian "foster" misses the central

⁵⁰ Watson E. Mills and Roger Aubrey Bullard, "Sheol," in *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 1990).

⁵¹ "כְּלִיָּהּ," *HALOT*, 2:479.

⁵² "בְּלִיָּהּ," *HALOT*, 1:194.

concept of the embryo being shapeless, and therefore I must choose the translation “without form”.

2.4 An overview of some previous scholarly interpretations

Before embarking on my own interpretation of Psalm 139 I will present some of the interpretations resulting from more traditional scholarly work on this text. One of the things I noted early was that this psalm is one of those texts that scholars have long been trying to classify, without being able to come to a consensus. One author previously mentioned is Holladay, who writes that Psalm 139 has been “classified as a hymn, an individual song of thanksgiving and confidence, a declaration of innocence and a didactic (wisdom) psalm”.⁵³ As mentioned above, his claim is that Psalm 139 most likely originally was used as a declaration of innocence. This classification is incompatible with my project, since I have chosen to omit the supposed climax of this declaration in Ps. 139:19-22.

Allen’s summary in *Psalms 101-150* serves to further explore previous scholarly debate about Psalm 139. He also mentions the debate over vv. 19-24, where some have suggested that these might have been added at a later stage or even misplaced, while others have claimed that this psalm ending at verse 18 would have been the most beautiful in the Psalter.⁵⁴ More than anything Allen’s overview confirms how diverse interpretations have been made by different scholars, from Westermann’s psalm of praise regarding the wonder of creation, to Mowinckel’s “complaint expressing innocence” where the references to God’s all-encompassing knowledge underscores the claim to innocence.⁵⁵

A major effort has been put into reconstructing a historic setting where the psalm could have been used, and one popular claim puts it in a legal context envisioning a sort of religious court in the temple. The psalmist then has been accused of idolatry and pleads his innocence by use of these verses. Others yet have emphasised some wisdom elements of Psalm 139 suggesting that it might have been part of a conflict between opposing teachers in wisdom schools, and vv. 19-24 would be accusations against the opponents.⁵⁶ Allen finally concludes that the most adequate classification is that of a psalm of innocence, where the psalmist arrives at the

⁵³ Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 69.

⁵⁴ Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, ed. David A. Hubbard, et al., Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: W Publishing Group, 1983), 254.

⁵⁵ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 257.

⁵⁶ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 258-59.

temple seeking “vindication via a divine oracle and to this end affirming his innocence and faithfulness to God”.⁵⁷

Yet another suggestion as to how Psalm 139 should be read comes from John Eaton. He writes that the purpose of the psalm becomes apparent in v. 19: “prayer against murderous men who threaten the psalmist’s life”, and further suggests the psalmist was probably a king, asking for God’s aid against his enemies.⁵⁸

This overview shows how most commentaries and previous research focuses heavily on trying to very precisely reconstruct a historical psalmist and the psalm’s original use, while my method of choice is a reader-oriented exegesis focusing on a specific group of contemporary readers; bereaved parents. The only point these scholars seem to agree on is that the psalm’s climax and core meaning can be gathered from vv. 19-24, which are very same verses that I (as well as most liturgies) have chosen to omit. This means that my exegesis will be a reinterpretation of Psalm 139 on very different premises than most previous work I have encountered. In the following chapter I will outline my research method for producing this reinterpretation together with representatives from this group of contemporary readers.

⁵⁷ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 260.

⁵⁸ John Eaton, *The Psalms : A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and a New Translation* (London: T&T Clark International, 2003), 459.

3 Empirical research methods

Early on in developing this research project the need for an empirical component became obvious, for it seemed impossible and irresponsible to do a reader-oriented exegesis without encountering the reader's perspective first-hand. The solution was to make this thesis into a mixed-method project, combining the traditional exegesis process of textual criticism, translation, reception and close reading, with an empirical component consisting of qualitative interviews with representatives of the readers in question.

3.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

While this thesis does not pretend to be a clinical study of bereaved parent's existential woes, it is heavily inspired by such studies. The findings of Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue's paper are especially central to the theoretical framework of this thesis. For analysing interview data, their method of choice was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which puts an in-depth focus on the individual experiences of the interview participants.⁵⁹ Acknowledging the parallels between the goals of this study and that of Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue, and the fact that I depend heavily on their data for my own interpretation, it made sense to apply IPA to this project's qualitative component for the sake of comparability.

According to Linda Finlay, there are three cornerstones within IPA:

- 1) "A reflective focus on subjective accounts of personal experience": assuming that every person is a being engaging in creation of meaning, as they try to make sense of their lived experiences. The IPA researcher explores these meanings by asking participants about their reflections on their experiences, engaging them on both a cognitive, emotional and existential level.
- 2) "An idiographic sensibility": meaning that the researcher is committed to understand the individual participants in their individual contexts. This starts on a micro-level when engaging each case and continues with a comparison between the individual cases investigating differences and similarities in their emerging themes.

⁵⁹ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1082-83.

- 3) “The commitment to a hermeneutic approach”: IPA applies a double hermeneutic, a process where the participants are trying to make sense of a given phenomenon, and the researcher tries to make sense of their sense-making.⁶⁰

3.2 Developing a hypothesis

This thesis has a simple two-part hypothesis based on the same premise as reader-oriented exegesis; the reader’s life experience is integral to the creation of meaning in a literary process, thus insight into the reader’s situation should give an indication of their interpretation. To test the merit of this hypothesis, themes identified in research on existential needs of bereaved parents were used to guide a close reading of Psalm 139 and to identify several verses and terms that were expected to garner a strong response from the interview participants. The preliminary close reading and predicted verses of special interest were then to be compared with the actual interpretations that came up during the interviews.

3.3 Developing the interview guide

The interview guide of this study ended up short and sparingly worded, because it follows the ideals of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and reader-response theory where the perspective of the interview participants should guide the direction of the interview. This is ensured by a semi-structured approach where a short list of open-ended questions invite the participants to deliberate on their experience of reading the text, their interpretation of its message and how it relates to their lives. The IPA interviewer should respect the integrity of the participants creative thought process by not interfering too much and letting the participants lead, unlike what an interviewer would do in a structured interview following a more extensive list of questions to fill in. What the interviewer does instead is to ask follow-up questions to facilitate the participant’s thinking process, helping them to delve deeper into the subject matter and explore their decision making, and emotional and existential reflections.⁶¹

The resulting interview guide starts with an open question about the participant’s prior knowledge of Psalm 139, before the psalm is to be read according to the participant’s preference. The second part of the interview consists of open-ended questions about the participant’s reading experience and interpretation of the text. To help me formulate follow-

⁶⁰ Linda Finlay, "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis," in *Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the Lived World* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 140-41.

⁶¹ Finlay, "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis," 142.

up questions the rest of the interview guide contains a list of identified themes of special interest as identified in Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue's research on existential challenges of bereaved parents. A lot of thought was also put into preparing myself for these interviews when it comes to the empathy and care required when discussing such a sensitive subject matter. To respect the participants' privacy and avoid forcing them to relive traumatic experiences by asking intrusive question, one goal of the interview was for specific themes to be brought up organically by the participants themselves.⁶²

3.4 Selection criteria, recruitment and number of interviews

Interview participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Being bereaved parents, having experienced the loss of a child under one year of age.
2. It had to be more than a year since they experienced the loss of a child.

The sensitivity of the subject matter meant that the selection criterias had to be few and broad, due to the potential difficulty of finding participants that both qualified and were willing to participate. It is due to this same sensitivity participants with too fresh experiences were excluded, judging it irresponsible to subject the recently bereaved to the arduous process of bringing up and examining tragic and traumatic memories.

A low goal of three interviews was settled on for two reasons: (1) limited time, resources and scope of a thesis supposed to be completed over the course of one semester. (2) the goal of these interviews is not to gain an overview of a representative population, but to gain in-depth insight into the reading process. An amount of three interviews is generally recommended for IPA projects, to maintain a manageable quantity of data, considering the in-depth nature of the method.⁶³

In the end, a total of two participants were recruited through my own network of colleagues of the clergy. Originally, the intention was to get in touch with non-governmental organisations working for the interests of bereaved parents to get help with contacting potential participants, but it proved difficult for an unknown theological student to gain trust and access to such a vulnerable group. Within the church context, however, trust was already established due to my prior experience as a substitute minister. The goal was to conduct at least one more interview, but I was unable to do so due to limited resources and recruitment challenges.

⁶² For details, see the interview guide included in annex 1.

⁶³ Finlay, "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis," 141.

Finding representatives of this study's target group is a complicated matter to being with because of its sensitive nature. I was further impeded by travel restrictions and social distancing introduced because of the COVID-19 pandemic and establishing contact with further potential participants proved unviable.

However, these interviews cover a satisfactory amount of different perspectives, one of them being a father and a minister, and the other one being a mother and a lay person. Firstly, the experience of motherhood and fatherhood are very different, especially in a bodily perspective, up until the child's first birthday. Secondly, due to their different educational and professional background, they likely have very varied relationship with scripture and approach to theological questions. For instance, a minister is likely to have far more background knowledge on both Psalm 139 and the context this thesis concerns itself with. His profession carries its biases towards scripture, biases that I, as a budding colleague, am likely to share, at least to some degree.

Both participants are in their 60's, so their experiences of losing a child was a couple decades old in their cases, which is well beyond the criteria of at least one year. A disadvantage with my sample is that both represent the same generation. Furthermore, the time that has passed since their experience means that they might be somewhat difficult to compare with Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue study that contacted parents via the study hospital, presumably indicating their participant's experiences to be fresher. Another difference in the sample is that their participants had experienced stillbirth⁶⁴, while in my cases the children died in their first year. At the same time, the experiences are arguably similar, and the difference in time frame might prove to be advantageous, as my participant's different perspectives can give new insights.

3.5 Interview process

One interview was performed in the participants' office, while the other was performed in the participants' home. After taking a few minutes getting comfortable and setting up, the recordings of the interviews proper ended up being approximately one hour each. In addition to the recordings, I also utilized a notepad to record body language, laughter, pauses and other significant non-verbal cues. The interview process mirrors the reading process, as it starts

⁶⁴ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1083.

with a short question on the participants' prior knowledge of the text, before it is read in a way the participant chooses.

After reading the text follows a conversation about the reader's interpretation. The interview guide contains a handful of open questions the interviewer can ask. These questions concern the experience of reading the text, in what way the text speaks to the participant, and how they understand the overall message of the psalm. In addition to these open questions, there is a list of relevant themes based on the research of bereaved parents' existential needs that the interviewer can use to construct follow-up questions as needed. The interview ends with a question on whether the participant has anything to add before ending the recording.

3.6 Analysis

Recordings from the interviews were transcribed verbatim using Nvivo 12, before digitalising handwritten notes on significant non-verbal cues and adding these to the anonymous, time-stamped transcriptions. Upon completion, the use of software was deemed unnecessary, and working on paper seemed more adequate for a creative analysis process involving only two interviews. The finished transcripts were printed on paper to be able to work on them without distractions. Then followed a rigorous analysis process done according to the IPA process entailing three phases as described by Pietkiewicz and Smith⁶⁵:

1. Immersion in the interview's data and setting, consisting of close reading and re-readings of the transcripts, listening to the recordings, and taking careful notes of participant's interpretations and emotional responses, and my observations of potential interest.
2. Creating emerging themes from the careful notes taken earlier in the process, by formulating phrases that summarises different ideas and topics on a slightly higher level of abstraction. These identified themes served as codes or keywords to pinpoint the various sections of interest within each transcript.
3. Grouping the different themes and creating relationships between them, thus compiling the shared themes between the two different cases. By writing keywords and comments in the margin of the transcripts, and later turning these keywords into conceptual maps, I got an overview of the topics and verses of Psalm 139 that were of

⁶⁵ Igor Pietkiewicz and Jonathan A. Smith, "A Practical Guide to Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Qualitative Research Psychology," *Czasopismo Psychologiczne – Psychological Journal* 20, no. 1 (2014): 12-13. <https://doi.org/10.14691/PPJ.20.1.7>.

importance to the participants. This overview was then used to select sections from the interview that were needed to be able to compare the two participants' and my own interpretations of the psalm, and how they each connected this to their experience of losing a child. The interview sections were then translated into English so they could be quoted directly in the findings and discussions chapter of this thesis, choosing longer quotes to keep the integrity of the participants' first-hand narratives.

3.7 Research ethics

This thesis treats a very sensitive subject matter, as the death of a baby is recognized as the most difficult bereavements a person can experience.⁶⁶ Conducting interviews discussing such matters require a special sensitivity towards people's emotional responses, meeting the participant's with empathy, caution and patience. In this context my theological education is invaluable. Especially my practical and theoretical training in pastoral care, and prior experience preparing funerals as a substitute minister, came into good use when planning and conducting these interviews.

As Alase duly points out, caution regarding the privacy and emotional needs of participants is important in qualitative studies, and especially when completing an IPA project: "As an interpretative and 'participant-oriented' research approach, IPA research studies should endeavour to do everything within its power to protect the rights, dignities, and privacies of the research participants. The privacy of the research participants should never be compromised; it should always be paramount to the researchers."⁶⁷ It is in the nature of IPA research to pry deeply and personally into the participants' experiences, and this thesis's subject matter is of an extraordinary sensitive nature as it explores both difficult experiences and questions of faith.

While the pastoral care training and experience enabled me to conduct the interviews in a caring and responsible manner, ensuring the privacy of the interview participants required its own rigorous process. This thesis had to be approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) through a standardised application process where I had to provide a description and justification for the project, interview guide, informed consent form and a plan for

⁶⁶ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1081.

⁶⁷ Abayomi Alase, "The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Ipa): A Guide to a Good Qualitative Research Approach," *International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies* 5, no. 2 (2017): 17. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.5n.2p.9>.

research data collection and storage.⁶⁸ According to the Article 9 of the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), religious and philosophical convictions are considered sensitive personal data that are offered extra protection, prohibiting the processing of such data without legitimate reason such as research deemed valuable for society.⁶⁹ My interview data ranks as “in confidence (Red)” according to the University of Oslo’s classifications of research data.⁷⁰ The university has tools for collecting such sensitive data using the online platform “Nettskjema”, a proprietary technology for encrypted submission of questionnaires and interview recordings.⁷¹ The recordings and personal information were stored on encrypted university servers with restricted access, until such a time as the anonymised transcriptions were ready.⁷²

⁶⁸ For more information on this application process, visit NSD’s website:
https://nsd.no/personvernombud/en/about_us.html

⁶⁹ "General Data Protection Regulations," in *Regulation (EU) 2016/679*, ed. European Parliament and Council of European Union (2016), Article 9. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32016R0679&from=EN> (last accessed 1st of August 2020)

⁷⁰ "How to Classify Data and Information," updated Feb 7, 2020, 2018, accessed 31 July, 2020, <https://www.uio.no/english/services/it/security/isis/data-classes.html>.

⁷¹ See University of Oslo’s about page on Nettskjema for more details:
<https://www.uio.no/english/services/it/adm-services/nettskjema/about-nettskjema.html>

⁷² For details, see the Declaration of informed consent in annex 2.

4 A reader-oriented exegesis of Psalm 139:1-18

Before presenting and discussing the interview participants' interpretations of Psalm 139:1-18, I will present my own reader-oriented exegesis. These readings produced by "desk work" exegesis based on an imagined reader will later be compared to the interpretations of real readers identified in the interviews. As previously suggested, it is possible to imagine a synthesis of a historical and a contemporary approach to reader-oriented exegesis: In the first part of this chapter there will be a short discussion on the structure of the psalm. Then, the various parts of Psalm 139 will be interpreted from the hypothetical perspectives of both a historical and a contemporary reader. The historical element will be based on insights on ancient Hebrew cosmology, symbology and anthropology. The contemporary element consists of applying the existential challenges of bereaved parents identified by Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue. The two relevant categories of themes are "creation of meaning", including a feeling of being chosen, the value of the child's life and the child's spiritual significance, and "questioning core beliefs", consisting of theodicy, impact on faith, the place the baby, anger, and spiritual needs.⁷³ The themes will be used to predict specific words and verses that might produce a strong response from the participants.

4.1 Structure and overview

I have chosen to mirror the most common way to organize Psalm 139:1-18; in three stanzas of six verses each. Firstly, this ensures coherence, as each stanza represents a different thematic emphasis. Secondly, this creates poetic rhythm and symmetry, as vv. 1-6 follows an "I-You" sentence structure, while in vv. 7-12 the "I" dominates and vv. 13-18 brings back the focus on the "I-You" relationship between the poetic first person and YHWH. The whole of Psalm 139 shows a psalmist ("I") that wants to enter a dialogue with YHWH, describing a vigilant and present Creator in a close relation to this poetic first person.

I will avoid using the terms omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient in my descriptions. Avoiding these terms that are modern inventions that do not appear in the actual text, allows me to work with the terms used in the psalm itself, the very same that the interview participants will meet as they read themselves. Since this is a reader-oriented exegesis, my analysis will focus on the experience of the imagined reader of this text identifying themselves with the psalmist's "I".

⁷³ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1085-92.

4.2 Psalm 139: 1-6: God as always vigilant

Each of the verses 1-4 describe in different images how God is constantly vigilant, paying attention and taking note of everything we do. I, as a contemporary reader, experience that this is not done in a vindictive, threatening or overbearing way, but out of love and a desire to stay up to date, know and understand how I am doing. This is emphasised in verse 5 stating how God surrounds me on all sides to hold a protective hand over me, seemingly to keep me out of harm's way, or at least to keep me company in good and bad. Verse six concludes this stanza by breaking the pattern so far. Verses 1-5 are second person statements about the nature of God's caring vigilance but verse 6 is a first-person statement about the psalmist/reader being unable to take in such good news. As a reader I can easily identify with this declaration, because verses 1-5 can certainly sound too good to be true. I, with contemporary eyes, interpret this part in a positive light and can find no specific indication as to why it should be different for bereaved parents.

However, it is far from guaranteed that the ancient Hebrew reader would agree with this interpretation, even if we have disregarded vv. 19-23 and the assumption of Psalm 139 being a declaration of innocence. Why this might be the case becomes clear if we have a closer look at the language used in verse 5. The Hebrew verb “צָרַףְנִי” that I have translated to “surround” can have aggressive military connotations, and the same root can also mean to “encircle with sentries” or “lay siege to”.⁷⁴ Seen in combination with the fact that hands in the Hebrew Bible often is a symbol of power and tyranny,⁷⁵ the verse about God surrounding me and holding his hand over me could sound very threatening indeed.⁷⁶ If the connotations of verse 5 is an indication of the stanza as a whole, then caring vigilance suddenly becomes oppressive surveillance. The word “too wonderful” in the concluding verse 6 might have to be changed for another translation of the Hebrew “פִּלְאֵי־הוּא” whose root can also mean “too difficult”.⁷⁷ The conclusion of the stanza is no longer an elated praise, but a cry of despair. Of course, this is

⁷⁴ “צָרַףְנִי,” HALOT, 3:1015.

⁷⁵ Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli, *Body Symbolism in the Bible*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Kindle Version ed. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001), Ch. 8, Subch. "Creative and Destructive, Powerful and Violent Hands". (Kindle version has no page numbers and instead requires reference to relevant chapter and subchapter)

⁷⁶ As mentioned in the above section on semantic challenges, this threatening connotation of the term is probably not apparent to my Norwegian participants. I had to choose between one term exclusively military, or one exclusively caring, and concluded on the latter.

⁷⁷ “פִּלְאֵי־הוּא,” HALOT, 3:927.

only one possible interpretation, and there is nothing stopping my hypothetical ancient Hebrew reader to reach the same conclusions as I have myself.

4.3 Psalm 139:7-12: God as always present

This stanza starts with two rhetorical questions in verse 7, both communicating the impossibility of avoiding the presence of God. Verses 8-10 give us three hypothetical examples of increasingly extreme and distant places you could go and still be accompanied by God: Upwards to the firmament of the heavens, downwards to the underworld where the dead go, and to the rim of the ocean, the primeval waters of chaos that according to ancient Hebrew cosmology lies beyond the furthestmost edge of existence.⁷⁸ Verse 11 sees the psalmist stating a hypothetical suggestion to be swallowed by darkness, declaring that night is all that can be seen. This is a desperate cry of total despair, a depression and an apathy so profound that no hope, happiness, life or light can exist or be perceived by the Psalm's author. The conclusion of this stanza states in verse 12 that even this extreme darkness is mere light, that for God even the darkest night shines like day. Thus, God always keeps us company and can overpower even our darkest and loneliest moments.

In verse 8 there are two terms that match the topics identified by Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue; heaven and the underworld. Other common translations of “שְׁאוֹל” or “Sheol” include “hell” and “grave”⁷⁹, but neither of these words match the ancient Hebrew concept of the underworld. Using the words heaven and hell together would immediately cause the contemporary reader to think in the modern, dualistic Christian concepts of afterlife. Many of the bereaved parents reported being concerned about where their child was and found great relief in the thought of it having found its way to heaven.⁸⁰ Thus, I found talk of heaven and the underworld in verse 8 to be likely to bring these topics into focus in my interviews. However, it is not obvious to connect this verse to the lost children, because it is a hypothetical situation regarding the poetic “I”, and readers might be more likely to identify it with themselves rather than their lost child.

⁷⁸ Nicholas F. Gier, "The Three-Story Universe," *God, Reason, and the Evangelicals: The Case Against Evangelical Rationalism* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987), <https://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/gre13.htm>.

⁷⁹ “שְׁאוֹל לְיָשָׁרִים,” *HALOT*, 4:1368.

⁸⁰ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1090.

4.4 Psalm 139:13-18: God as Creator

The third and last stanza starts with a statement in verse 13 establishing a close connection between the Psalmist and God as its creator. The term “כְּלִיָּהּ” (literally meaning “kidneys”), has a symbolical meaning equivalent to “the innermost, most secret part of man”.⁸¹ I chose to translate this as “my inside”, is a help for the contemporary reader to be able to access this figurative meaning of the kidneys. The ancient reader, on the other hand, was accustomed to body parts and organs being used to signify and explain many aspects of the human condition. They would probably be able to appreciate the importance of God creating those most important organs, the kidneys, for within a man’s innards lies his essence.⁸² The ancient reader would probably also be able to appreciate the depth of the phrase “you weaved my in my mother’s womb”. The womb did not only belong to God and served as his channel to give the gift of life, but the Hebrew root for womb is also the root for compassion, a description often given to God. This connection could be understood as showing God’s motherlike compassion towards the psalmist being woven in the womb and delivered by midwife YHWH.⁸³

An ancient reader might hear how YHWH’s involvement as creator is intimate, making the innermost part of the reader, and compassionate as this shaping took part in the womb, that place of divine creation and compassion. The praise in Verse 14 could serve as a very fitting response to such a thought, that the individual reader must admit this close and affectionate relation to a creator. The description of God as “frighteningly wonderful” echoes the wonder expressed in verse 6, and, the reader being unable to truly fathom this, all he can do is praise God.

For my contemporary readers verse 13 is likely to illicit a strong response, maybe especially from mothers, as they read that “you have weaved me in my mother’s womb”. This establishes God’s very close and personal involvement from an early point in the development of the child, an involvement that should prove extremely personal to a reader whose womb it concerns directly. God seeming to have pointed out a specific womb could bring up a topic

⁸¹ “כְּלִיָּהּ,” *HALOT*, 2:479.

⁸²Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 65-66.

⁸³ Schroer and Staubli, *Body Symbolism in the Bible*, Ch. 3: Subchapters "The Womb: Compassionate Giver of Life" and "God's Wombliness".

identified by Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue regarding the interviewed mothers' feeling of being chosen for the special role of bearing a child that was to die early.⁸⁴ This verse also has the potential of confirming the value of a child's very short life, seeing how God is involved as creator also before birth. Such a message should resonate strongly with all those contemporary readers brought up with an emphasis on the importance of baptising children, like the father interviewed by Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue who was denied a church funeral for his unbaptised child.⁸⁵

This message can be read as being reiterated with even more force in verse 16 by the wording "when I was without form", placing God's involvement further back. The Hebrew term "אֵינִי" here translated to "without form" is indicated to equvalate the modern term "embryo"⁸⁶ and has in fact been used in several modern translations.⁸⁷ Even without using the concrete word, it is conceivable that the contemporary reader thinking along the lines of God's involvement in the womb should interpret "without form" as referring to the embryo. Expanding on the logic of the above paragraph, the phrase "when I was without form" could counter the worries of a bereaved parent that a child with no earthly life to speak of has little value. In the eyes of God, the earthly life dwindles compared to the relationship between creator and created, established eons before any human had knowledge of this budding life.

Thus, verses 15 and 16 can be seen to massively expand the scope of the creator's involvement, for it started long before we had any form, as we were created in secret, in the deep of the earth. An interesting detail in verse 15 is how God's involvement in this creation process beneath the earth is described as less active than the one in the womb, the phrase uses the passive voice "when I was created". While it might be difficult for the contemporary reader to glimpse this nuance, for the ancient reader this could activate notions about the earth being a cosmological authority, and especially the idea that earth is mother and originator of humankind. The passivity of God in this part of the process makes it possible for the reader to imagine that the earth also has some creative agency.⁸⁸ A comforting interpretation of these

⁸⁴ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1085.

⁸⁵ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1091.

⁸⁶ "אֵינִי," *HALOT*, 1:194.

⁸⁷ Some examples include the 2011 Norwegian Bible's «foster» synonymous with both «embryo» and «fetus» and Allen's commentary on Psalm 139 utilizing «embryo», see Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 248.

⁸⁸ Terje Stordalen, "Mother Earth in Biblical Hebrew Literature: Ancient and Contemporary Imagination," in *The Centre and the Periphery: A European Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, ed. Jill Middlemas, David J.A. Clines, and Else K. Holt, Hebrew Bible Monographs (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 116-20.

verses is how God has known and loved us even as earth was forming our bones deep underground, long before our existence was known by ourselves or other humans.

However, Verse 16 also states that all days were written in God's book, making it seem as he knew all days and how each of them would unfold, even long before they came to be. This can be problematic for some to read, as it quickly can take a step towards predestination, where everything that happens is already preordained by an almighty and all-knowing being. Verse 16, then, easily leads us to the challenge of theodicy; how can evil exist if God is a loving creator? For the contemporary readers that I have in mind, this verse is likely to be important for their reading experience, as many bereaved parents reported facing the issue of theodicy when they lost their child.⁸⁹ Depending on the circumstances of this experience, interpreting it as a heavenly ordained plan could make God look profoundly evil in the eyes of a bereaved parent. In this case, verse 16 might not serve to comfort the reader, but to provoke.

Even so, the psalmist does not concern himself with theodicy, but simply concludes the stanza with two more verses of praise. In verses 17-18 God's thoughts are described as endless, numerous like sand, or, in other words, uncountable for humans. To me, this yet again echoes the wonderful and unfathomable quality of Psalm 139's overarching theme; God as an ever present, intensely attentive and loving creator. With this theme in focus, leaving theodicy aside for the moment, we can easily see why these godly thoughts are so precious. Lastly, verse 18 concludes reiterating the fact that as the author wakes up in the morning, "I am still with you".

4.5 Preliminary conclusions

In this chapter I have applied knowledge from earlier research to construct the imaginations of two hypothetical readers, one historical reader from the same ancient context as Psalm 139's origins and one contemporary bereaved parent. Following the three-part structure of the text, I have tried to interpret the text from these two perspectives with special attention to verses that might catch the eye of my interview participants:

Vv. 1-6 speaks of God as always vigilant, something that can be read both as caring attentiveness, and as a threatening and judging surveillance. There is little in the first stanza that seems to specifically speak to the bereaved parents. Vv. 7-12 describes God as always being present with the reader, even at the furthestmost edges of the Hebrew cosmos and in our

⁸⁹ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1088-89.

darkest moments. Verse 8 speaks of the heaven and the underworld, two terms that can activate the issue of where the lost child has gone after death.

The last part of Psalm 139 is expected to garner the strongest response from my participants because of its descriptions of God as creator, having formed the child in the mother's womb according to verse 13. This speaks to bereaved parent's need to confirm the value and spiritual significance of their child, showing divine involvement long before birth. It can also speak to the mother's potential feeling of being chosen for the special role of bearing this child. The historical perspective might emphasise God's role as midwife, a compassionate creator and deliverer of life. Verse 16 is the most problematic of the psalm, as it can easily be read as everything that happens being part of a divine plan. Many contemporary readers are sceptical towards predestination, and many bereaved parents report struggling with theodicy.

5 Findings and discussion: Reading Psalm 139 with bereaved parents

Above, I have provided my own preliminary close reading and interpretation of Psalm 139 as well as an overview of verses and topics that I expected to be of special interest for the interview participants. In this chapter, I will be presenting and discussing the findings from my interviews with bereaved parents.

In qualitative research, the norm is to present the findings and write the analysis as two separate chapters. The objective of such a separation is to present relevant interview data in the most objective and unfiltered way possible, thus showing the original statement of the interview participants with minimal interference from the researchers and their biases. The problem with such a division is that it conceals the researcher's subjectivity when choosing what interview segments are relevant enough to deserve inclusion, and in what fashion it should then be presented.

For these reasons, I have chosen to combine the typically separate chapters for findings and discussion, as there is no point in feigning neutrality and objectivity. Rather, because exegesis and theology are a thoroughly subjective and personal exercise, I would like to emphasise and critically analyse my own subjective and creative process in relation to that of the interview participants. At the same time, it is important to maintain the integrity of the participants' statements as much as possible. This means that I will include longer direct quotes from the interview transcripts and attempt a conversation with these by providing my own commentary and analysis.

In the following, I will present the interpretations and comments from the interview participants, then provide my own commentary and analysis. This will contain both comparisons between my own preliminary close reading and the two participants, as well as references to the theoretical framework of Rosenblatt's transactional theory, McKnight's clash meeting of the worlds of the text and reader, as well as themes identified as existential challenges among bereaved parents. To structure this section, I will primarily focus on my suggested structure and thematic headlines for Psalm 139, beginning with an overview of the psalm before taking a closer look at each stanza and individual verses. As a reminder, two interviews were performed with two different bereaved parents in their 60's who both experienced losing a child in its first year. One of them is a father and minister, while the other is a mother and a lay person. Moving forward, I will simply refer to them as the "father" and the "mother".

5.1 The overall message and function of Psalm 139

As promised, we will begin with the participant's understanding of the psalm's overall message. Even though my request for them to summarize the message came late in the interviews, it seems a good place to start, because it points out some important differences in the participants' general attitude towards Psalm 139. These differences will be explored in higher detail as we take a closer look at individual stanzas and verses.

Interviewer: What, in summary, is this text about?

Mother: Total safety, I feel. 100% like caretaking of you as a human being on earth. No matter what situation you are in, God is always with you, like, there. And that is fabulous to think about, so, it can't get any better than that. That... This text is in a class of its own. The total, like, surrounding of God, in a way. That he in a way is 100 per cent. Yeah, surrounds me on all sides. So... No, this is a maximal psalm, simply put. Really, this is what it all boils down to, I feel. It's like, that's it... That's why it's so great to believe in God.

Father: [It's about] a human that has tried to run away from God, and that is caught up with. And that just realizes that there is no use running away from God, he will always catch up with us. Because it is a God that sees, no matter where we are, or... or what we have done. And that he, both a little like the strict God that exposes, but also God that gives comfort. And the thought that it is God that has created us... Yes, that gives us worth. And that... well, that's a salutary thought, that it is from him we have our human dignity.

[...] My summary is probably that it is an example of how a biblical text can be both for comfort and for provocation for different human beings.

As we can see, there are some major similarities, and some major differences in the two different summaries of the psalm's message. Firstly, both respondents focus on the image of God as ever present and vigilant, but this presence and vigilance has quite different connotations. On the one hand, the mother describes this fact as wholly positive; the psalm is a confirmation that God is with her all the time, something that gives her a feeling of "total safety". Her last comment "that's why it's so great to believe in God" shows us that for her,

this is an essential element of faith in general. On the other hand, the father describes this as both “the strict God that exposes” and “gives comfort”, so for him this image of God (and the psalm’s message) is much more ambivalent. An ever present and vigilant God can be both reassuring, but also threatening or challenging, as you can hide no secrets.

Comparing this to my own reading, I am much more aligned with the mother, as both of us interpret God’s vigilance and presence as purely loving and caring. It could be claimed that the two of us belong to one group mentioned by Allen; the ones who think Psalm 139 is the most beautiful of all because it mirrors our image of a loving creator, as long as it ends on verse 18.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, the father echoes to a much larger degree the more mainstream scholarly interpretations where God’s vigilance and complete knowledge is connected to divine judgment, as in the declaration of innocence and religious court setting suggested by some.⁹¹ This also mirrors my hypothetical ancient reading of the first stanza that emphasised the aggressive connotations of verse 5, showing how the entirety of Psalm 139 can appear oppressive if this is the chosen focus for the reading as a whole.

Secondly, only the father puts emphasis on the role of God as creator when summarising the essence of the psalm, stating that it shows that our human dignity is confirmed by its divine origin. I was surprised to see that the mother did not mention this as essential to the text, for in my own close reading I put “Praising God as creator” as the title of the conclusive third stanza of Psalm 139. Both the father and I, then, emphasise creation, but the mother seems to bundle this together with divine presence and caretaking, maybe interpreting the role of the creator as an amplification and confirmation of the intimate and long-term involvement of God in our lives.

Thirdly, the two respondents describe the content of the psalm in quite different ways. The mother immediately starts speaking of the consequences of the message in quite personal terms: total safety, God is with you wherever you are and that it is fabulous to think about. The father seems to apply more distance in his initial descriptions, describing the psalmist’s experience in neutral, third person fashion; a human that has tried to run away from God. Only later does he use the collective “we” to talk of the consequences of the message. It might be foolish to speculate about such things, but it seems likely to me that this less personal language used by the father is due to a sort of “professional distance” deriving from his being

⁹⁰ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 254.

⁹¹ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 258.

a minister. No matter the reason in his case, I recognize that this style is much more alike my own when compared to the mother's way of describing her interpretations. This might be explained by the fact that the father and I share the experience of academic work with scripture, having been taught to work with biblical texts in the "neutral and objective" way that has frustrated the likes of McKnight.⁹²

5.2 Ps. 139:1-6: God as always vigilant

Out of Psalm 139's three stanzas, my participants dedicated the by far least time to the first one, and only provided these short comments:

Mother: [Quotes Ps. 139:1-5]. Those first lines, it's really fantastic to read something like that, you know! It's totally. I mean, you don't really need anything more. That's like a maximal eh... guarantee that God is 100% present for you, in a way.

Father: And that one, verse 5: [Quotes Ps. 139:5]. Yes. God is there. Even if we do not see him, he sees us. Yes.

Regarding the first stanza, the two participants gave similar readings, even though they used different wording: The mother interprets vv. 1-5 as a guarantee that God is always there for her, and in no uncertain terms show her positive feelings towards this text. The father, while not explicitly sharing his attitude in this context, also sees v. 5 as telling us that "God is there" and sees us even when we don't see him. This last comment could be read as foreshadowing the father's experience of losing faith that will become important in the following discussions. As might have been expected, these contemporary readers did not comment on the oppressive or military connotations of the language or body symbolism. While there is no way to prove this, it can be speculated that this is explained by their modern-day cultural context, being unable to access these references that an ancient reader might have caught up on. Moving on, the following stanzas garnered more attention.

5.3 Ps. 139:7-12: God as present, when God is gone

While the mother did not have much to add on these verses specifically, we shall in the following see that they produced a very strong response in the father. Hopefully without speaking too soon, we shall also see that this has everything to do with his own experience of losing a child and losing God. The father's comments in this section might also prove to be the clearest example of Rosenblatt's transactional theory in practice and shows the mutual

⁹² McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible*, 14.

influence and negotiation between reader and text. When I early in the interview asked whether the father had prior knowledge of Psalm 139, this is the answer he gave:

Yes, absolutely. I do... Both for reassurance and admonition... I have. When I experienced that God was distant... or gone. Then I am kind of caught up with here:

“Whither would I go from your hand? And whither would I flee from your presence? If I rise to the heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in the underworld, you are also there” [Quote Ps. 139:7-8]. Well, God is everywhere. And that can be both a reassurance and an admonition. It can be experienced both positively and negatively.

Simply put, 139:7-8 about the presence of God, were the first verses the father wanted to emphasise in our interview, and the father briefly mentions that God’s presence can be experienced as both negative and positive. Like I have already mentioned, this might be the most important disagreement among our different interpretations, where both the mother and I read this presence as purely positive and comforting. The father introduces this reading by reference to his experience of God being distant, something that he elaborates later in the interview with heavy reference to vv. 7-12:

Father: What I experienced when we lost our child [anon], was that it wasn’t I who ran from God, so: “Whither would I go from your hand? And whither would I flee from your presence?” [Quote Ps. 139:7]. It wasn’t I who ran from God’s presence. *Shakes his head* I neither tried to run up to heaven nor down into the underworld nor tried to run to the ocean’s rim [paraphrasing Ps. 139:8-9], it was God that disappeared from me. It was a frightening experience, meaning that, it was so dark in that room that even God was gone. It wasn’t I who ran from him, it was he who disappeared from my world. So, then I experienced that this psalm gave me nothing, in that situation. I could not say these words: “Let the darkness take me, so the night is all the light I see. Even darkness is not dark for you, the night shines like the day, the darkness is like light.” [Quote Ps. 139:11-12]. I could not say that, for I experienced only darkness, and no God in that darkness.

There is a lot to unpack in these statements, but the most important aspect to comment on is the way the father’s experience here comes into negotiation with vv. 7-12. Nuzum, Meaney and O’Donoghue reported that many bereaved parents struggled with theodicy; the loss of a

child can severely challenge a parent's faith in a benevolent God.⁹³ In the father's case the faith crisis was so grave that he experienced not only the loss a child, but also the loss of God. This experience is plugged directly into the psalm in a creative way, where he puts himself from the time of losing his child into to the psalmist's place and shows how and why he views the two as completely incompatible:

In his interpretation, the psalmist does his very best to try and run away from God to the farthest corners of the world, while the father's experience was the other way around. He describes being in a room so dark that even God was gone, that he couldn't repeat the psalmist's words nor concur with my interpretation that God overcomes our darkest and loneliest moments. This is an example of how, in the words of McKnight, the reader expands on the words of the psalm to create the text's world, and these worlds of the text and the reader can then clash.⁹⁴ Here, it's a case of the message of Psalm 139 being contradictory to the experience of the reader, and is therefore rejected. Shortly thereafter this contrast between the father and the psalmist's stories were further elaborated in the same creative way:

Interviewer: To summarize: this text conflicted significantly with the experience you had, at least when it was still fresh?

Father: Yes, something in [Psalm 139] clashed a lot with how I experienced it. It was not reassuring when God himself was not present. That is, that's how I experienced it, subjectively. [...] For that was how it felt; that it wasn't I who had left God, it was him who had removed himself from me. The roles were kind of switched around: Should I go to the ocean's rim, or should I spread the wings of dawn to look for God? Meanwhile in this text it's a human on the run from God and is always caught up with by God. There is no point trying to run away from God. Meanwhile I was looking for God, because he was suddenly gone from my reality.

Once again, here we can see the world creation in practice: the father reads his own experience into the psalm, comparing his own situation with the psalmist's and using the same images to illustrate his feelings at the time. This also exemplifies Rosenblatt's transaction that takes the form of a reciprocal influence between the reader and the text. In her words, the text provides a blueprint guiding the father's attention and stimulus when activating certain

⁹³ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1088-89.

⁹⁴ McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible*, 254-63.

recollections of the lived experience. This lived experience is then leading factor in how the text is interpreted, as the father forms the reading event, finally deciding as to what the psalm means to him.⁹⁵ With different experiences, it seems, comes very different interpretations:

In my reading of Ps. 139:7-10, mainly informed by Gier's chapter on ancient cosmology⁹⁶, I describe the heavens, the underworld and the ocean's rim as increasingly extremely distant, hypothetical travel destinations at the edge of the cosmos. I interpret these verses as showing how far the psalmist can go and still find that God is with him. For the father, it seems to be the other way around; with apparent frustration he asks rhetorically whether he was supposed to don the wings of dawn and travel to the borders of existence, trying to find the God he was looking for. We can presume the father, being a minister, has some knowledge on the ancient cosmology at work in this stanza. This might enable him, like my imagined ancient reader, to appreciate the extremity and impossibility of these suggested travel destinations, fuelling his creative process and frustration with the text. It seems that these extreme images are equally reassuring to those that experience God as near, as they are disturbing to those who feel left behind in their own darkness.

On one side, then, you find the mother and I, who, with our own various experiences, read these verses as unequivocally positive and as proof that God is with us even in our darkest moments. On the other side, we have the father who has experienced a darkness so profound that it brought on a faith crisis and loss of God. In his experience, these verses were of no use, because they were incompatible with his situation, they didn't ring true. This, however, does not mean that he's unable to see that they can ring true for others:

Father: While others that may have experienced the darkness of depression, for that was what I experienced, maybe they experienced that God was there also, so this is so individual. And that is exactly what is so exciting when we try to arrange a meeting between a biblical text written 3000 years ago and human beings alive today. How will this meeting be? Is it a good meeting where people recognize... can situate their lives within that text, or will it be a clash? They are two entirely different perceptions of reality.

⁹⁵ Rosenblatt, *The Reader the Text the Poem*, 11-12.

⁹⁶ Gier, "The Three-Story Universe."

Acknowledging the risk of confirmation bias (me as a researcher being more likely to notice information that supports my hypothesis⁹⁷), this is an interesting comment from the father where he seems to express agreement with the fundamental assumptions of this thesis. He emphasises how different each individual situation is and how this means that others sharing his experience could have found God in that darkness, concluding that these two very unlike perceptions of reality would lead to equally unlike interpretations. We can also sense his professional enthusiasm as a minister when he, gesticulating fervently, exclaims that's why facilitating meetings between ancient text and modern readers is so exciting, while describing this meeting in a fashion very similar to that of Rosenblatt and McKnight.

5.4 Ps. 139:13-18: God as creator, and the will of God

This following section will have to be subdivided into two, discussing the two different verses that garnered the by far strongest and most differing responses from the two participants; vv. 13 and 16. Both verses brought up some of the expected existential themes identified by bereaved parents, and both participants found these either problematic or helpful. Verse 13 brought up the value of child's life, while both brought up questions regarding the will of God, fate, guilt and blame.

5.4.1 Ps. 139: 13: Created in my mother's womb

As expected, then, verse 13 was identified by both participants as one of the most relevant:

Mother: It says here: "For you have created my inside, you have weaved me in my mother's womb." [Ps. 139:13]. So, that is kind of what comes before you are born, right. That might be extra nice considering if it's a child that dies while little. Then it's not such a long life that child gets. So, then it's kind of that... that God was there already before it was born in a way, that's extra nice then, in a way.

[...] because if you're going to bring forth something that has something to do with it being a child then [...] It's sort of that the whole time the child was given, then God was there the whole way, right? So that, that can be quite nice to have. That it's kind of said concretely in that text. That's it's not just something you can, like, imagine for yourself, but it's kind of said explicitly, the way it is here.

⁹⁷ *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. «Confirmation bias». 1st August 2020.
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/confirmation-bias>

The mother sees verse 13 as especially relevant when the context is the death of a small child, because this confirms God was involved already before it was born. In her eyes this shows how God was involved the whole way, before birth (and before baptism), confirming the worth of the child's life in the eyes of the divine, even though it turned out much too short. Even though he chooses other words to describe it, the father initially gave a very similar interpretation of the verse:

Father: Verse 13 there: "For you have created my inside, you have weaved me in my mother's womb." Uhm... "When I was without form your eyes saw me" [Ps. 139:16a]. So, that a little human child that maybe was not alive at birth, is still created by God, and wonderful and valuable. So, this is a fantastic description of human dignity. That a human being, also a tiny human child in mother's womb, is just as valuable and seen by God. And I think that can be reassuring for people that experience loss, absolutely.

While the mother seems to read verse 13 as an affirmation and reinforcement of the presence of God by showing it starts long before the moment of birth, the father and I read it more along the lines of God as creator. For the father the central point of this passage can be that our worth as human beings has its source in being created by God, and verse 13 shows how this includes those unborn and early deceased. Read together with verse 16 about "when I was without form", the father seems to interpret that this extends even to the embryo (which is suggested as a modern translation of the term "אֵלֶּם" that I translated to "without form"⁹⁸).

Both these interpretations echo one of the known woes of bereaved parents, namely the child's spiritual significance the value of its life despite being short.⁹⁹ Humans seem to value our life achievements, but a baby that dies after mere months hasn't been given much time to prove itself in the eyes of men. Both my participants recognised the value of having this tendency directly and concretely contradicted by verse 13, but the father followed up by explaining how the very same verse would have been less relevant, and maybe even destructive in his experience of losing a child:

Father: I think I took it to heart that the two children who weren't meant to live were worthy in the eyes of God. But, also here there's a conflict: "For you have created my inside, you have weaved me in my mother's womb." [Quote Ps. 139:13]. But when the

⁹⁸ "אֵלֶּם," *HALOT*, 1:194.

⁹⁹ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1085-87.

child was born with a serious genetic disease... What, then is it God who has done a poor job? Or, how did that disability come to be? Is it because God has been too bad of a designer?

Again, we can see how the experience of the reader has a direct and significant impact on the interpretation of the text. In the father's case his child died because of a genetic disease, and, while he did appreciate that this verse can confirm the worth of his children, this was apparently not the issue. For him, the major issue appeared to be how and why his children had to be born in such a condition that their lives were not sustainable, and verse 13, then, seems to point a finger at God being a poor "weaver". Thus, it is not a great comfort to know that God has been involved since very early in the process, because its result is equally abysmal, and makes the Creator seem like a sloppy one.

Once the father had shown me how verse 13 could be interpreted as the Creator being culpable for the death of his children by way of poor craftsmanship, he continued reflecting along the lines of this important existential question among bereaved parents searching for meaning; why did it happen?

Father: And that's a big question that has two answers; a biological and a theological one. I did accept the biological one; that it's a genetic arithmetic problem. [...] But the theological question is much bigger: "Why God, when we finally had children, why did we get two that didn't grow up and died?" And that question I still haven't received an answer to. [...] Then I kind of accepted that, and that's an important word in all this with losing a child: it's the word reconciliation. To reconcile oneself with that this is how it turned out. One might well be angry and protest. Hold God accountable. In our case there was no one that had done anything wrong. [...] It was simply a genetic disease that no one had any blame in. So, if I was to find anyone guilty, then I had to go to the top, to our Lord, he who had made the child "in my mother's womb" [quote Ps. 139: 13]. So, this psalm can also be used as an accusation against God. So, both as a consolation and as an accusation.

The father identifies two different levels at which this question could be asked and answered, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, the scientific explanation that points to biology is much clearer and less complicated than the more existential one. Reportedly, the scientific answer was easy to understand and accept, but it also seems to leave a lot of unanswered questions, his existential curiosity, as well as his sense of justice remained unsatisfied. Since the cause of

death was the result of a genetic lottery, then there was no one around who could be said to be responsible; he had no one to blame. So, if this was something that he needed, then he had to go “straight to the top”. If we agree that verse 13 confirms God’s involvement, and there was no perceivable human involvement in the cause of death, then it can certainly be used to find someone responsible, namely God, and hold him accountable. This again mirrors the findings of Nuzum, Meaney and O’Donoghue, once more with the issue of theodicy, and with the anger caused by the pain of losing a child. Many reported being specifically angry with God¹⁰⁰, just like this father was, and here we can see how verse 13 can serve to express and channel this anger.

In summary, this verse seems to hold a very different meaning, and serve a very different purpose, as we process our various experiences. For both me, who has neither had nor lost a child, and for the mother, who lost her child under very different circumstances, God’s involvement from early on only serves to confirm the presence of a loving and attentive creator. For the father, however, this verse has an almost diametrically opposite function; to show that God is to blame, and thus to confront him. As we shall see in the next section, we are far from finished with our discussion along the lines of the meaning behind the death of a child.

5.4.2 Ps. 139: 16: In your book were all days written: The Will of God?

As we got to verse 16, the father quickly connected this verse to the idea of predestination and the will of God:

Father: And it’s an image of God that I cannot completely accept, personally: “In your book were all days written, they were formed before a single one came to be.” [Ps. 139:16b] So, the thought that everything in life is predestined... in detail, [...] and what happens is God’s will, [...] for me, that is not a thought that gives consolation. I can’t get it to work with my image of God overall.

For the father, then, it was important to open his commentary on verse 16 by disagreeing with his understanding of its message on a general basis, declaring its incompatibility with his fundamental theological views. This demonstrates how, as McKnight writes, the worlds of the text and the reader can clash on an ideological level. Sometimes this clash inspires a change in

¹⁰⁰ Nuzum, Meaney, and O’Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1088-91.

the reader's world¹⁰¹, but in this case, the text is denied such an opportunity by the father who is likely to have a less malleable stance than younger minds with less experience with existential questions. He finds no consolation in the idea of predestination and is clearly critical of the idea that God has full knowledge and control over people's fates. This did not come as a great surprise to me, as this verse and topic was one of the ones that I had expected to create friction. Further on in the interview he elaborates this stance in connection with his own experience of losing a child:

Father: It says in verse 16: "When I was without form your eyes saw me. In your book were all days written, they were formed before a single one came to be." And if one is to understand that concretely and literally, that means that God knows how long a human being will live. [...] Well, that's a kind of belief in destiny that I cannot participate in. Because then that would have to mean that God had decided that our two children were not going to have a long life. They just got [less than a year]. Or in other instances, if there's a traffic accident or something else... an accident that happens. If it really is so that God is a God that has decided everything, then that becomes an image of God that I can't make sense of.

Here we yet again clearly hear an echo of one potential existential crisis among bereaved parents; their faith in a benevolent and almighty God, or theodicy.¹⁰² For the father, verse 16 says that God knows how long a human life will last, which in turn means that the horribly short lives of the children he lost, the pain and loss he suffered and all fatal accidents, are part of a divine plan. In other words, all these terrible things that happen are according to God's will, an idea that does not make sense to the father; in his mind this is an evil a loving creator should be unable to commit. While this might be impossible to think for the father, the mother told me how she was of a very different opinion:

Mother: [...] I remember that some said: "That's absolutely awful, you cannot say that it was the will of God that he should die four months old". For at least it was very modern for a while, that like, everything that was problematic or negative, God had nothing to do with that. [...] But, for me, that was very reassuring, quite simply. [...] He died of crib death [Sudden Infant Death Syndrome], you know. And then... Then you thought the whole time: "I should have gone out and checked on him before" ... That

¹⁰¹ McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible*, 260-63.

¹⁰² Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1088-89.

guilt that you automatically feel when a small baby dies ... Then I felt that I could put that a bit to the side. Because then he was not supposed to live longer than those four months.

For the father, then, the thought of God being responsible for the early death of his child was reprehensible. The mother also reported others to have told her the same, but in her case it proved to be a great relief that God had planned exactly how many months her child was going to live, for it meant that she could let go of some the guilt she felt for being a parent whose child had died. One of the themes identified by Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue was unique to the mothers who participated in their study: A sense of being chosen as the mother for a baby who was to die gave a feeling privilege and pride that they had the necessary inner strength.¹⁰³ While not worded in the same way, I interpret the mother finding solace in her experience being part of a divine plan as an idea that shares many similarities to that of being chosen. After telling me this, she quickly made the connection between this idea and verse 16:

Mother: Yes, it says [somewhere in the Bible] how long you are going to live. I am not sure whether its written exactly here, but... [The participant is browsing the sheet of paper with my translation of Psalm 139]. [...] So, yes: "In your book were all days written, they were formed before a single one came to be." [Quote Ps. 139:16]. Within that one it might be that it also kind of was decided how many days we were talking about, that that child was going to have here on earth.

This comment indicates that the mother interprets Ps. 139:16 in the same way as the father does, namely as a claim that God knows and decides how long every person is going to live. Both participants give very similar interpretations of this verse, but their responses are still very different; one finds the idea disgusting and the other reassuring. Is there a way for us to try to understand better how these differing readings come about? Applying Rosenblatt's transactional theory, the answer must lie within the different readers, as in each case their inner lives encounter the same text, and due to their unique past experiences and personalities bring about different results. Applying McKnight's concept of the encounter between the text's and the readers' worlds, then for the mother there is harmony between these worlds, and in the father's case there is a clash of worlds resulting in rejection.

¹⁰³ Nuzum, Meaney, and O'Donoghue, "Spiritual & Theological Challenges of Stillbirth," 1085.

It is not for me to say whether the different readings come about because of their different experiences with the loss of a child, or due to more general or fundamental existential convictions. Still, both of my participants do allude to this topic, and even indirectly to each other as they elaborate on the issue of the will of God. In the father's case, he simply says that this idea does not compute with his image of God, without going into much more detail. The mother however, had more to add on the topic:

Mother: I have noticed that many ministers say that you can never say something like that, right. But, I feel one should be a little humble here, and think that it can actually be a solace, that it was supposed to be that way, [...] One shouldn't make God so small that one was to think that it could never occur to God to do something that we think is bad, you know. So, we kind of diminish God a little, thinking he can only be nice and easy, I almost said. That's kind of, a simplification of God's superior position, or what you should call it. That we should make him so that he fits in our own perception of one thing and the other. If God is love, then he cannot do anything that seems awful.

A curious detail in the above comment is how the mother refers to ministers that are of an opinion that you cannot say that the death of children are God's will, which might indicate that my two interview participants are to be found on opposite sides of an important existential discussion among their generation. In opposition to these "many ministers" the mother calls for humility, as she feels one shouldn't diminish God so much as to fit into our limited comprehension; Who are we, with our human minds, to measure whether an occurrence is a result of godly love, and deem it divine or not? In summary, this mother found solace in a God that was infinitely mightier than herself and surrendering her responsibility and guilt to this bigger entity. At the same time, it was important for her to precise that this was her experience, and that it does not necessarily apply to others:

Mother: So, I would never ever say to someone that that maybe was the life the child was supposed to have, but for me it was very good to think about.

Interviewer: And that was reassuring?

Mother: Yes, I did feel that. [...] Obviously, all this with crib death [Sudden Infant Death Syndrome] is very unique: in a way, it's a very quiet way to die, there's no drama in that way of dying, right. It just falls asleep, they die as they sleep. [...] I also remember thinking that I was very glad, as mentioned, that there was nothing concrete we hadn't done, or we... that we should have done, you know. And that he didn't die of

a disease either, I felt that was good to think about, because that would have entailed a lot of suffering and pain and those horrible periods with lots of awful things you have to go through, right.

Judging by these words from the mother, whether you find solace in the death of a child being the will of God, and thus from reading Ps. 139:16, seems to also depend on the circumstances surrounding the death. She starts by saying that she would never tell anyone else to think a certain way, thus emphasising the importance of considering the uniqueness of each person's individual experience just like the father did. She continues by emphasising that the circumstances around her child's death were uniquely quiet and undramatic and concludes by stating her gratitude for her child not having to live through the pain and suffering of disease. What she here expresses gratitude for avoiding, is exactly the experience of the father that I interviewed. Assuming, as we are, that the interpretation is contingent on the reader's prior experience, then it is very possible that my two participants might have been of a different mind if they were to switch places. With the seemingly less traumatic experience in your emotional luggage, it appears to be easier to appreciate that this experience can be part of a divine plan. Of course, it could also be the case that all this is independent of the specific circumstances, and how they interpret both their individual experiences and Psalm 139 are products of their separate world views and philosophical convictions.

5.5 The importance of experience

What these findings show most clearly is the importance of the individual experience, as they have shown how the two participants come up with different interpretations based both on their different experiences and philosophical convictions. Rosenblatt's description of literature as event rings true, meaning that each interview represents a unique event created by the participant's meeting with the text. Using the theoretical framework of the text providing stimulus for the readers' experience and a blueprint guiding their attention, I could predict several themes and verses that created a strong response thanks to insight into bereaved parent's existential needs. However, there also awaited several significant surprises along the way, because I had little knowledge of the individual participants' lived life. Their unlike pasts and personalities resulted in very different readings.

For the mother, Psalm 139 was purely positive as she found a confirmation in her belief in an all-powerful and ever-present God, and the phrases about creation served to show his early involvement in the child's life. In her case the idea of the death of her child being part of a

divine plan had been of great relief, letting her let go of the guilt she was feeling. For the father, however, the psalm turned out to be very problematic. It clashed with his world both on an ideological level, as he was very critical towards predestination and a belief in destiny, and on a personal level, as the relationship with God describe by the psalmist is opposite of his own experience of a faith crisis brought on by the loss of a child. Because the cause of death was a genetic disease, God's forming of the child in the womb was not a comfort but could rather serve to reinforce his struggle with theodicy and to hold the Creator accountable.

In summary, the mother embraces her reading of Psalm 139, identifying it with core elements of her faith and recognising its relevance for her experience of losing a child. The father, on the other hand, rejects what he sees as central theological concepts of the psalm and emphasises the incompatibility with his experience. At the same time, both emphasise the importance of each individual person's perceptions and grief process and recognise the validity of each other's interpretations for their given situation (without any knowledge of the other participant).

If each reader interprets the text in such a different way, this should have wide reaching consequences for how we as exegetics approach Psalm 139 (and any other biblical text, for that matter). The acknowledgement of varying personally valid interpretations should in some way be incorporated in our own scholarly studies of biblical texts and professional readings when preparing sermons for different occasions. This is especially important for ministers who are about to preach in funerals and other contexts where pastoral care perspectives are essential. A child's funeral service is one such setting that requires caution and empathy in every aspect, including the choice of biblical readings and interpretations, as evidenced by studies of bereaved parents' existential challenges and confirmed by the various strong responses from my interview participants.

While it is well and good to applaud this as an ideal, it also creates many practical and principal challenges to the process of interpreting and communicating biblical texts. Reader-response exegesis can lead to an exaggerated individualisation to our dealings with scripture. The extreme consequence of such an individualisation can be both a complete invalidation of the existence of universal, Christian truths and devalue our common foundations as a community. It can also lead to paralysis among ministers unable to reach conclusions and clear communication of texts as they are overwhelmed by the impossible task of taking into consideration the perspective of every member of the congregation.

Reader-oriented exegesis has proven to be a time consuming, and mentally and emotionally taxing process. With all the work invested in this thesis, I have still only been able to discern a very limited understanding of the perspectives of two readers. Mildly put, to implement such ambitions on a weekly basis in preparation of the Sunday sermon is unrealistic. A more balanced approach includes a humble acknowledgement of both the wealth of valid personal readings and the very human limitations of researchers and preachers, while still respecting the role of trained theologians in facilitating responsible bible reading. For preachers this means that a sermon will have to pry open a biblical text with the objective of letting the congregation access some of the wealth of possible messages that can broaden their horizon and enable each listener's creative process. The opposite approach, that I heartily discourage, would be to define one "true message" of Psalm 139, e.g. narrowly defining a valid reading either according to the original intent of a hypothetical historical author, or according to contemporary rigid, dogmatic truths.

6 Conclusions

6.1 The need for a reader-oriented approach to biblical texts

I started this thesis project motivated by my experiences from summer work as a substitute minister, wanting to find a way to make scripture available as a resource for the grieving congregation in a funeral service. While there has been written much on grief processes and pastoral care, I could not find much research on this topic within the field of the thorough first step preparation of preaching; exegesis. Thus, I ended up with my research question “How to conceive a responsible reading of the Psalter in children’s funeral service when taking bereaved parents’ existential needs into consideration?”.

My search for a way to answer my research question lead me to the, for me, little known field of reader-oriented exegesis. While there are sources that speak of this kind of exegesis, it was hard to find anything in the way of a systematic methodology. McKnight’s contribution to reader-oriented exegesis was of great value, but I had to supplement this with reader-oriented criticism from literary sciences to construct a theoretical framework for this thesis project. One critique of reader-oriented criticism is a naïve and exaggerated confidence in the reader’s immediate response to the literary work, which gravely conflicts with the basic theological conception of the Bible as an authoritative source and the.

While I concur with the exegetical ideal of an educated and critical approach to biblical texts, I criticise the historical-critical paradigm’s tendency to construct the text as an independent entity to be interrogated to discover its original, historical meaning. I contend, like McKnight, that an exaggerated emphasis on the text itself and its historical context has made biblical literature foreign and inaccessible to most contemporary readers. At the same time, it is important to recognise the value of the knowledge gained from historical-critical biblical studies. This thesis suggests a reader-oriented approach that applies a synthesis of the perspective of the reconstructed historical reader and the contemporary reader. A comparison of the historical and contemporary reader’s creative engagement with the biblical text could teach us a lot about scripture’s impact on lived lives: What depends on the reader’s cultural context and specific experience, and what proves to be a constant of the human condition?

One voice from the literary sciences that proved essential for this thesis was that of Louise M. Rosenblatt who shared many of my gripes with reader-oriented literary criticism and its exaggerated and one-sided focus on the individual reader. Her transactional theory of literature is a balanced approach that endeavours to respect the integrity of both text and

reader. Rosenblatt describes the poem as an event created by the reader and guided by the words of the text: in the reading experience the text and reader meet each other as two subjects in a mutual transaction and create something new. This lets the scripture be an authoritative text, while also acknowledging that it will produce different interpretations when it encounters different readers and their unique life experiences. Thus, her transactional theory of literature became a foundation part of the theoretical framework for my reader-oriented exegesis.

My confidence in emphasising the reader's perspective to conceive a responsible reading of Psalm 139:1-18 for bereaved parents was summarised and formulated as a two-part hypothesis. The first part matches the founding premise of Rosenblatt's transactional theory, while the second part is a consequence of the first:

How a reader interprets a text depends on the reader's life situation.

Therefore, insight into the reader's life situation will contribute to responsible interpretation and communication of texts.

6.2 The reader's experience and its influence on interpretation

To check the validity of this hypothesis I started by applying the findings of Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue study on the existential challenges of bereaved parents to construct the imagined perspective of such a hypothetical contemporary reader. They identified two highly relevant categories of themes: (1) "creation of meaning", including a feeling of being chosen, the value of the child's life and the child's spiritual significance, and (2) "questioning core beliefs", consisting of theodicy, impact on faith, the place the baby, anger, and spiritual needs. Using this list of themes to focus my interpretation I was able to identify various verses and specific terms in Psalm 139:1-18 I found likely to be of special interest for my interview participants. Having completed my own interpretation based on this approach, I could then compare it with the interpretations provided in the interviews I conducted with real bereaved parents about their experience of reading the psalm. Some of the predictions I made with this method turned out to be correct, evidenced by which verses ended up being offered the most time and attention during the interviews. At the same time, there were many unexpected elements in the reflections offered by the interview participants.

Two interviews were conducted with two different parents who had experienced the loss of a child in its first year of life. One of them was a father and a minister, and the other was a mother and a lay person. Together they covered a wide range of perspectives on both the

experience of being a bereaved parent and on relationship to biblical literature. We all agreed on the overall message of Psalm 139 being about God as a present and vigilant creator, but while the mother found this message wholly positive, the father had a much more ambivalent view of the psalm.

6.2.1 Psalm 139:7-12: God's presence and God's absence

When it comes to verses 7-12, I both got my prediction wrong and a surprise to boot. None of the participants responded to the verses' mention of the heavens and the underworld in connection with the place of the children they had lost, something that was very important for many of the parents interviewed by Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue. In own interpretation I had, perhaps naively, simply written that God is always present, and overcomes even our darkest moments. For the father, however, this was far from the case, because, as he lost his children, he also experienced a faith crisis that entailed losing God. While the psalm says God comes finding the psalmist at the remotest ends of the world, the father experienced the opposite, that he had to go looking for God, and was unsuccessful for a long time.

6.2.2 Psalm 139:13: God as loving or incompetent Creator

Verses 13 and 16 were the two that I had suggested would create the strongest responses, and we spent by far the longest discussing these. Both the mother and the father agreed that verse 13 was especially relevant to the context of the loss of a child, because this shows God's involvement confirming the value of the child's life, as I had suggested. At the same time, I was surprised to see that the mother did not emphasise the creation element or put special focus on the mother's womb statement, instead seeing this in connection with God's "total presence". The father also surprised me by showing how this God's involvement in the creation can be interpreted as a negative when the child was born with a genetic disease; he said Ps. 139:13 could serve as an accusation towards the creator, holding him accountable for the children's early demise.

6.2.3 Psalm 139:16: The Will of God, a comfort or an evil?

The mother and the father turned out to be on two opposing sides of a debate that I had seen coming regarding the interpretation of verse 16 that speaks of all the days being written in God's book. Both participants read this as meaning that everything that happens is part of a divine plan that has been decided upon long before it occurs. For the mother this was a great relief, because it meant that she could surrender to God some of the responsibility and resulting guilt she was feeling. Meanwhile, the father, being strongly against the idea of a belief in destiny, found no solace in verse 16, and could not imagine God doing something so

evil as to predestine his children to an early death. As a counter argument, the mother pointed to God's magnitude being beyond our comprehension and that we therefore shouldn't limit divine action to what we personally consider appropriate, all the while admitting that she might've felt different under other circumstances.

In summary, some of my predictions were accurate, showing that it is possible to gain insight by reading relevant research and using this to predict some general topics in your target group's reading, showing that my hypothesis has some merit. I would argue that also the shortcomings of my prediction, and the amount of unexpected interpretations that came up in the interviews, means that my hypothesis holds. This is because what I was unable to predict was due to my lack of insight in the participants' convictions and life experiences, an insight I was able to gain by means of the interview.

Finally, this leaves us with a very simple answer to my research question. How do we conceive of a responsible reading considering the existential needs of bereaved parents? By knowing them! And, it turns out, the only way of properly knowing them might be sitting down and asking them directly. Obviously, we cannot end on the simple answer, which brings us to a difficult follow-up question: What does this mean for scholarly exegetical work and for pastoral work?

6.3 Consequences for the field of biblical exegesis

This thesis has shown that the interpretation of Psalm 139 becomes very different when it is read within a contemporary context of use, compared to the suggested message of the psalm as scholars attempt to reconstruct its historic context. By no means does this mean that we should stop researching the historical context of scripture, but I would argue that there is a need for a greater focus the contemporary reader's perspective. To be able to communicate the relevance of biblical texts and bridge the gap between the historical context and that of our modern congregations, reader-oriented criticism should be taught as part of the exegetical toolbox for theologians. This would also enable ministers to access the Hebrew Bible's potential as a pastoral resource, enabling them to make these ancient texts available for the contemporary reader to interpret and make sense of their lived experiences.

Further reader-oriented biblical research is required to achieve this goal. It gives hope to see that there are efforts being made in doing research of this kind, like Gerald West and his contextual bible studies, Mark A. Pike's effort to popularise Rosenblatt's work and Francis, Smith and Corio's exploration of Anglican deacons interpretations of Psalm 139, as well as

efforts to publish complete encyclopaedias of reception of scripture. Still, the reader-oriented criticism seems to be an afterthought in most cases and goes unmentioned in summaries of scholarly work as they appear in mainstream commentaries. For outsiders, exegesis might come across as an elitist and self-centred field of study because it mostly concerns itself with topics that require a wealth of philological, historical and theological knowledge to find interesting.

Exegesis as I know it from my Norwegian Lutheran theological training, then, is desk work, and can only be applied to real life with great difficulty as one tries to translate dense theological concepts to the lived experience of the congregation through preaching and pastoral work. Theologians should be immensely grateful for the privilege of “standing on shoulders of giants” and having this wealth of knowledge as a theoretical foundation. All the same, adding reader-oriented exegesis to the mainstream theologian’s toolbox, encountering and acknowledging the perspective of the present-day reader, would massively expand the wealth of meaning and potential impact of the Bible.

As far as my short and very limited study goes, there is a lot left to uncover, and expanding this project to the scope of a doctoral thesis would still unearth only a fraction of what there is to learn from an empowered lay people. Never in history have so many known how to read and had easier access to the information and tools necessary to make qualified interpretations of their own. The emergence of reader-oriented criticism might also be an acknowledgement of this fact; today the academic ought to be humble enough to admit that there is a lot to learn from every person’s perspective. In my own experience, this acknowledge comes at an advanced stage of theological training, as part of practical theology and pastoral care. A properly developed method for reader-oriented exegesis could give the next generation of theologians the tools they need to bring the reader’s perspective into their critical and creative work with scripture.

References

- Alase, Abayomi. "The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Ipa): A Guide to a Good Qualitative Research Approach." *International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies* 5, no. 2 (2017): 9-19. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.5n.2p.9>.
- Allen, Leslie C. *Psalms 101-150*. Word Biblical Commentary. Edited by David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, John D. W. Watts and Ralph P. Martin. Waco, Texas: W Publishing Group, 1983.
- Cornwall, Susannah, and David Nixon. "Readings from the Road: Contextual Bible Study with a Group of Homeless and Vulnerably-Housed People." *The Expository Times* 123, no. 1 (2011): 12-19. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524611417668>.
- Denmark, Evangelical Lutheran Church in. "Funeral Liturgy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark." In *Hymns in English - A selection of Hymns from the Danish Hymnbook* Det Kgl. Vajsenhus' forlag, 2009 [https://www.interchurch.dk/ Resources/Persistent/7/1/6/4/7164f9e588d00bd9b0ebb78c703dcaceb0719ca2/Funeral%20and%20committal.pdf](https://www.interchurch.dk/Resources/Persistent/7/1/6/4/7164f9e588d00bd9b0ebb78c703dcaceb0719ca2/Funeral%20and%20committal.pdf).
- Eaton, John. *The Psalms : A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and a New Translation*. London: T&T Clark International, 2003.
- Finlay, Linda. "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis." In *Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the Lived World*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Folkekirke, Den Danske. "Begravelse." In *Gudstjenesteordning for Den Danske Folkekirke: Ritualbog*, 111-23. Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Vajsenhus' Forlag, 1992.
- Francis, Leslie J., Greg Smith, and Alec S. Corio. "Exploring Psalm 139 through the Jungian Lenses of Sensing, Intuition, Feeling and Thinking." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.5058>.
- "General Data Protection Regulations." In *Regulation (EU) 2016/679*, edited by European Parliament and Council of European Union, 2016.
- Gier, Nicholas F. "The Three-Story Universe." In *God, Reason, and the Evangelicals: The Case Against Evangelical Rationalism* Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987 <https://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/gre13.htm>.

González, Justo L. "A Latino Perspective." In *Methods for Luke*, edited by Joel B. Green New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Hartvigsen, Kirsten Marie. "'Prepare the Way of the Lord' : Towards a Cognitive Poetic Analysis of Audience Involvement with Characters and Events in the Markan World." University of Oslo, 2009.

Hayes, John Haralson, and Carl L Holladay. *Biblical Exegesis : A Beginner's Handbook*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987.

Holladay, William Lee. *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years : Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT). Accordance electronic edition ed. (version 3.5). Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1999, 2000.

Lavik, Marta Høyland. "'Do Not Fear for I Am with You': The Use of Isaiah 41:10 in Times of Incurable Illness." In *New Studies in the Book of Isaiah : Essays in Honor of Hallvard Hagelia*, edited by Markus Zehnder. Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2014.

McKnight, Edgar V. *Postmodern Use of the Bible : The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988.

Mercer Dictionary of the Bible. Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 1990.

Mligo, Elia Shabani. "Jesus and the Stigmatized : Reading the Gospel of John in a Context of Hiv/Aids-Related Stigmatization in Tanzania." Degree Philosophia Doctor, University of Oslo, 2009.

Norway, General Synod of the Church of. "The Order for a Funeral." Church of Norway, 2003 https://kirken.no/globalassets/kirken.no/om-troen/liturgier-oversatt/funeral_2003.pdf.

Nuzum, Daniel, Sarah Meaney, and Keelin O'Donoghue. "The Spiritual and Theological Challenges of Stillbirth for Bereaved Parents." *Religion and Health (needs verification)* 56 (2017): 1081-95. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-017-0365-5>.

"How to Classify Data and Information." Updated Feb 7, 2020, 2018, accessed 31 July, 2020, <https://www.uio.no/english/services/it/security/lsis/data-classes.html>.

Peden, Alison. "Contextual Bible Study at Cornton Vale Women's Prison, Stirling." *The Expository Times* 117, no. 1 (2005): 15-18.

<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524605058718>.

Pietkiewicz, Igor, and Jonathan A. Smith. "A Practical Guide to Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Qualitative Research Psychology." *Czasopismo Psychologiczne – Psychological Journal* 20, no. 1 (2014): 7-14.

<https://doi.org/10.14691/CPJ.20.1.7>.

Pike, Mark A. "The Bible and the Reader's Response." *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 7, no. 3 (2003): 37-51.

Rosenblatt, Louise M. *The Reader the Text the Poem : The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978.

Schroer, Silvia, and Thomas Staubli. *Body Symbolism in the Bible*. Translated by Linda M. Maloney. Kindle Version ed. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001.

Stockwell, Peter. *Cognitive Poetics : An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Stordalen, Terje. "Mother Earth in Biblical Hebrew Literature: Ancient and Contemporary Imagination." In *The Centre and the Periphery: A European Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, edited by Jill Middlemas, David J.A. Clines and Else K. Holt. Hebrew Bible Monographs, 113-30. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010.

West, Gerald. *Contextual Bible Study*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993.

Wolff, Hans Walter. *Anthropology of the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview guide

Interview Guide

Part 1: Reading the text

As you know, I am writing my thesis on one of the biblical texts that are often read in children's funerals, and I am interested in reading this text with you since you have experienced losing a child. The text I want to read with you is Psalm 139.

Are you familiar with this text? In what way?

Would you like to read the text? Aloud or silently?

(If the participant hesitates): Should we read it aloud together?

(If participant still hesitates): Would you like me to read it for you?

Part 2: Questions about reading/ interpreting the text

- How was it reading/ hearing this text?
- In what way does this text speak to you?
- What in this text speaks to you?
- According to your understanding of the text, what is its message?

Topics that should come up during the interview, either organically or introduced by the interviewer

- The experience of losing an own child
 - o Of arranging the funeral?
- The search for meaning
 - o Value of the child's life
 - The child's lived life
 - Spiritual significance, relation to God
 - o A feeling of being chosen (by God)
- Challenges for faith/ value systems
 - o Theodicy: The belief in an all-mighty and loving God in an evil world

- Anger towards God
- Relation with God
 - The child's relation to God
 - Where is my child now? In heaven/ with God?
 - The parent's relation to God: Broken? Re-established?

Final question:

Is there anything else you would like to share with me that we haven't talked about so far?

Would you like to participate in the research project «Reinterpreting the Psalter with the Bereaved»?

This is an invitation for you to participate in a research project with the purpose of exploring how biblical texts used in children's funerals can be read to better tackle the existential and emotional needs of bereaved parents. In this document, we offer information about the project objectives and what it would mean for you to participate.

Objective

The research project "Reinterpreting the Psalter with the Bereaved" is a thesis project that I am writing in my sixth and last year of cand.theol., professional studies in theology.

This project is on the intersection between Old Testament bible studies and pastoral care, and will investigate how biblical texts read by the minister in the funeral can be interpreted to better help bereaved parents after the unexpected death of a child.

The premise of this project is that how that how a text can affect the reader or listener depends on this reader's experiences and life situation. Therefore, we believe that insights in the situation of bereaved parents can help the minister in his task of interpreting and communicating texts utilised in the funeral so as to make them more relevant and accessible for the participants.

In the first part of the interview, I will introduce a biblical text that is commonly used in funerals to the participant. In the second part, I will ask the participants about their experiences and the text we have read together. This is firstly to hear how the bereaved parents themselves feel about the text and whether it is perceived as relevant to them, and secondly to see whether the information gathered in such a conversation can assist a minister improving his work when encountering those who grieve.

Who is responsible for the research project?

The Faculty of Theology of the University of Oslo is responsible for the project.

Why are we asking you to participate?

You have received an invitation to participate in an interview are bereaved parents who have experience the loss a child in the child's first year of life. In consideration of the participants and the subject matter's sensitive nature, at least one year must have passed since the participants had this experience, but there is no upper limit, and the project seeks different perspectives.

The project participants can be both mothers or father, couples or single, but again, we are striving for representing various perspectives. The plan is to conduct between 2-5 interviews.

What does participation entail for you?

If you choose to participate in this project, it means that you will take part in one interview during approximately 45 minutes to one hour. In this interview we will read at text together that is used in children's funerals, and you will be asked about your thoughts on the text's content and message, as well as your own experience of losing a child.

I will take notes and do an audio recording of the interview.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may withdraw your consent at any point, without providing any explanation. All details about you will then be anonymised. It will have no negative consequences for you if you do not wish to participate, or if you decide to withdraw at a later point in time.

Your privacy – how we store and process your information

We will only use your information for the purposes we have told you about in this document. We treat all information confidentially and in accordance with privacy regulations.

Only the student and the project leader will have access to your personal details and interview recordings. We will digitalise the interview notes and recordings in a database where we replace your name and contact information with an anonymous code name. When the interviews are completed, we will create an anonymised interview text from the audio recording that you will be given the opportunity to read through and approve before it is used as data in the thesis. Your name, contact information and declaration of consent will be kept securely and separate from interview data.

The University of Oslo publish all thesis projects through their publication channels for master and doctoral theses. Anything from the interviews included in the finished paper will be anonymised so that you as a participant cannot be identified. If any individual participants need to be described in the paper, we will use pseudonyms and limit personal information to gender, occupation and approximate age grouping.

What happens with your information when we complete the research project?

The project is projected to complete by the end of 2020, and we will delete all personal details and audio recordings upon project completion.

Your rights

As long as you can be identified in the data material, you have a right to:

- Access to what personal information we have registered about you
- To have any personal information about you corrected
- To have any personal information about you deleted
- To be given a copy of your personal information (data portability) and
- To send a complaint to the privacy ombudsman or the Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal information.

What gives us the right to process your personal information?

We process your personal information based on your consent.

On request from the Faculty of Theology of the University of Oslo, the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) has deemed this project's processing of personal information to be in accordance with privacy regulations.

Where can I find out more?

If you have any questions regarding this study, or want to make use any of your rights, please contact:

- The Theological Faculty of the University of Oslo, c/o the project supervisor Terje Stordalen, [email address] and secondary project supervisor Nina Hoel, [email address].
- Student: Anders K. Nrodvik, [email address].
- The University of Oslo's privacy ombudsman: Maren Magnus Voll, Universitetet i Oslo, [email address].
- NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data, [email address] or [phone number].

Sincerely

Terje Stordalen

Anders K. Nordvik

Declaration of informed consent

I have received and understood the information about the research project “Reinterpreting the Psalter with the Bereaved” and been given the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that I at any given time can contact the project supervisor and withdraw my consent to participate in this project.

I consent to:

- Participate in an interview
- The interview treating topics of a religious and philosophical nature
- The interview being audio recorded

I consent to my personal information being stored and processed until project completion, up to 31st of December 2020.

(Signed by project participant, date)

Appendix 3: Norwegian translation of Psalm 139:1-18

Salme 139, 1-18

¹ Herre, du ransaker meg og kjenner meg. ² Du vet om jeg sitter eller står, du følger mine tanker langt borte fra. ³ Min vandring og min hvile ser du, og alle mine veier gjør du deg kjent med. ⁴ For selv uten et ord på min tunge, har du, Herre, hørt alt. ⁵ Du omgir meg på alle sider, og du legger din hånd om meg. ⁶ Dette er for underfullt for meg, så opphøyd at jeg ikke fatter det.

⁷ Hvor skulle jeg gå fra din ånd? Hvor kunne jeg rømme fra ditt nærvær? ⁸ Om jeg stiger til himmelen, er du der. Om jeg rer min seng i dødsriket, er du også der. ⁹ Spenner jeg morgenrødens vinger og slår meg ned ved havets ytterste ende, ¹⁰ selv der leder din hånd meg, din høyre hånd holder tak i meg. ¹¹ Jeg kan si: «La bekmørket fange meg, så natten er alt lyset jeg ser.» ¹² Selv ikke mørket er mørkt for deg, natten skinner som dagen, mørket er som lys.

¹³ For du har skapt mitt indre, du har vevd meg i min mors liv. ¹⁴ Jeg priser deg, for du er skremmende underfull. Vidunderlig er ditt verk, det vet min sjel så vel. ¹⁵ Mine knokler var ikke gjemt fra deg da jeg ble skapt i hemmelighet, vevd i jordens dyp. ¹⁶ Da jeg var formløs så dine øyne meg. I din bok ble alle dager skrevet, de ble formet før én eneste var til. ¹⁷ For meg er dine tanker dyrebare, Gud, uendelig er summen av dem! ¹⁸ Teller jeg dem blir de mange som sand, når jeg våkner er jeg stadig hos deg.