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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.Sup27.3>

ISSN 1015-8758 (Print)  
ISSN 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2019  
Suppl 27:39-66

Date Published:  
22 July 2019



Published by the UFS  
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

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# WHEN THE UNHEARD VOICES BECOME VIOLENT. PERSPECTIVES FROM PSALM 109 AND THE #FEESMUSTFALL MOVEMENT

## ABSTRACT

In October 2015, the #FeesMustFall protest movement began. These protests started as a protest by the poor who could not afford the tuition fees of South African universities. This turned quite rapidly into violent protests as the focus of the movement became the addressing of past injustices: students, feeling that their voices were not being heard, added the issue of decolonisation of education. In the book of Psalms, too, there are examples of where violence results when voices crying for justice are not heard. One of these psalms is the imprecatory psalm, Psalm 109, where the poor are the starting point for the charges made against the one praying the psalm, and violent curses are used to address the situation. In this article the text of Psalm 109 is analysed, and perspectives on violence and unheard voices are provided and applied to the #FeesMustFall protests. The analysis of Psalm 109 is used to indicate whether or not a possible solution is found to the problem of the unheard voices.<sup>1</sup>

1 This article is a continuation and expansion on the research that was started in the project "A trilogy of war and renewed Honour? Psalms 108, 109 and 110 as a literary composition" (Sutton 2015).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of October 2015, the #FeesMustFall protest movement began. The reason for these protests was the steep increase in student fees over the past years at South African universities. The protests were led by Shaera Kalla, who was a member of the Student Representative Council at the University of the Witwatersrand at the time. The first university to be affected by these protests was Witwatersrand, and the Universities of Cape Town and Rhodes soon followed. Thereafter, the situation spread swiftly to the rest of South Africa's universities (Muller 2016).

In 2016, Nuran Davids and Yusef Waghid (2016) wrote in an article on #FeesMustFall that:

Protests at South Africa's universities didn't suddenly start in 2015 with the 'fees must fall' movement. Students at poorer institutions such as the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Fort Hare University and the Tshwane University of Technology have been protesting routinely against rising fees and the cost of higher education since 1994. But their protest action was largely ignored and often didn't make headlines beyond regional newspapers. The most recent 'fees must fall' protests have involved students from both historically advantaged and historically disadvantaged universities. They have attracted widespread media coverage and have sparked solidarity protests in London and New York.

The voice that was made to be heard within the original protests and also by the solidarity protest was that of the poor who were not able to pay the higher fees instituted by universities in recent years. In the end, however, the protests were not only about the voice of the poor, but also became a loaded political protest. Davids and Waghid (2016) observe, in regard to the reasons for the protest, "that apartheid-era inequalities have not been addressed or removed."<sup>2</sup> At the University of Kwazulu Natal the

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2 Already at the Universities of the Witwatersrand and Rhodes, the following issues had been released in a manifesto outlining issues other than just free education for the poor (Malabela 2017:133-134):

- Africanisation of university symbolism and institutional memory (the students argued that the curriculum was too Eurocentric and that they wanted to read African scholars, who currently find little expression in the curriculum);
- radical revision and Africanisation of all university curricula;
- fast-tracking of Africanisation of academic staff contingency;
- an end to worker discrimination and outsourcing;
- an end to financial exclusion of students (university support for poor students); and

protest became a violent uprising. The reason for the violence according to the students was that they felt that their voices were not being heard. In September 2016 all academic programmes at the University of Kwazulu Natal were suspended for more than four weeks due to the disruptive nature and violent actions of the protest (Kujeke 2017:88).<sup>3</sup>

A *Daily Vox* article on 6 September 2016 captured the frustrations and the emotions of the students at the University of Kwazulu Natal (Engl & Settler 2016):

Throughout the morning, students were frustrated by the fact that their repeated calls for a line of communication to university management were met with silence. Instead, management circulated a statement claiming that all was calm on all campuses and that they had “beefed up” security. The effect of this “beefing up” was palpable when several police vans, including a Nyala [armoured personnel carrier], pulled onto campus. Students reacted with both fear and anger. The strategy, on the part of university management, of “showing strength” and intimidation signalled to students that their concerns were dismissed and that they would be brought “in line” by force.

According to Kujeke (2017:89), the violence was used to attract the media because the students felt that their feelings and emotions were not being taken into account by the university. The students were of the opinion that these actions and the media attention would bring the injustices of the universities into the light and would force the university managements to act on their demands. The result, according to Kujeke (2017:89), was that:

The violent turn of events brought a new dynamic to the movement. Although aimed at fighting fee increments at tertiary institutions and at creating a “decolonised” university setting, today the movement has become a symbol of police brutality targeted at the youth. As a result of the police presence on campus and their clashes with students, the protests changed from peaceful marches to violent incidents where university property was torched.

In his 2016 article, “South Africa’s #FeesMustFall protests: Some inconvenient truths”, author and senior lecturer in Economics at the

- revision of the departmental academic structures that impede the output of black students.

3 The CSVR - Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation released a report in 2017 (Langa 2017) with the title *#Hashtag: An analysis of the #FeesMustFall Movement at South African universities*. In this report ten articles comment on the violence that took place during the #FeesMustFall protests at different universities across South Africa.

University of Johannesburg, Seán Mfundza Muller, identifies the following inconvenient truths about the #FeesMustFall protests that, in his view, centre on poverty:

- First truth – Failing the young: Most young South Africans are failed by society and the education system. Schooling outcomes are bad.
- Second truth – Poor youth are not the priority: The rhetoric around #FeesMustFall typically concerns the exclusion *and* hardship of the *least* privileged. But this is at odds with students' demands. The vast majority of poor young people do not access universities. This is first-and-foremost because their schooling outcomes do not satisfy (low) official entrance requirements. The result is that most students come from households that are significantly richer than the South African average. This is why spending more money on students attending higher education is not the same as helping poor students, or poor young people in general.
- Third truth - Inequality will not budge: Financial need should not be an obstacle to students who qualify to enter university at a suitable academic standard. But in allocating public finances it is critical to recognise that even carefully designed changes in funding will not materially reduce inequality in society as a whole. Removing university fees is not the best way to help South Africa's young people who are poor.

In the article "Fees must fall remains one of the confused struggle post 1994", Pule Phepheng (2017) writes that the continuous problem within the #FeesMustFall struggle was that the students were not heard or listened to. Justice is sought but not found. In the end, because their voices went unheard, the students became violent. In the Book of Psalms there are also examples where certain voices for justice are not heard and those who are not heard turn to violence. One of these psalms is Psalm 109. In the rest of this article, the text and contents of Psalm 109 are analysed, and perspectives regarding the use of violence and what happens to the unheard voices in the psalm are given and applied to the #FeesMustFall protests. The text and context of Psalm 109 are used to indicate how the author of Psalm 109 addressed the problem of unheard voices, and whether a possible solution to the problem is given or not.

## 2. A TEXTUAL AND LITERARY ANALYSIS OF PSALM 109

A Masoretic syntactical division of Psalm 109:1-31 is given below.

Stanza	Strophe	Verse	Translation: Psalm 109:1-31	Hebrew Text: Psalm 109:1-31
		1a	To the leader (music master). A Psalm of (by/for) David	<sup>1</sup> לַמְנַצֵּחַ לְדָוִד מְזֻמָּר
I	A	1b	Do not be silent, O God of my praise!	אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה לְתִלְתֵּי אֵל-תְּהַרְשׁ:
		2a	For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of deceit they have opened against me,	<sup>2</sup> כִּי פִי רָשָׁע וּפִי-מִרְמָה עָלַי פָּתְחוּ
		2b	Speaking against me with lying tongues	אֶתִּי לְשׁוֹן שָׁקֵר:
		3a	with words of hatred they have surrounded me	<sup>3</sup> וְדַבְרֵי שִׁנְאָה סָבְבוּנִי
		3b	and attacked me without cause.	וַיִּלְחַמוּנִי בְּתוֹמָם:
		4a	In return for my love they accuse me	<sup>4</sup> תַּחַת-אֲהַבְתִּי יִשְׁטְנוּנִי
		4b	but I am a prayer!	וְאֲנִי תְּפִלָּה:
		5a	So they reward me evil for good,	<sup>5</sup> וַיְשִׂימוּ עָלַי רָעָה תַּחַת טוֹבָה
		5b	and hatred for my love.	וְשִׁנְאָה תַּחַת אֲהַבְתִּי:
II	B	6a	(They say), "Appoint a wicked man against him,	<sup>6</sup> הַפְקֵד עָלָיו רָשָׁע
		6b	let an accuser stand on his right side ("right hand").	וְשֹׁטֵן וְשֹׁטֵן יַעֲמֵד עַל-יְמִינוֹ:
		7a	When he is tried, let him be found guilty,	<sup>7</sup> בְּהִשְׁפָּטוֹ יֵצֵא רָשָׁע
		7b	and let his prayer be shown to be sin.	וְתִפְלָתוֹ תִּהְיֶה לַחֲטָאָה:
		8a	May his days be few;	<sup>8</sup> יְהִיוּ-יָמָיו מְעַטִּים
		8b	may another take (seize) his office (position)!	כִּי-קָדְתוֹ יִקַּח אַחֵר:
		9a	May his children be (become) orphans,	<sup>9</sup> יְהִיוּ-בָנָיו יְתוֹמִים

		9b	and his wife a widow.	וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אַלְמָנָה:
		10a	Wander about, yes, let his children wander about and beg;	<sup>10</sup> וְנָעוּ יָנוּעוּ בְּנָיו וְשָׂאֲלוּ
		10b	may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit!	וְדָרְשׁוּ מִחֲרָבוֹתֵיהֶם:
		11a	May the creditor seize all that he has;	<sup>11</sup> יִנְקֹשׁ נְוֹשָׁה לְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ
		11b	may strangers plunder (steal) the fruits of his toil.	וַיִּבְזּוּ זָרִים יְגִיעוֹ:
		12a	May there be no one to do him a kindness (to show him love),	<sup>12</sup> אֶל־יְהוּיִלּוּ מִשֶּׁדַּךְ חֶסֶד
		12b	nor anyone to pity his orphaned children.	וְאֶל־יְהִי חוֹנֵן לִיתוֹמָיו:
		13a	May his posterity be cut off;	<sup>13</sup> יִהְיֶה־אֲחֵרֵיתוֹ לְהַכְרִית
		13b	may his name be blotted out in the second generation!	בְּדוֹר אַחֵר יִמַח שְׁמֵם:
		14a	May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before YHWH,	<sup>14</sup> יִזְכָּר׃ עֲוֹן אֲבֹתָיו אֶל־יְהוָה
		14b	and do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out;	וְחַטָּאת אִמּוֹ אַל־תִּמָּח:
		15a	may they be constantly present before YHWH,	<sup>15</sup> יְהִיוּ נִגְדֵי־יְהוָה תָּמִיד
		15b	and may their memory be cut off (eradicated) from the earth!	וַיִּכְרַת מֵאֶרֶץ זְכָרָם:
		16a	For he did not remember to show kindness (love),	<sup>16</sup> יַעַן אֲשֶׁר׃ לֹא זָכַר עֲשׂוֹת חֶסֶד
		16b	but pursued the poor and needy	וַיִּרְדֹּף אִישׁ־עָנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן
		16c	and the broken-hearted to their death!	וְנִכְאָה לְקֶבֶר לְמוֹתָת:
		17a	He loved to curse and it entered into him!	<sup>17</sup> וַיֵּאָהֵב קָלְלָהּ וַתִּבּוֹאֶהוּ

		17b	He did not like blessing; may it be far from him!	וְלֹא־הִפֵּץ בְּבִרְכָּה וְתִרְחַק מִמֶּנּוּ:
		18a	He clothed himself with cursing as his coat,	18 וַיִּלְבַּשׁ קָלְלָה כְּמִדּוֹ
		18b	it soaked into his body like water,	וְתֵבֵא כַמַּיִם בְּקִרְבּוֹ
		18c	and like oil into his bones.	וְכִשְׁמֶן בְּעֲצָמוֹתָיו:
		19a	May it be like a garment that he wraps around himself,	19 תִּהְיֶי־לּוֹ כְּבִגְד יֵעָטָה
		19b	and like a belt that girds him constantly!"	וְלִמְזוּחַ תִּמְיֵד יִחְגְּרָה:
		20a	This is what they do, those who accuse me, calling on YHWH,	20 זֹאת פְּעֻלַּת שׂוֹטְנֵי מֵאֵת יְהוָה
		20b	and who speak evil against my life.	וְהַדְּבָרִים רָעִים עַל־נַפְשִׁי:
III	C	21a	But you, YHWH, my Lord,	21 וְאַתָּה   יְהוָה אֲדֹנָי
		21b	do to me (act on my behalf) for the sake of your Name,	עֲשֵׂה־אֵתִי לְמַעַן שְׁמֶךָ
		21c	for you love is good – deliver me!	כִּי־טוֹב לְךָ־דָּדָה הַצִּילֵנִי:
		22a	For I am poor and needy,	22 כִּי־עָנִי וְאַבְיוֹן אֲנִי
		22b	and my heart shudders (is pierced) within me.	וְלִבִּי חָלַל בְּקִרְבִּי:
		23a	I am gone like a shadow that grows long (at evening);	23 כָּצֵל־כְּנֻטוֹתַי נִהְלַכְתִּי
		23b	I am shaken off like a locust.	נִנְעַרְתִּי כְּאַרְבֶּה:
		24a	My knees are weak through fasting;	24 בְּרַכְּבִי בְשָׁלוֹ מְצוֹם
		24b	my body has become gaunt, from a lack of oil.	וּבְשָׂרִי כְחֵשׁ מִשְׁמֶן:
		25a	Indeed, I am an object of scorn to them;	25 וְאַנְיָ   הֵייתִי חֲרָפָה לָהֶם

		25a	when they see me, they shake their heads.	יִרְאוּנִי וַיִּנְעוּן רֵאשֵׁם:
	D	26a	Help me, YHWH, my God!	26 עֲזֵרְנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי
		26b	Save me according to your love,	הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי כַחַסְדֶּךָ:
		27a	so that they may know that this was your hand,	27 וַיֵּדְעוּ כִּי־יָדְךָ אֶת
		27b	that you, YHWH, have acted.	אֶתָּה יְהוָה עָשִׂיתָה:
		28a	Let them curse, but you will bless;	28 יִקְלְלוּ־הַמָּה וְאַתָּה תְּבָרֵךְ
			they have arisen and will be put to shame,	קָמוּ וַיִּבְשׁוּ
		28b	but your servant will rejoice.	וְעַבְדְּךָ יִשְׂמַח:
		29a	May my accusers be clothed with dishonour;	29 יִלְבְּשׁוּ שׂוֹטְנֵי כְלָמָה
		29b	may they be wrapped in their own shame in a mantle.	וַיַּעֲטוּ כַמְעִיל בְּשָׂתָם:
	E	30a	With my mouth I will give great thanks to YHWH;	30 אֲוֹדָה יְהוָה מֵאֵד בְּפִי
		30b	I will praise him in the midst of the throng.	וּבְתוֹךְ רַבִּים אֶהְלֵלְנוּ:
		31a	For he stands at the right hand of the needy,	31 כִּי־יַעֲמֵד לְיְמִין אֲבִיּוֹן
		31b	to save them from those who would condemn them to death!	לְהוֹשִׁיעַ מִשִּׁפְטֵי נַפְשׁוֹ:

## 2.1 Notes on the poetic techniques and translation

- In verse 1a the psalm begins with “to the leader,” which in general is viewed as a musical instruction for public recitation. According to Segal (2013:530), if this is the case with Psalm 109, one might wonder and could argue about how it became appropriate language for liturgical purposes, especially in view of the psalm’s language of vengeance.

- The Psalmist continually uses thought-parallelism: There are synonymous parallelisms in verses 2 (mouth // tongues), 5 (evil-good // hatred-love), 9 (children-orphans // wife-widow), 13 (cut off // blotted out) and 27 (your hand // have acted).
- The following metre can be observed in this psalm: 3, 4+2+4, 3+3, 3+2, 4+3, 3+3, 3+3, 3+3, 3+2, 4+3, 4+3, 3+3, 3+3, 4+3, 3+3, 3+3+3, 3+3+2, 3+3+3, 3+3, 4+3, 3+4+3, 3+3, 3+2, 3+3, 4+3, 3+2, 3+3, 4+4, 3+3, 4+3, 3+3 (Allen 2002:98-98; Krause 1993:337). According to Terrien (2003:745), the metre for this psalm is irregular. A probable reason for this is the emotional state of the one praying the psalm.
- In verse 6a, translating the line as “against him” implies an accuser (6b); if one were to translate it as “over him”, it would imply a judge (a corrupt judge) (Bratcher & Reyburn 1991:938). For this article “against him” is chosen. Another issue in this verse is who is the speaker. For this article the perspective is chosen that the speaker is the petitioner who quotes the words of his accusers.<sup>4</sup>

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4 There is a lot of controversy among scholars in v. 6 on who the speaker is, and as a result the speaker for the section vv. 6-19. According to Hossfeld and Zenger (2011:126; see deClaisé-Walford 2014:829-830), there are four perspectives that can be followed. The first is to assume that it is the same speaker that was presented in vv. 1-5. In vv. 6-19 the speaker then expresses his desire toward YHWH to punish and curse his enemies about whom he lamented in vv. 1-5. The second perspective is that the speaker is the petitioner that is presenting the words of his accuser in a legal case. These words of the accusers are aimed to condemn the petitioner and destroy in effect his family. The third perspective that can be followed is that vv. 6-15 reflects one speaker and that vv. 16-19 reflects another speaker. The first speaker then quotes the words of the enemies and the second speaker replies with words of punishment for his opponents. The fourth perspective is that the speaker is YHWH. According to this perspective, the words reflect the response by YHWH to the petitioner’s plea. The problem with this perspective is that it requires alterations to the text. The second perspective is followed as it supports the structure of the psalm that presents a legal situation. In this structure the case is presented and the words of the enemies are quoted that YHWH can make a legal finding, decision or revision. It is therefore that the words “they say” is placed in brackets in the translation, as to clarify that the section that follows is a quote from the enemies or rather the accusers by the petitioner; therefore vv. 6-19 is placed in brackets. The phrase “they say” is not part of the original text. Therefore also the imperative is retained in v. 6 “appoint” – הִפְקִד . The following arguments are used to support perspective two (Hossfeld and Zenger 2011:130): The psalm is best understood through its juridical language (judge, witnesses, accusations and appeal to YHWH to judge – see further Hossfeld and Zenger [2011:130]); vv. 1-5 present the danger the petitioner finds himself in due to the words of the

- Another important lyrical aspect in Psalm 109 is the use of figures of speech, as in verse 18: “He clothed himself with cursing as his coat, it soaked into his body like water, and like oil into his bones.” Here the first line employs a metaphor to state that the enemy cursed so much that it was as if curses were continually around him as a coat is around a man. The psalmist uses similes, “like water” and “like oil,” to imply that the curses, instead of being *around* his enemy, should enter wholly into him and become part of him, thus acting on his life rather than on those originally cursed. This thought is further emphasised by the use of two more similes in verse 19. Another metaphor and simile combination is found in verse 29: “May my accusers be clothed with dishonour; may they be wrapped in their own shame in a mantle.” The first line gives the metaphor “clothed with dishonour” in requesting that everything about the enemy should only bring dishonour to him. The psalmist then continues the synonymous parallel by employing a simile, saying that his enemy’s shame should cover him just as a mantle covers the body.
- Verse 23 is a sequential use of similes: “I am gone, like a shadow that grows long”; “I am shaken off like a locust” (Ward 1980:163-168; Burden 1991:119).
- The chiasm structure ABBA can be seen in verse 30: thanks (A) – YHWH (B) – him (God) (B) – praise (A) (Ward 1980:163-168; Burden 1991:119).
- In verse 31, the Hebrew שפט is apparently used in a sense more commonly attached to ריב, but must be compared to the *niphal* and *poel* verb. The Septuagint renders מְשַׁפֵּטִי as “persecute” which may represent a paraphrase considered necessary, because of the unusual meaning (Allen 2002:100; Oesterley 1939:459).
- In verse 31 one can see a synthetic parallelism of reason: For he stands at the “right hand” of the needy, to save them from those who would condemn them to death!

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enemies and therefore vv. 6-19 can be viewed as a quote of those words and its consequences; the content and the first-person discourse of v. 20, and also syntactically refers back to the first-person discourse in vv. 1-5; the content and on a syntactical level the discourse of vv. 6-19, differs greatly from the sections before and after it; quotations of the exact words of enemies in lament are not unusual (see Pss 3:3; 10:4, 6, 11, 13; 12:5; 13:5; 14:5); the reference in v. 28 by the petitioner that is cursed by the enemies and also the petition towards YHWH to turn the curse into blessing, is strengthened if the curse by the enemies were quoted in vv. 6-19.

## 2.2 The structure of Psalm 109

The breakdown of Psalm 109 can be concise, as in the following structural plan according to Hossfeld and Zenger (2011:131; see also Firth 1996:58; Gerstenberger 2001:257; and Allen 2002:101):<sup>5</sup>

Introduction: Superscription – For (by) David

I	1a-5	The appeal to God
A	1b-5	Appeal to God as the highest form of juridical authority
	1b	Opening address to God
	2-3	Reason for the appeal: the complaint against the enemies as opponents with false statements and hatred
	4-5	Claim: the petitioner describes his good deeds
II	6-20	The complaint
B	6-20	Explanation of the legal case before YHWH (imprecation)
	6-7	Manipulation of the legal procedure
	8-13	Purpose of the action: death of the accused and destruction or extermination of his family
	14-15	Final goal of the action: continued imputation of guilt and extinction of his (good) memory
	16-18	Opponents' false accusation
	19	Desire of the opponents for his destruction
	20	Summary of the petitioner's position
III	21-31	Requests for YHWH's help
	C 21-25	Central plea for YHWH's intervention on behalf of the petitioner
	21	Exhortation to YHWH to intervene in accordance with his Name
	22	Reason: cry for help from a "poor person"
	23-24	Physical destruction ("death of body and soul")

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5 Brueggemann (1995:269-270) divides vv. 6-20 into three sections: the introductory appeal, vv. 6-7; the hoped-for sentence, vv. 8-15 and vv. 19-20; the reasons, vv. 16-19.

25	Enemies' scorn and contempt ("social death")
D 26-29	Renewed plea for YHWH's intervention in view of the opponents
26	Appeal to YHWH with a plea for a demonstration of his love and fidelity
27	Reason: opponents' knowledge of God
28	Removal of the hostile curse
29	Public shaming and disempowerment of the opponents
E 30-31	Promise of thanks as an expression of assurance of being heard
30	Announcement of praise of YHWH/thanks "in the midst of the throng"
31	YHWH as the rescuer of the poor

According to Terrien (2003:745), the structure of Psalm 109 presents a contradiction. The reason for this is that its strophic structure resembles that which is usually used for hymns, and its thematic content resembles that which is used for a complaint.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.3 Genre and *Sitz im Leben*

The genre of Psalm 109 is understood mostly in its use of "curses" or evil words,<sup>7</sup> therefore it is part of the "imprecatory psalms" (Blaklock 1977:77; Eybers 1978:28; Kidner 1979:388; Adams 1991:116). Secondly it is understood as a judicial redress, in a religious court (Anderson 1981:758; Weiser 1982:690; Allen 2002:100; Harman 2011b:785). Byassee (2018:69) argues that Psalm 109 should not be understood as an imprecatory psalm, but as a justice psalm.<sup>8</sup> Gerstenberger (2001:261; see also Weiser 1982:690) understands this psalm in terms of an individual who is defending himself against people who are accusing him of black magic and who are planning to kill him. In relation to this, Gerstenberger (2001:261) understands the genre of this psalm as a "complaint of the individual" with a subgenre

6 Bullock (2017:283) summarises the structure of Ps 109 quite appropriately in four parts as "lament, imprecation, prayer and a vow to praise".

7 For an important further discussion on the understanding and use of curses in the psalms, the works of Nehrbass (2013) and Nowell (2013) must be consulted.

8 Bellinger (2012:59) also makes the remark that many scholars only see the curses in Ps 109, and do not realise that it is about justice and also about what it means to be the people of God.

of being a “counter-curse.” As such it is interpreted as a person making an appeal to God for help against his enemies (Kidner 1979:388-389; Wilcock 2010:156). One needs to take into account the strong appeal for the poor in this psalm, as it makes an appeal on God who is the protector of the poor and needy (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:138; see also Kirkpatrick 1903:652).

In its final redaction between Psalm 108 and Psalm 110,<sup>9</sup> the *Sitz im Leben* of this psalm changes from the “individual” focus to that of the group. In Psalm 108 and Psalm 109 the “foreign policy” of the king (or the new king, the revived David) concerning military action is seen clearly. In Psalm 108 the “domestic policy” of the king and his duty as the protector of the poor and needy as well as his duty as defender of justice are seen. This context presents a particular image of the king as it presents a royal theology that provides future hope for Israel in difficult times. The king that is the rescuer becomes the victim of violence and injustice and must be rescued from his enemies and accusers, therefore the petition to YHWH.<sup>10</sup> Psalm 109 in the trilogy of Psalms 108-110 must not only be understood as for a particular individual or with a particular individual historical event, but as an expression of the future hope of post-exilic Israel, that is impregnated with royal theology (similar to Ps 108 and Ps 110). This expression of the future hope becomes the *Sitz im Leben* of this psalm (see Eaton, 1986:81; deClaisse-Walford 1997:97-99; Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:131).<sup>11</sup>

## 2.4 Dating and authorship

For the one praying, this psalm shows a struggle of life and death. It would seem from the psalm’s contents that both the petitioner and the opponents are people that have power and influence. The social conflicts of the psalm, the “prayer formula”, the connection with the juridical system, and also its connection and strong theology for the poor leads one to think of the social reforms, for example of Nehemiah, dating from the historical situation around the fifth century BCE (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:130-131; see also Kirkpatrick 1903:652). Dating the psalm is difficult, although its contents suggest a post-exilic dating. The final redaction of this psalm

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9 For a further discussion on the topic of the “Shape and shaping of the Psalter” the work of deClaisse-Walford (1997) can be consulted.

10 The prayer now becomes a prayer against enemies that go to war with the king (Eaton 1986:81).

11 Brueggemann (2007:66) is convinced that one of the purposes of this psalm is to be cathartic; that the psalm serves as a therapeutic method to unload emotional distress.

into the trilogy of Psalms 108-110 probably took place around the fourth century BCE (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:131).

If one understands this psalm as part of the reformation that took place in the fifth century BCE, then the original author could possibly be a reformer of that time who was accused of his actions on behalf of the poor. In its final redaction the psalm was placed in the trilogy between Psalm 108 and Psalm 110, and given the superscription of “for David.” This gives the psalm a new purpose as it now becomes not only a prayer for the individual but also a text for Israel which is threatened by hostile nations. The war situation would favour a post-exilic dating.

## 2.5 Detail analysis

The superscription of the psalm binds it with Psalm 108 and Psalm 110 as this makes it a prayer of the king (of David – new David). The psalm starts as a typical lament of petition, with a call directed towards God. Because God is a God of the poor and also the protector of the poor, the petitioner in this psalm wants to make a public display of praising and glorifying God (see Deut 10:21; Pss 22:4; 71:6; Jer 17:12). The outcry “do not be silent” (Pss 35:22; 50:3; 83:2) stresses the purpose of this psalm: that YHWH must not be silent, that he must proclaim his judgment aloud, just as the opponents are shouting out their slander aloud. The petition in verse 4 is the opening of the appeal towards YHWH. His is the highest authority, hence the cry for help in these opening verses. The law is warped, and therefore YHWH must intervene to bring order (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:131-132).

In verses 2-3, the statements made against the petitioner are viewed by him as lies under oath that are expressions of godlessness (“the wicked”) and deliberate deception (“deceit”) that have the purpose of bringing about the death sentence.<sup>12</sup> It is with these statements in mind that the petitioner makes his appeal. In verse 3 the petitioner wants to make it clear that the accusations have no ground and that they are purely made to bring him into dishonour and to annihilate (defeat – honour and shame) him. The imagery in these verses indicates a strong emotional experience by the petitioner. The open “mouth” brings to mind the imagery of a wild beast that has the intent to devour its prey or enemies (see Pss 17:11; 22:17; 27:2-3; 35:1-3; 56:3; 57:5). These words of the opponents are literally words that are waging a war of destruction against the petitioner (the king). They are busy closing in on him and attacking him (see in other psalms of lament the military metaphors, for example, Pss 17:11; 22:17; 27:2-3;

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12 See for example Pss 5:7 and 10:7.

35:1-3; 56:3; 57:5) (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:132). The imagery is that of an enemy that is waging war (Tucker 2014:74).

In verses 4-5 the petitioner makes a summary of the actions of his opponents. This is done by the use of the verb  $\text{שׂוּט}$ , which can be translated as “be hostile,” “have a hostile attitude,” or “be an enemy too.” In a judicial context it can be translated by the word “accuse” (see Pss 38:21; 71:13). The noun of this word occurs recurrently with the meaning “trial opponent,” “accuser,” or “witness for the prosecution” (see 2 Sam 19:23; Job 1:6-9, 12; 2:1-4, 6-7; Zech 3:1-2). This legal context is also the context in which it is presented in Psalm 109 and therefore in verse 4 (used in the form of a finite verb), verse 20 (used as a participle) and in verse 6 (used as a noun) it can be translated by “accuse” or “accuser.” The petitioner has shown “love” and “goodness” towards others, especially towards the needy and the poor, but these deeds have been shown to be evil deeds by his opponents and have brought him to dishonour in the public eye. In verse 4 the petitioner does not react to the hatred and accusations, but only emphasises them (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:132). The psalmist here is not vindictive (Waltke 2007:879). He leaves the judgment and outcome to his only hope, an appeal to YHWH that is the God of justice (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:132).

In verses 1-5 and 21-31 it seems that the person praying is confronted by a group of enemies. The destructive desires expressed in verses 6-19 are expressed towards a single person. This can be explained by understanding that these verses are directed at an individual (the king – who is the representative of his nation). In verses 1-5 and verses 21-31, the individual cries out towards the enemies and in verses 6-19 the enemies cry out against the individual (Zenger 1996:60). The lament, as in the case of most lament psalms in the Book of Psalms (Pss 3:3; 10:4, 6, 11, 13; 12:5; 13:5; 14:1), provides the actual words of the enemies. The reason why the petitioner does this is to give an especially vivid or clear picture of the enemies’ hubris and brutality (Zenger 1996:60).

In verses 6-7 the petitioner comes before YHWH and explains the state of affairs, according to him. This is done by allowing the opponents to speak in a “fictional quotation” of their lying and deceitful words. The purpose of this is to expose them for their destructive intentions towards the petitioner and to show their tactics of bringing destruction to the petitioner and manipulating the court to bring about a ruling of death. It is uncertain *who* is addressed in these verses as it could be the one who is “presiding over the court.” According to Zenger (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:132-133),

most probably it would be the one presiding over the court, who by calling on (הִפִּיל Hifil: “hire, appoint”: see Gen 39:4; Num 1:50) a criminal perjurer (v. 6a) or an unscrupulous judge, as well as a defender who then does not, as usual, act “at the right hand” of the accused (v. 31; see also Pss 16:8; 17:7; 142:5) as a counsel for the defence, but as an (additional) witness for the prosecution or accuser, determines the outcome of the proceeding from the start: the condemnation of the accused (v. 7: “wicked”) to death (see vv. 8-10) because of a crime deserving death – and with reference to the testimony of the two witnesses (see Deut 19:15).<sup>13</sup>

The psalmist uses the person on the “right hand” in verse 6 as the place for the accuser (as a witness for the accuser), but in verse 31 the “right hand” becomes the place of the one that must help (Dahood 2011:102; see also Keck 1996:1126; and Allen 2002:103). The “right hand” becomes a judicial act, to help establish whether a person is guilty or innocent (Kraus 1993:340; Burden 1991:119). In verse 6 the “right hand” brings judgment and in verse 31 the “right hand” brings help and salvation. The rest of verse 7 emphasises the condemnation as the ending of the court’s formal proceedings. The opponents wanted to make sure that in this court the petitioner’s appeal for innocence’s to YHWH is shown as a lie and as a sin (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:132-133).

The purpose of verses 8-13 is to show the true intentions of the opponents’ actions toward the petitioner and what they plan to accomplish with these actions. The first purpose is that the petitioner must die and that his work must be given to another person (v. 8). The dishonour that is brought upon the petitioner must be suffered by his family (v. 9) (see Exod 22:21-23; Ps 94:6). Verses 10-11 describe what the situation will be for the petitioners’ family when his destruction comes. It will be a situation of total dishonour, exclusion and expulsion from society. Verse 13 gives a review of the strategy of destruction. In a nutshell it means social and physical death for the petitioner (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:133).

In verses 14-15 the opponents call on God to assign to the petitioner and his family all past sin and guilt, so as to make sure that the petitioner and his family will be wiped out from history and even let them be seen as

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13 In v. 6, according to Keck (1996:1126), as the opponents have accused, now they must be put in the same situation; therefore an accuser must be put on their “right hand”, a position of closeness and help. Dahood (2011:102; see also Burden 1991:117) argues that the “wicked” in v. 6 can be translated here with “Satan” as the accuser. This argument is not followed in this study. For a discussion on the translation of as שָׂטָן in Psalm 109 as “Satan”, see the work of deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson and Tanner (2014:830).

representatives of what evil looks like. This is the climax of the opponents' strategy for destroying the petitioner (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:133).

In verses 16-18 the opponents' "fictional quotation" presents its accusations of guilt and also the charges made against the petitioner. This becomes the reason for destruction as described in verses 6-7. The accusation made against the petitioner is made in the context of his work (spoken of in v. 8). The "charge" is a misuse of office and a neglect of the poor (resulting in the suffering and probable death of the poor). The charge is thus twofold: firstly the petitioner did not live by the law of YHWH, and secondly he did not do his official duties (to take care of the poor and needy). Verses 17-18 make the argument of the accusers even stronger when "a theological antithesis between cursing and blessing as well as by the use of heavy comparative imagery" is used (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:134). The purpose is to show that the petitioner even enjoyed doing these evil deeds: they had become part of him (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:133-134). The cloak "garment" has a negative meaning of dishonour.

The (false) accusations made against the petitioner in verse 19 show that the desired result is the destruction and annihilation of the petitioner. They call upon a (metaphorical) destruction that shows "cause and effect." The curse must weigh heavily on him like his clothes: it should bind him, so that he himself will be the cause of his destruction (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:134).

Verse 20 develops into a kind of colophon or perhaps a subtitle to verses 6-19. It becomes a summary of the opponents' speech and a transition to the emphatic cry of the devout person for YHWH's help (Zenger 1996:60). The petitioner is furious about the (false) accusations made against him; specifically that they also call on YHWH for his destruction. The petitioner stands in disbelief that they will go as far as not only wanting to destroy and kill him, but wanting to kill his soul – נפש – as well (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:134).

Verses 21-25 develop into the central plea for YHWH's intervention on behalf of the petitioner. Verse 21 is the beginning of a new section. This can be seen with the change of speaker. It is now the petitioner who is speaking. The speech is now directed towards YHWH, who is the only hope for intervention for the petitioner. By addressing YHWH as "my Lord" the petitioner calls on YHWH to protect his "servant" and also to deliver him from his enemies (Exod 3:8; Pss 7:2; 22:21; 59:2-3; 86:2-4; 130:1-2). The statement that he must be delivered implies that he cannot do this

himself, that only YHWH can rescue him (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:134). This element of trust and hope is a fundamental attitude of thanksgiving psalms. In the lament, and in this imprecatory lament, the element of trust places YHWH in the centre to act, redirecting the vengeance away or at least out of the hands of the one praying (Pemberton 2014:59).

YHWH is the protector of the poor and needy, therefore the petitioner in verse 22 calls attention to this fact to gain the protection and assistance of YHWH. He knows that YHWH has an obligation towards the poor and therefore he trusts in YHWH's nature that he will not abandon him. These accusations have taken their toll on him; he is a wounded person and in verses 23-24 he provides a description of the physical toll that has been taken on him. His body and soul are being destroyed; hence the expression of grief with the two comparisons made in verses 23 and 24 (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:134-135). Segal makes a valid remark when he says that the prosecutors in this psalm accuse the psalmist of not caring for the poor, yet they prosecute the accused who associates himself with the poor and needy (Segal 2013:529). This becomes the argument of the psalmist for the intervention and salvation by YHWH, because the psalmist knows that YHWH is faithful towards the needy (Tucker & Grant 2018:582; see also Tucker 2014:75).<sup>14</sup>

Verse 25 becomes a summary of his lament, his total expression of grief. The psalmist stresses his oppression and neediness in language that is significant of other prayers, to "shake their heads" (Ps 22:6-8) (Keck 1996:1126). The accusations against the petitioner grieve him so much that he becomes a shadow of the man he was; therefore when they see him they shake their heads (Allen 2002:105). They are shaming him, by shaking their heads. Dahood (2011:108) is of the opinion that the persons talked about in this verse do not refer to the accusers, but could simply be the people the petitioner has met or even neighbours.

While verses 21-25 develop into the central plea for YHWH's intervention on behalf of the petitioner, verses 26-29 are the plea for YHWH's intervention towards the accusers. In these verses YHWH is asked to turn his focus on the accusing enemies. The plea for help in verse 26 is not only a call for help in a crisis or dangerous situation but rather for legal assistance for the petitioner (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:135). The suffering by the petitioner becomes internal (in the mind), but also external (physical), hence the central plea to YHWH (Bergant 2013:90).

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14 For a further discussion on the importance and development of the "Theology of the poor" in the psalter, the work of Bremer (2017:101-116) may be consulted.

The subject of verse 27 is YHWH. It is his hand that must perform the act the petitioner requires (Dahood, 2011:109). The hand becomes a direct intervention in this verse (Allen 2002:105). The petitioner uses a twofold argument in verse 27. Firstly, he points out that YHWH is the all powerful God that can accomplish anything. Secondly, as a demonstration of his power, the destruction of enemies and nations and bringing them to their knees before YHWH, is a way of signifying this (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:135). The hand in verse 27 thus becomes a demonstration of power.

It is clear that the enemies curse and accuse the one who prays (Zenger 1996:59). The feelings and emotions of vengeance on the enemies are expressed in verse 28 and verse 29, although this expression of vengeance is gentler than the curses collected in verses 6-19. It would seem that the petitioner's aim is to bring the enemies into dishonour, for the dishonour they caused him (Zenger 1996:59). The petitioner knows that YHWH's power makes the enemy's curses, which have been made towards him (see v. 19), a futile activity. In fact it is such a futile activity that the curses are turned into blessings, restoring his hope and giving him joy in his restoration before God (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:135).

Verse 29 is a summary again. This time the petitioner expresses his wish for retaliation for his enemies' punishment. He uses their own words (fictional words) in verse 25, but does not express the same outcome as they wished upon him; rather entreating that his honour be restored in the public eye and that if his honour must be restored, then theirs must be taken away so as to show that the justice of YHWH has prevailed (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:135-136). The imagery of his being enveloped (the coat in vv. 18, 19) is now directed by the psalmist towards the accusers: shame must envelop them as the curse they proclaimed enveloped the psalmist (Goldingay 2008:284, 287). In a society built upon honour and shame, the restoring of his honour is more important than a curse upon his enemies. The public shaming of their dishonour would be enough.

The psalm therefore starts as a typical lament of petition, and ends in the same fashion, with a promise of thanksgiving. Verses 30-31 become a closing formula for some of the themes in this psalm. The petitioner becomes a counter figure to his enemies. He uses his mouth for praise and thanks and they use it for deceit and false witness (v. 2). The "right hand" is used here for help and salvation, while in verse 6 it brings help and assistance for false witness. The "right hand" in verse 31 becomes a metaphor for YHWH's help, assistance and salvation in war. The psalm becomes a "confession" of YHWH's justice for those in need (the needy and the poor), even when false witnesses, powerful men and godless and corrupt judges, take the stand. YHWH restores the petitioner's honour and exposes those who tried

to take it away. This restored honour is further expressed in Psalm 110 (see Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:136; Tucker & Grant 2018:584).

### 3. PERSPECTIVES ON VIOLENCE FROM PSALM 109 AND THE #FEESMUSTFALL MOVEMENT

What is Psalm 109's perspective on violence?<sup>15</sup> According to Amy Cottrill (2012:374):

Many interpreters of the imprecatory psalms have struggled with the ethical and theological implications of these texts. There have been different types of responses to the violent imagery and vengeful rhetoric of psalmic violence. The most recent trend in scholarship is to interpret the violence of certain of the psalms as an expression of anger of the oppressed person. In this line of interpretation, the violent desires of the psalmist are not understood to have violent effect in the world, but release the urge toward real-world violence through cathartic expression. Because the psalmist does not pray that he be the agent of violence but asks that God act against the accursed enemy, scholars Walter Brueggemann, Erich Zenger, and William Bellinger have argued that violent desires of the psalmist are relinquished to God through these prayers.

Cottrill (2012:374) indicates the state of scholarship when she says that the imprecatory psalms are viewed as “an expression of anger of the oppressed person.” The imprecatory psalms become an expression of the unheard voices. Those being oppressed need to voice their emotions and the situation. This is why Zenger (1996:viii), when he sees the labels “psalms of cursing” or “imprecatory psalms”, views them as inappropriate because these psalms “do not curse; they present passionate lament, petition, and desires before God.” They become instead, emotional laments.<sup>16</sup>

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15 Brueggemann and Bellinger (2015:476) present the following methods on how to deal with a thirst for vengeance: firstly, that “violence can be enacted”; secondly, that vengeance can simply be denied (the problem then is that it can manifest in another way); and thirdly, that vengeance can be articulated to YHWH. What is seen in Psalm 109 is the third option: to articulate the vengeance towards YHWH.

16 On the topic of the imprecatory psalms, the contribution of J. Clinton McCann Jr. (1996:1127-1128) should be noted. McCann (1996:1127-1128) explains that the imprecatory language in Ps 109 should be understood where the expression of desire for vengeance is voiced and placed in the hands of YHWH. It is therefore a submission of anger to God in the form of a prayer and is viewed as sufficient enough by the psalmist as not to take actual physical revenge on his or her enemies. It is therefore important to view the imprecatory language as prayer.

In Psalm 109, violence is used in the text to describe the experiences of one person or a group, who experience violence from others (Pss 57; 109). The expression of violence as an outcry for justice occurs mainly in three instances in the psalms where violence is experienced through the acts of others. The same can be seen with the #FeesMustFall movement. Firstly, for those who are socially oppressed such as the poor, widows and orphans, the violence becomes an outcry for justice as part of an act of deliverance from their oppressors. In these circumstances the imagery is expressed on a structural level: that the basic order of a specific society has been damaged and justice is needed (see Ps 94:3-7) (Firth 2015:75; Sutton 2018:277). Secondly, for those who are tormented by enemies or the wicked, the violence becomes the outcry for justice as part of an act of salvation and even in some cases an act of retribution (Ps 74:4-8). It is mostly a description of physical violence (Firth 2015:75; see Mafico 1992:1128; Ryken, Wilhoit & Longman 1998:474-475; Sutton 2018:277; Walton 2008:647-654). Thirdly, and closely related to the second instance, there is an outcry by an individual (or one that represents a group) who is tormented by enemies or the wicked on a psychological level through “threatening behaviour and words.” Again it becomes an outcry for justice is an act of deliverance and salvation (see Ps 3) (Firth 2015:75; Sutton 2018:277). All three of these experiences are present in Psalm 109. In Psalm 109 the violence provides the justice and social harmony for the petitioner and the poor.

Within the #FeesMustFall Movement, the expression of violence as an outcry for justice can also be seen where violence is experienced through the acts of others. Firstly, the students who are socially oppressed due to the increase in fees at South African universities, began the protests as an outcry for justice as part of an act of deliverance from ever-increasing fees and the feeling that they were not being heard or listened to, which also developed into other political issues such as decolonisation.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, for those (the students) who are tormented also by physical violence by enemies or the wicked (the police and the upgraded security at universities), the violence become the outcry for justice as part of an act of salvation and in this case as an act of retribution against the response of the police. Thirdly, it is an outcry by an individual (or one who represents

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As a prayer it binds the psalmist with the rest of the nation that shares (in the prayer) the emotions of hatred towards their enemies and leave it in the hands of YHWH.

17 See the article of Malabela (2017:132-148), “We are not violent but just demanding free decolonized education”, where the issues of the #FeesMustFall developed into a discussion for decolonisation.

a group, in this case the #FeesMustFall Movement) who is tormented by the universities and the government on a psychological level through “threatening behaviour and words.”

Cottrill (2012:377) goes further, coming up with an alternative explanation by saying:

Violence occurs in both tragic and comic narrative and poetic contexts, yet violence serves very different purposes in these contexts. My use of the concept of tragedy and comedy helps me to describe the different ways violence functions in these two Psalms. My argument is that Psalm 109 offers an essentially comic view of violence, whereas Psalm 137’s violence is part of a tragic worldview. In tragic contexts, violence often reveals the inhumane and hideous aspects of violence and revenge. In an unvarnished fashion, tragedy portrays the destructive aftermath of violence. A classic example is Shakespeare’s Hamlet, in which the tragic hero commits violent acts in a way that leads the audience to the realization of the horrifying reality of violence. In comparison, a comic structure may incorporate violence and revenge in similar ways as tragic texts, but the trajectory of the violence is socially restorative. The comic worldview utilizes violence as a representation of justice that is likely to bring about social harmony. In comic contexts, the desire for violence is not an experience of moral or ethical compromise for the protagonist or the audience. Instead, the representation of violence perpetrated against an enemy is a triumph of justice and righteousness that restores balance to the world and punishes those who are obviously (in the context of the narrative, at least) deserving punishment. The tragic portrayal of violence and revenge reveals the brutality of such desires and the ethically compromising effects of such desires. In the comic structure, the complex experience of violence is overshadowed by the fundamental correctness of such desires.

An important point that Cottrill (2012:377) illustrates in her discussion about the differences between tragic and comic narratives is that in the comic narrative, the violence that is expressed is there to restore social justice. In the #FeesMustFall Movement, the protest started as a voice for the poor in regard to student fees, but then metamorphosed into a political movement against multiple social issues that needed to be addressed and rectified. As with her description of comic narrative, the tragic violence and revenge become a portrayal of the absolute desire to rectify this social disorder. The desire surpasses the ethical boundaries of what is the right procedure to address the problem, so as to accomplish the desire of rectifying the social injustices of the past. The original problem of the poor not being able to pay the high fees for universities became a voice, became a point of

departure, to address previously unheard voices that still remained and had not been addressed. The same situation is viewed in Psalm 109 where the prosecutors cursed the accuser or the one praying the psalm for neglecting the poor, an unheard voice (v. 16), and in the end the violence (curses) in the psalm is used to address the situation of the accuser, the one praying the psalm, leaving the poor again as an unheard voice.

The question remains as to whether the outcome of the protest achieved justice as an act of deliverance and salvation, or if the “inconvenient truths” as Muller (2016) describes his statements, mean that justice was only achieved in regard to certain political agendas, leaving the poor still as an unheard voice in the protest.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Psalm 109 is viewed as one of the imprecatory psalms, better understood as an emotional lament. In the psalm the psalmist is accused of multiple things, especially for neglecting the poor (v. 16). As the accused, the psalmist is cursed (violent actions) by the prosecutors in the psalm for not looking after the poor, the unheard voices of their social context. In a plea for justice, the psalmist redirects his plea towards YHWH for a saving intervention and in this the psalmist redirects the curses (violent actions) towards the prosecutors, leaving the voice of the poor unheard again. Only the need and the voice of the psalmist are addressed. The psalmist uses the poor (vv. 16, 22, 21) and the association with the poor as a reason why YHWH will intervene and help him. In the end the psalmist does not help or show kindness towards the poor (that of which he was accused in v. 16), nor does he become a voice for the poor. Although in the end the prosecutors and the psalmist as the accuser address their own problems and agendas, the poor are still heard by YHWH (v. 31). As with Psalm 109, the #FeesMustFall Movement started by addressing the needs for the poor, the unheard voices. During the protest the agenda changed to address previously unheard voices and issues of the past, turning to violent actions as the desire to rectify these past injustices surpassed ethical and moral issues, in the process leaving the poor once again an unheard voice.

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**Keywords**

**Psalm 109**

**#FeesMustFall**

**Violence**

**Trefwoorde**

**Psalm 109**

**#FeesMustFall**

**Geweld**