

SPEECH ACT THEORY AND THE PERFORMATIVE LANGUAGE OF LAMENT IN THE INDIVIDUAL PSALMS OF COMPLAINT

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive application of speech act theory, as developed by J. L. Austin and John Searle, to the analysis of the individual psalms of lament in the Hebrew Bible. Moving beyond traditional form-critical approaches that describe the structure of these psalms, it argues that lament psalms are not merely expressive or descriptive utterances of distress but are fundamentally performative; they perform distinct communicative actions through language. The analysis identifies two primary illocutionary acts: the act of complaint, which performs a covenantal accusation charging God with silence, absence, or inaction; and the act of praise, which performatively reconfigures the speaker's covenantal relationship with God through a declarative reorientation. Drawing on and synthesising form-critical insights from Hermann Gunkel, Claus Westermann, Walter Brueggemann, and Craig Broyles, alongside speech-act applications in biblical studies by Kevin Vanhoozer and June Dickie, the article demonstrates that the renowned sudden shift of mood from lament to praise is best understood not as a psychological change or a narrative report of divine intervention, but as a performative transformation, a new reality enacted through the very utterance of trust and praise. Through detailed, verse-level analysis of Psalms 13, 22, and the anomalous Psalm 88, the study shows how the lamenter not only describes suffering but performatively renegotiates and recreates his relationship with God. The article concludes with significant implications for biblical hermeneutics and pastoral practice, paying particular attention to African and Nigerian appropriations of lament psalms in contexts of enduring suffering, oppression, and the search for liberation.

Keywords: Speech act theory, lament psalms, performative language, illocutionary force, Psalm 88.

Introduction

The individual psalms of lament constitute the largest single genre within the Psalter, forming the constitute a foundational form of biblical prayer in times of distress. Yet, for much of modern scholarship, their linguistic and theological functions remain insufficiently explained through the lens of subjective emotional expression. Traditional form criticism, pioneered by Hermann Gunkel and rigorously developed by Claus Westermann, has systematically described the structure of these psalms, their characteristic movement from address to complaint, petition, confession of trust, and finally to a vow of praise. However, form criticism has been less successful in explaining what the lamenters actually do with

words. It has tended to read the psalms as reports of inner states or as narrative precursors to divine action.

Speech act theory, which fundamentally asserts that “saying something is doing something” (Austin 1962, 94), offers a transformative and powerful lens for reinterpreting the lament psalms. This article posits that these prayers are best understood as acts of language that perform, rather than merely describe or express, the speaker's relationship with God. The words of laments are not merely expressions of despair; rather, they function as covenantal appeals, protests and transformative speech acts of despair; they are a weapon, a plea, a demand, and ultimately, a transformative linguistic act.

The central and most debated puzzle of the lament psalms is the so-called “sudden shift of mood.” In numerous psalms (e.g., Psalms 6, 13, 22), the speaker moves abruptly from the depths of anguished complaint to the heights of confident praise, often without any intervening narrative explanation of divine intervention. Where did this confidence come from? Did God speak? Did the psalmist receive a sign? This article proposes that speech act theory resolves this puzzle by revealing that the shift is not primarily psychological (a change in feeling) nor narrative (a report of new events) but performative. The lamenter does not necessarily receive new information about God’s action; rather, through the very utterance of the vow of praise, he creates a new covenantal reality and a new relationship with God. Lament, in this view, is a speech act that actively transforms the speaker’s world and repositions him before the divine.

Furthermore, this study deliberately engages with African and Nigerian biblical scholarship, which has long and fruitfully interpreted the lament psalms in contexts of colonial oppression, political violence, economic hardship, and communal suffering. By bringing the analytical rigour of speech act theory into conversation with the lived, contextual hermeneutics of African scholars such as David T. Adamo and Justin Ukpog, the article demonstrates the cross-cultural and pastoral relevance of performative readings of lament. It argues that for communities who continue to suffer, the lament psalm is not an ancient artefact to be dissected but a living speech act to be performed.

Objectives

This study seeks to:

1. systematically analyse the individual psalms of complaint as illocutionary acts, identifying the specific performative forces (complaint, petition, accusation, vow, declarative praise) operative within their formal literary structures.
2. demonstrate how speech act theory illuminates the vexed question of the transition from lament to praise, explaining the “sudden shift of mood” as

a performative transformation (an act of language that brings about a new state of affairs) rather than a psychological change or a reported narrative event of deliverance.

3. compare and synthesise Western form-critical and speech-act readings of lament psalms with African and Nigerian scholarly interpretations, showing how speech act theory can be effectively inculturated within different hermeneutical contexts that prioritise the power of spoken and performed words.
4. draw clear pastoral and hermeneutical implications for contemporary readers and worshipping communities, with particular attention to contexts of ongoing suffering, systemic injustice, and trauma, where lament remains a vital, and often costly, mode of prayer.

Literature Review

Western Scholarship on the Lament Psalms

The modern study of the lament psalms begins with Hermann Gunkel, the father of form criticism, who, in his *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (1933, completed by Beggich), identified the individual lament (*individuelles Klagelied*) as a distinct *Gattung* (genre). Gunkel outlined its characteristic structure: (a) address to God (invocation), (b) the complaint (*Klage*) detailing the psalmist’s distress, (c) a petition for help, (d) a confession of trust in God’s power or faithfulness, and (e) a vow of praise (*Gelübde*). Claus Westermann (1981) deepened this analysis by arguing that lament and praise are the two fundamental, dialectical poles of all prayer in the Psalter. For Westermann, lament is the necessary counterpart to praise; one cannot truly praise without having first lamented. Critically, Westermann observed that the lament moves toward praise through an act of trust (often marked by the Hebrew *kî* – “for” or “because”), though he left the mechanism of this act largely unexplained. Craig C. Broyles (1989) further refined the category by distinguishing psalms of “plea” (which affirm God’s goodness even in distress) from psalms of “protest” or “complaint” (which more radically depict God as absent, hostile, or the

very cause of suffering). Walter Brueggemann (1986) has powerfully emphasised the “costly loss of lament” in modern worship, arguing that the suppression of lament psalms robs the community of a crucial social and theological function: giving legitimate voice to suffering, challenging unjust power structures (including divine ones), and re-establishing covenantal dialogue. Patrick D. Miller (1995) explored the theological daring of lament as a form of biblical prayer that not only questions God but also insists upon God’s attention. This Western tradition, while formidably descriptive, has consistently struggled to explain the mechanism of transformation within the psalm itself.

Paul Wayne Ferris (2022) provides a comprehensive form-critical study of the communal lament genre, tracing its development across Sumerian, Akkadian, and Hebrew traditions. Ferris surveys the current state of lament study, engages with Gunkel and Westermann, and offers detailed structural analyses of ancient Near Eastern laments (balag, eremma, city-laments) alongside Hebrew communal laments in the Psalter and Lamentations. The work is valuable for understanding the genre’s ancient Near Eastern background and its formal characteristics. Paul Wayne Ferris (2022) examines the rhetorical function of vows of future praise within lament psalms. It questions whether such vows are conditional upon God’s positive response and investigates the rhetorical devices linked to the psalmist’s promise. The study offers important insights into the persuasive dynamics of lament prayer and the relationship between human speech and divine action.

While *Imprecation as Divine Discourse: Speech Act Theory, Dual Authorship, and Theological Interpretation* is primarily concerned with imprecatory psalms, it makes significant contributions to lament psalm studies through its sophisticated use of speech act theory and its argument that the Psalter continues to function as divine discourse, Barker (2024) demonstrates how Christological fulfilment and the call to forgive enemies are determinative for theological interpretation of troubling psalms, concluding that

they remain an essential part of God’s voice that must not be ignored. The work engages directly with the theological tensions that lament psalms pose for Christian readers. Barker (2022) explores the nature of lament as an acceptable object of analytic theology. Starting with scriptural lament, particularly as found in the Psalms, the chapter examines what constitutes “lamenting well” and argues that genuine lament is a learned skill involving exacting theological work. The Psalms offer emergency language to deal with fear and loss, anger toward enemies, and the tension between faith and despair.

Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation

Speech act theory was founded by the British philosopher J. L. Austin in his seminal *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) and systematically developed by his student John Searle in *Speech Acts* (1969). Austin famously challenged the logical positivist assumption that the only meaningful use of language is to describe facts. He distinguished three levels of linguistic action:

Locutionary act: the sheer utterance of words with a certain sense and reference (the “what” of saying).

Illocutionary act: the act performed in saying something, such as promising, warning, complaining, or praising (the “what is done” by saying).

Perlocutionary act: the effect achieved by saying something, such as persuading, frightening, or comforting (the “what is brought about” by saying).

Searle (1976) later systematized illocutionary acts into a taxonomy of five categories: assertives (committing to truth), directives (attempting to get the hearer to act), commissives (committing the speaker to future action), expressives (expressing a psychological state), and declarations (bringing about a new reality by virtue of the utterance itself, e.g., “I now pronounce you husband and wife”).

In biblical studies, Kevin Vanhoozer (1998) has been the foremost advocate of applying speech act theory to Scripture, arguing that biblical texts are not merely repositories of propositional truth but are divine communicative acts that

accomplish God's purposes. More recently, Dickie (2020) has applied speech act theory specifically to the lament psalms, suggesting they function as scripts for a dialogue in which the lamenter and an off-stage voice representing God interact. This article builds focuses more intensely on the individual complaint and on the internal performative force of the vow of praise itself as the engine of transformation, rather than requiring an external divine response.

Nord, Christiane (2023) offers a thorough analysis of the issues surrounding the actual and potential use of imprecatory Psalms in worship. Nord examines four imprecatory Psalms, three reading strategies (pertaining to justice/vengeance, reading from "below," and cathartic expression), two levels of reading (commentary and metacommentary), and employs speech act theory as a key philosophical tool. The work demonstrates how speech act theory can illuminate the performative dimensions of even the most difficult psalms. He also examines the appropriateness and utility of applying speech act theory to psalm studies, focusing specifically on praise psalms. While praise psalms are the primary focus, the methodological framework developed here has direct implications for lament psalm studies as well, since lament and praise are understood as dialectically related speech acts within the Psalter (Nord 2025).

African and Nigerian Scholarship on the Psalms: Inculturation and Performance

African biblical scholarship has read the Psalms through a distinct lens, most notably the inculturation hermeneutics pioneered by Justin Ukpong. This approach seeks to interpret the Bible from within African cultural frameworks, where the oral, communal, and performative dimensions of text are paramount. David T. Adamo, a leading Nigerian biblical scholar, has demonstrated how the Yoruba people, for example, read psalms of imprecation and lament not as theological problems but as texts of power for protection, healing, and victory over malevolent forces (Adamo 2006, 2015). The psalm is not studied in a vacuum; it is memorised, chanted, and applied ritually.

Biwul (2022) reads Psalm 73 as a lament

against oppression, drawing parallels between the psalmist's traumatic emotional experience and the situation of many Nigerians today. Biwul argues that the lamentation in Psalm 73 reveals the enigmatic irony of divine theodicy—an apparent contradiction of divine promise vis-à-vis prevailing orchestrated oppression in society. The article resonates the emotional torture of the psalmist with the oppressed economic, political, religious, social, and psychological condition of many contemporary Nigerians. This study exemplifies the inculturation hermeneutics pioneered by Ukpong, reading the biblical text from within Nigerian cultural and social realities. Written from the functionalist perspective of religion, (Biwul 2023) explores how the reading of lament psalms can initiate a healing process for the distressed Nigerian church and promote social cohesion. The paper argues that communal reading of lament psalms in the face of national disaster provides sharing platforms where the distressed express pain by composing their distresses. Governance in the Nigerian state has been plagued with insecurity and social injustice, and the paper maintains the efficacy of lament in initiating a healing process, strengthening communal bonds, and eliciting the hope of restoration in the Nigerian situation.

Stephen Egwim has offered a decolonising reading of Psalm 109 in the African context, showing how the imprecations function as a legitimate cry for justice against colonial and neo-colonial oppressors. J. O. Adeogun has examined how the entire Psalter functions as a "tool of liberation" within the Aladura (African Independent) churches, where specific psalms are performed liturgically to bring about healing, deliverance from witchcraft, and economic breakthrough (in Abogunrin 2005). Mercy Oduyoye has brought African women's voices to bear on the Psalms, reading lament as a mode of resistance against both patriarchal oppression in the church and political oppression in the state. Critically, this African scholarship shares with speech act theory a profound concern for the performative dimension of the psalms—their capacity to do something in the lives of readers and worshippers, rather than merely signify

something.

Hombana (2025) offers a critical exegetical and theological analysis of Psalm 137, examining its literary structure, historical context, and relevance within contemporary African Christian communities. The paper argues that Psalm 137 presents a theologically coherent response to communal trauma, loss, and spiritual exile, and explores how the psalm legitimizes lament and appeals for justice in African liturgical and theological contexts marked by historical oppression and social injustice. Engaging scholarly perspectives on divine justice, lament, and imprecatory prayer through the works of Brueggemann, Zenger, Kraus, and Ahn, the study contributes to biblical and contextual theology by situating Psalm 137 within the African Christian context as a model of faithful protest and spiritual resilience. Korankye (2024) explores Mark's use of Psalm 22:1 in the crucifixion narrative as a postcolonial theological act and pedagogical resource within the South African context. Psalm 22 invites a pedagogy of hope and theological agency, enabling marginalised communities to articulate their suffering and faith within a framework of redemptive lament. While South African in focus, this postcolonial reading resonates with Nigerian scholarship's concern for reading lament psalms as texts of liberation and resistance.

Dickie, June F. (2023) presents a literature trauma theory, using the biblical story of Ruth and some lament psalms, to help sufferers find a measure of healing. The study found that engaging with the emotions of biblical lament enables contemporary sufferers to use the form of biblical lament to compose their own lament poems. This work bridges African and Western scholarly traditions by combining trauma theory with the performative reading of lament psalms. He also explores how the rhetorical function of *bos* ("shame") and its cognates within twelve Individual Lament Psalms reflect persuasive responses aimed at enhancing the relational spirituality of the psalmist. The study brings African spiritual frameworks to bear on the individual lament tradition, offering an inculturated reading that resonates with the

concerns of Nigerian scholars like Adamo and Oduyoye.

Theoretical Framework: A Synthesis of Austin, Searle, and Vanhoozer

This study employs John L. Austin's speech act theory as its primary analytical framework, supplemented by John Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts and Kevin Vanhoozer's theological extension of speech act theory to biblical hermeneutics.

Austin's Tripartite Distinction in Practice: When the psalmist cries, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Psalm 13:1), we can identify:

Locution: The utterance of the English/Hebrew words with their literal meaning.

Illocution: The act of complaining (an expressive) and the act of accusing (a directive, demanding that God cease the behaviour).

Perlocution: The intended effect—to move God to act, to remind God of the covenant, or to reassure the worshipping community that God hears such cries.

Searle's Taxonomy Applied to the Psalm: Within a single lament psalm, multiple illocutionary forces operate:

The Complaint is both an expressive (expressing pain and distress) and a directive (indirectly directing God to intervene by exposing divine inaction).

The Petition ("Give light to my eyes") is a clear directive (requesting action).

The Vow of Praise ("I will sing to the Lord") is primarily a commissive (committing the speaker to a future act) but, in the context of covenantal worship, functions also as a declaration (bringing about a new relational state of praise, as if the deliverance had already occurred).

The "sudden shift of mood" can therefore be re-described as a shift in illocutionary force: from a dominant mode of directive/expressive to a dominant mode of commissive/declarative.

Vanhoozer's Theological Appropriation: Vanhoozer (1998) argues that biblical texts are not merely human religious documents but participate in God's own communicative action. Applied to the lament psalms, this means that the lamenter's performative language is not merely human speech

about God but is part of a covenantal dialogue with God. The lament does something in the divine-human relationship itself: it re-engages the covenant, it brings God's promised faithfulness into question, and it creates the condition for renewed praise. The speech act of lament is, therefore, a theological event.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that deliberately combines traditional form criticism, fine-grained speech act analysis, and comparative cross-cultural hermeneutics. For the selection of data, five individual psalms of complaint were initially selected for analysis: Psalms 13, 22, 55, 88, and 109. This selection represents the full range of the individual lament genre, from the relatively hopeful and quickly resolved (Psalm 13) to the darkest and most unresolved (Psalm 88), and from psalms focused on personal suffering and illness (Psalm 22) to those expressing imprecation against human enemies (Psalm 109). For depth of analysis, this article focuses on the three most representative and contrasting psalms: 13, 22, and 88.

Each psalm was analysed in three systematic steps.

First, the psalm was segmented according to the classic form-critical structure identified by Gunkel and Westermann: (a) address/invocation, (b) complaint (against God or enemies), (c) petition, (d) confession of trust, (e) vow of praise. Second, each segment was subjected to a speech act analysis to identify its dominant illocutionary force(s) and performative function, paying close attention to grammatical mood (imperative, cohortative, indicative), performative verbs, and contextual cues. Third, the transition from lament to praise was analysed not as a temporal sequence but as a logical-performative transformation, asking: what act does the utterance of the vow of praise perform?

The findings from the speech act analysis were then brought into dialogue with African and Nigerian scholarly readings of the same psalms, drawn from the works of Adamo, Adeogun, Egwim, and Oduyoye. This comparison aimed to identify both convergences (shared emphasis on performative power) and divergences (e.g., Western focus on individual cognition vs. African focus on communal ritual efficacy) between the two interpretive traditions.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The following table summarises the speech act analysis of three representative psalms: Psalm 13, Psalm 22, and the unique Psalm 88. Each psalm is discussed in detail after the table.

Psalm	Form-Critical Section	Verses	Dominant Illocutionary Act(s)	Perlocutionary Aim	Performative Outcome
Psalm 13	Address / Complaint	vv. 1-2	Expressive (distress) + Directive (accusation: "How long?")	To break divine silence, provoke response	Divine attention is claimed
	Petition	vv. 3-4	Directive (imperatives: "Consider, answer, give light")	To secure deliverance from death/enemies	Divine action is requested

Psalm	Form-Critical Section	Verses	Dominant Illocutionary Act(s)	Perlocutionary Aim	Performative Outcome
	Trust / Praise	vv. 5-6	Commissive (“I have trusted,” “I will sing”) + Declaration	To transform the speaker’s situation and reorient the self	New reality enacted through praise
Psalm 22	Address / Complaint	vv. 1-2	Expressive (abandonment) + Directive (“My God, why...?”)	To name and challenge divine absence	Covenantal relationship is reasserted even in pain
	Complaint (enemies)	vv. 6-8, 12-18	Assertive (graphic description of suffering) + Expressive	To elicit divine compassion and justice	Suffering is given a public, ritual voice
	Petition	vv. 19-21	Directive (urgent plea: “Be not far off!”)	To achieve immediate deliverance from mortal danger	God’s saving presence is summoned
	Vow of Praise	vv. 22-31	Commissive (“I will tell... I will praise”) + Declaration	To enact a new community of praise and include future generations	Performative expansion from individual to congregation
Psalm 88	Address / Complaint	vv. 1-2	Expressive (cry day and night) + Directive	To break divine silence in a context of extreme suffering	Utterance is maintained despite no response
	Complaint (death & divine wrath)	vv. 3-9, 10-12	Assertive (hopelessness: “I am shut in... a dead man”) + Expressive	To move God by sheer logic of despair (death cannot praise)	Suffering is articulated without mitigation
	Petition (repeated)	vv. 13-14, 15-	Directive (daily cry: “I call... I	To seek intervention that	The act of petitioning becomes

Psalm	Form-Critical Section	Verses	Dominant Illocutionary Act(s)	Perlocutionary Aim	Performative Outcome
		18	spread out my hands")	never arrives	visibly the sole remaining stance
	Vow of Praise	Absent	Missing commissive	No transformation enacted	Performative failure / unresolved lament

Analysis of Psalm 13: The Minimal Performative Leap

Psalm 13 is the shortest and most paradigmatic lament. The opening complaint (vv. 1-2) performs a powerful directive through repetition: four times the psalmist asks “How long?” (‘ad-anah), each iteration escalating the performative force of the accusation against God for forgetting, hiding, and abandoning. This is not merely a description of feeling forgotten; it is a speech act that constitutes God as forgetful in the covenantal courtroom. The petition (vv. 3-4) shifts to direct imperatives: “Consider, answer, give light to my eyes.” These are classic directives aimed at changing God’s behaviour.

The sudden shift occurs at verse 5: “But I have trusted in your steadfast love.” Grammatically, this is a perfect tense verb in Hebrew, suggesting a past act of trust. Yet it functions performatively in the present. Following this, verse 6 performs the vow: “I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.” Critically, the deliverance (“he has dealt bountifully”) is spoken of as already accomplished, even though no narrative of rescue has been reported. The psalmist’s utterance of praise creates the reality it describes. This is a declarative illocutionary act: in saying “I praise you for delivering me,” the speaker performatively steps into a delivered state. The shift is not the result of a psychological mood swing but the consequence of a courageous linguistic act.

Analysis of Psalm 22: From Individual Lament to Communal Declaration

Psalm 22, famous for its citation by Jesus

on the cross, begins with the most searing complaint in the Psalter: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This is not a statement of atheism but a performative act of covenantal clinging in the midst of felt absence. The address “My God” performs the relationship even as the complaint denies its experienced reality. The long central section (vv. 6-8, 12-18) is largely assertive, providing a graphic description of physical suffering and mocking enemies. These assertives serve a perlocutionary aim: to so vividly depict suffering that God is compelled to act.

The petition (vv. 19-21) is terse and urgent. Then, at verse 22, another dramatic shift occurs: “I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters.” The vow of praise here is uniquely expansive. The psalmist commits not only to personal praise but to performatively create a new worshipping community. Verses 22-31 are a series of commissives and declarations that reorient the speaker from isolated victim to priestly leader of praise. The transformation is complete: the one who was “a worm and not a human” becomes the herald of God’s righteousness to “a people yet unborn” (v. 31). The speech act of praise has not only saved the individual but has performatively generated a new, transgenerational community of faith.

The Anomaly of Psalm 88: The Refusal of Performative Transformation

Psalm 88 is the theological outrage of the Psalter. It contains every element of the lament genre except the vow of praise. There is no confession of trust, no expression of hope, and no shift in mood. The psalmist is “shut in” (v. 8), his

companions are “darkness” (v. 18), and God’s wrath “sweeps over” him (v. 16). From the perspective of speech act theory, this psalm performs the illocutionary act of complaint but refuses to perform the commissive act of praise. In Austin’s terms, it is an “infelicitous” performative sequence, not because it fails in its aim, but because it does not attempt the expected perlocutionary transformation to praise.

Craig Broyles (1989) classified this as a pure psalm of “complaint” rather than “plea.” Speech act theory allows us to go further: Psalm 88 represents a deliberate liturgical and theological decision to legitimate a lament that does not resolve. It performs the act of persisting in pain. This has profound pastoral implications. It is not every suffering that leads to a “sudden shift.” The biblical canon preserves unrelieved lament, giving voice to those for whom the performative leap to praise is emotionally unattainable or theologically dishonest. The speech act of Psalm 88 is simply: “I am still crying out, even though nothing changes.”

Discussion of Findings

The Complaint as Performative Covenantal Accusation

Across all three psalms, the complaint functions as a complex illocutionary act. It is simultaneously an expressive (giving voice to authentic pain), a directive (directing God to act), and, most critically, a performative accusation within a covenantal framework. As Westermann (1981, 169) observed, “the lament is an accusation against God for not acting.” Speech act theory clarifies that this accusation is not merely a description of a state of affairs (“God is inactive”) but is a constitutive act that places God in the position of defendant and the psalmist in the position of plaintiff. The lament performs a covenantal lawsuit (rib-pattern). By uttering the complaint, the psalmist refuses to accept suffering as the final word and demands that God’s character be vindicated.

The Sudden Shift as Performative Transformation, Not Psychological Event

The most significant contribution of this article is the re-description of the “sudden shift of mood” as a performative transformation. The shift does not require a psychological change (feeling

better) nor a narrative event (God’s visible intervention). Rather, when the psalmist utters the vow of praise, “I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me” (Psalm 13:6), he performs a commissive act that commits him to a future course of action. In the context of ancient Israelite worship, this commissive function is a declaration that brings about a new state of affairs. As Brueggemann (1986, 10) put it, “the language of praise performs what it proclaims.” The praise does not describe a prior divine act; it enacts a new relationship. The psalmist becomes, in the speaking, a delivered person. While Dickie (2020) argues that the shift occurs because the lamenter hears an off-stage divine voice, the present analysis offers an alternative: the performative act of praise itself creates the assurance of deliverance. The psalmist, by courageously committing himself to praise, makes himself the recipient of grace. The language is not descriptive but generative.

The Anomaly of Psalm 88: Legitimizing Unresolved Lament

Psalm 88’s absence of a vow of praise is not a failure of the genre but a deliberate feature. Speech act theory identifies this as a performative sequence that halts at the directive/expressive stage and refuses the commissive/declarative leap. The psalm performs the act of non-resolution. This has profound pastoral and theological implications. Many suffering persons, those with chronic illness, prolonged trauma, or deep depression, cannot “leap to praise.” Psalm 88 tells them that their cry is sufficient. The Bible legitimates a lament that simply endures before God, without requiring a happy ending. The speech act of Psalm 88 is the act of faithful complaint without relief.

African and Nigerian Appropriations: The Convergence of Speech Act and Inculturation

African biblical scholarship has long and intuitively recognised the performative dimension of the Psalms, often ahead of Western speech act theory. Adamo (2006, 145) has shown that the Yoruba read Psalm 35 as a psalm with “mysterious powers which bring about defence, victory, and protection.” The psalm is not read for information but is performed, memorised, chanted, sometimes

written on amulets, as a way of enacting divine protection. This is precisely a speech act understanding: the utterance of the psalm does something in the world. It is not a description of God's power but an instrument of that power.

Similarly, Adeogun (in Abogunrin 2005, 180) has examined how the Psalter functions as a "tool of liberation" in Aladura churches. When a member is sick or oppressed, a lament psalm is performed liturgically, not primarily to express emotion but to bring about healing and deliverance. The psalm is an efficacious speech act. Oduyoye's feminist reading adds that for African women suffering under multiple oppressions, the lament psalm performs a crucial act of resistance: it refuses to be silent and demands that God see and act.

The convergence between Western speech act theory and African inculturation hermeneutics is striking and mutually enriching. Both reject a purely descriptive or propositional view of biblical language. Both insist that language constitutes reality. For the Nigerian Christian facing economic hardship, political violence, or spiritual attack, the lament psalm is not a text to be understood but a speech act to be performed, a powerful way of doing something with God in the midst of suffering. The present article suggests that speech act theory provides a rigorous analytic vocabulary for what African interpreters have long practised.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that speech act theory provides a powerful, nuanced, and pastorally relevant framework for understanding the individual psalms of complaint in the Hebrew Bible. Moving beyond the descriptive limits of form criticism, we have shown that lament psalms are not merely expressions of emotion but are performative acts that accomplish specific illocutionary functions: complaint (as a directive and expressive that performs a covenantal accusation), petition (as a directive demanding divine action), and praise (as a commissive and declarative that enacts a new reality).

The long-standing puzzle of the "sudden shift of mood" from lament to praise is illuminated as a performative transformation rather than a psychological or narrative event. The shift occurs not because God visibly intervenes, but because

the psalmist's own utterance of the vow of praise creates the reality of deliverance. The anomalous case of Psalm 88—a lament without praise—shows that the Psalter also legitimates speech acts that refuse resolution, giving canonical voice to unrelieved suffering and faithful complaint without relief. Furthermore, this study has demonstrated a remarkable convergence between Western speech act theory and African inculturation hermeneutics. Both approaches reject a merely informational reading of Scripture and emphasise the performative dimension of biblical language: the Psalms are not only texts to be interpreted but acts to be performed. For Nigerian and many African Christians living in contexts of ongoing oppression, poverty, and spiritual warfare, the lament psalm remains a vital, living speech act—a way of accusing God of absence, demanding divine intervention, and, where possible, courageously enacting praise in the very face of suffering.

Implications and Future Research

The pastoral implications are clear: lament should be restored as a legitimate, even necessary, speech act in worship. To suppress lament is to deprive the community of the linguistic means to performatively confront God, renegotiate the covenant, and enact hope. Pastoral caregivers can teach suffering persons that their cries are not mere emotional noise but powerful speech acts that do real theological work. Future research could extend this performative analysis in several directions: first, to the communal laments (e.g., Psalms 44, 74, 79) to examine how a corporate body performs complaint and praise. Second, to the imprecatory psalms (e.g., Psalm 109, 137), exploring how cursing functions as a performative act of justice-seeking in contexts of irremediable oppression. Third, empirical research on the actual performance of lament psalms in African Christian worship—how they are chanted, accompanied by ritual, and experienced by worshippers—could test and richly refine the theoretical claims advanced here. Finally, a comparative study of lament speech acts across different religious traditions (e.g., Islamic *du'a*, African traditional prayers) would illuminate both the distinctiveness and the universality of biblical lament.

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