

Josué D. López Figueroa
OT 642 – Psalms
Dr. R. Bryan Widbin

PRECIS

Psalm 12

CULTURAL ORIENTATION:

(1) Concrete Thinking –

- (a) Not *faith* nor *truth*, as abstract concepts, are said to have vanished but the *faithful one* and the *true ones* (v.2). The people that could be considered as genuine and honest practitioners of the covenant/law were missing.
- (b) The fact that the *lawful ones* are disappearing is demonstrated by the actions of those who are left and from which deliverance is expected. These are liars, people with hidden intentions, overconfident boasters that think themselves untouchable and that, by benefit of their position, are bringing pain to the psalmist alongside the poor and needy (v.3, 5, 6).
- (c) The psalmist talks about the intentions and actions of the *unfaithful* by giving attention to their *lips*, their *speaking*, and the fact that they are doing real *damage* (v. 3, 5).
- (d) The petition of the psalmist is very tangible, wishing for the *deceitful* lips of the liars to be *cut off* by God so they can do no more harm (v.4).
- (e) We know that the *lawless* are hurting people because the poor have been *plundered* and their agony is shown by their *moaning* (v. 6).
- (f) God, on the other hand, also *speaks* and the psalmist demonstrate that He is going to act by telling us – using God’s words- that He will *arise* to help the needy (v.6).
- (g) The author also contrasts the vain words of the *unfaithful* to the word of God. While their speech is filled with lies, vanity, arrogance and ill intentions, God’s word is *pure*. How pure? Like *refined silver* that has been purified in a furnace. In this way, the author gives us a concrete image so we can understand that God’s word (Torah) has more weight, value, and power that those of the *lawless* (v.7).

(2) Cyclical Thinking –

- (a) This psalm starts with a direct petition for God’s aid. The *faithful* are gone, or are in danger, because there are some people favoring a life of division, rudeness, and lawlessness (v.1, 3, 9).
- (b) The psalm starts with the cry of “help” (v.2) and ends questioning *if* God will help and protect those who need Him in this time of disarray (v.8).
- (c) The psalm starts with the *faithful* and *true ones* being *gone* and “*vanished from among human beings*” (v.2) and ends with a statement that can be both a explanation of why the *faithful* have vanished or a warning to be heeded if the people do not want the situation to repeat itself (v. 9). The explanation may be that it is obvious that the *lawless* will go around walking with confidence because the people (the same people of v.2) has started prizing *rudeness* (the *unfaithful* live style) above the Torah. Alternatively, it may be a warning to the *faithful* that

if they value things that are contrary to the Torah the *lawless* will rule and they will bring division, destruction and oppression to Israel.

(3) Universal Thinking –

- (a) The lack of separation between the secular and the sacred is evident. The *faithful* and the *true ones* are those that are construed as God-fearing people (v.2 with v.4, 6,7, 8). They are the ones in need of divine help from, and are contrasted with, the *lawless* and the *liars* (v.3, 5, 9). They are all part of the *human beings* (although in verse one it seems that this category -*human beings*- is used in reference of the group of people that no longer have God-fearing, Torah-obedient, members in their midst).
- (b) From the psalmist viewpoint, whatever these *lawless* people are doing is contrary to God's design and thus, it's disrupting the most vulnerable members of society. There is no separation between regular life and religious life. On the contrary, it is *because* these people are leaving the way of life brought forth by God and His commandments that society is in peril. *Lawlessness* have consequences for the daily life of the Israelite.

(4) Group Centeredness –

- (a) Part of the priority that the Jewish people gave to the collective can be seen above, in the elements of *universal thinking*.
- (b) There is a two-fold anxiety that the *liars* and *lawless* people are bringing to the group: (1) it appears that they are bringing division to the God's people (v.3,9) and (2) they are harming those in the community who are penniless and powerless (v. 5,6). For the Law-obedient member of the people of God, harming the lesser ones of the community is harming everybody. If there's division and harm within the people of God that means that God's will and design for the nation is not being fulfilled. Included in that design, of course, is the responsibility of treating each other with mercy, love, kindness, and justice (*mishpat*).

(5) Subtle Expressions –

- (a) Work needs to be done to identify who the *faithful one* is (singular) and who are the *true ones* (plural). Is the *faithful one* the King? Are the *true ones* the judges, for example? Are they referring to other leaders that are high enough to cause trouble for the rest of the nation (v.5,6)?
- (b) What does it mean "*lip with divisions*"? Are these people dividing the nation or are they divided amongst themselves? After all, they lie to one another (v.3) and cause trouble to the community (v. 5,6).
- (c) What does the expression "*with a heart and a heart*" mean (v.3)? Are they lying to themselves? Are they speaking with hidden agendas in mind?
- (d) What can be gathered from the statement "*tongue speaking big stuff*"? Lies? Arrogance? Boasting? Self-confidence at the cost of the Torah and a relationship with God (v.5)?
- (e) How is the *plundering of the poor* being enacted (v.6)? Is it literal or metaphorical?
- (f) How exactly is God going to help the poor and the needy (v.6)? Is He going to deliver them through the King, through the community, or the prophets? Are His *sayings* (v. 7) the help that God is offering so they can defy the lies and walk the

right path? After all, the speech of the *lawless* is being contrasted with the *sayings* of the Lord.

(g) Is verse 8 validating the response of the Lord or showing doubt about it?

(6) Presence -

- (a) The desire for the deliverance and the presence of God amid the psalmist tribulation is clear from the beginning. First, he asks directly for God's help (v.2). Second, the presence of the Lord is felt throughout the whole psalm as He is mentioned five times (vs. 2, 4, 6, 7, and 8).
- (b) It is to God that the petition to stop these *lawless* people is made (v.4) in the hope that He will bring peace, order, and justice once again. If so, the community will be working according to God's design, being fruitful in communion.
- (c) It is the Lord who sees the condition of His people (much like in Exodus and in accordance to His Law) and gives His word that He will intervene. The Lord is not far from the pain of His children. In fact, He is among them and He will heed their call for justice and deliverance (v.6).

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

(1) Components – Zion, Jerusalem, the King or the Torah are not mentioned directly in this psalm, but we will continue with the presupposition that it responds to the Zion tradition.

- (a) *Zion is the center of life where God's presence is most palpable:* In Zion justice should reign. The "mishpat", the *shared life*, should flourish. Not so in this psalm. There is a group of -possibly- leaders that are bringing division, lies, lawlessness and harm to the nation of God, especially to those who are the most vulnerable (v.2, 5, 6).
- (b) *Life in Zion is productive and fruitful:* Again, not in this psalm were the author is asking for help because a group of *unfaithful* citizens are distorting God's vision for Jerusalem (v.2, 8).
- (c) *In Zion life is protected from evil:* This is especially important in this psalm were the unruly Israelites are plotting to do damage (v.4) and are boasting that no one will be able to stop them (v.4b). The theft that the poor are being subjected to and their cry for help (v.6) are evidence enough that, if Zion is supposed to be a place of protection, now is not. Maybe that's why Zion nor Jerusalem are mentioned in this psalm: they have failed their purpose.

(2) Vehicles –

- (a) *King* – it is possible that the *faithful one* may be reference to the King (v.2).
- (b) *Jerusalem* – as stated earlier, Jerusalem is not mentioned in this psalm, possibly because the Holy City has failed in its promise of protection and provision. The needy were being robbed and left moaning for help (v.6).
- (c) *Temple* – a slight reference to the temple may be found in verse 6b where God says, "Now I do arise!". From where? Considering that we are working within a centralized theology where God is abiding in a specific place, we can conclude that God will be arising from the Temple to help His people.
- (d) *Torah* – Possibly this is the most present *vehicle* in this psalm. At the beginning, we are said that there are no more faithful and true ones *among human beings* (v.2). At the end, we are told that when *rudeness is prized by human beings* (v.9) the *lawless* will move about freely. If the people who are not obeying the Law of

God are those who are doing damage to God’s people (v.5), then we must identify the *faithful one* and the *true ones* as those who, conversely, obey and follow God’s Law (Torah). On the other hand, God says in this psalm that He is going to help the poor and needy (v.6). This help seems to be connected to the *sayings of the Lord* (v.7). Maybe it is so because God’s Law (*sayings*) will help unmask the liars and give them their due punishment.

- (3) **Provision** – The specific concern of this psalm is for those that, not only are marginalized, but are *being* marginalized. There is alarm for those who are being damaged, plundered, and hurt (v.6). The whole psalm is a prayer asking God to help the needy and poor from such a strenuous situation (v.6,8).

LITERARY FORM

(1) Structure

- (a) *Theme*: The *motif* of this psalm can be found in the petition-protest of verse 2. Not wasting any time or space, the psalmist starts asking for God’s help because, amid *human beings* (the nation of Israel? other nations?), there seems to be no more faithful and true ones to God and His Law. *Faithful one* and *true ones* may be a designation for God and His people or for God/the King and His chosen ones. It is strange the use of *human beings* when the psalmist could use the geographical location, Jerusalem, or the name of the nation, Israel. Is the psalmist referring to people other than Israelites?
- (b) *Mode of Development*: There are *contrasting* elements in this psalm alongside *significant repetition*. The *contrast* can be seen between the faithful and true (v.2), the poor and needy (v. 6), and the Lord (v.2,4,6,7,8) versus the lying, vociferous, haughty and lawless ones (v.3, 5, 9). The *significant repetition* can be counted as follows: to *speak* or *say* something is mentioned six times (6x), the word *lip* is written three times (3x), *help* is stated three fold (3x) and the word *Lord* is presented six times in this psalm (6x = 5x for God + 1x as a verb (v.5)).
- (c) *Refrain*: The *refrain* can be found in verses 8 and 9. As the psalm closes, the prayer comes full cycle in these verses by reprising the elements of the *theme*. At the start, we had a petition of help (v.2) that is found again in verse 8. This time around, though, the petition is reformulated as a doubtful question. On the other hand, in the beginning we were introduced to a group of people (*human beings*) that were devoid of law, faith, and truth (v.2) these are mentioned again as the possible fertile ground that can give way to the lawless (v.9).

(2) Texture

- (a) *Balanced Lines*:

WIDBIN TRANSLATION

1

Help, Lord!
 For the **faithful one** is gone
 For the **true ones** have vanished
 From among human beings.

} Quatrain:
 Bicolon (2+2)
 Bicolon (2+2)

2

Lies do they speak **one to another**
 From a lip with divisions with a heart and a heart do **they speak**

} Bicolon (2+2)

3	May the Lord cut off all duplicitous lips with divisions Any tongue speaking big stuff	}	Bicolon (4+3)
4	The one that says, "By our tongues we will do damage! With these lips of ours who can lord it over us!"	}	Bicolon (4+4)
5	From the plundering of the poor From the moaning of the needy "Now I do arise!" let the Lord say "I do offer him the help he deserves!"	}	Quatrain: Bicolon (2+2) Bicolon (4+4), <i>JUSTICE, PROVISION</i>
6	The sayings of the Lord are pure sayings Silver purged in a furnace Refined seven-times in an earthen works	}	Tricolon (4+3+3)
7	You Lord, do you help them?! Do you protect him permanently from this group?!	}	Bicolon (2+3), <i>PROTECTION</i>
8	Round about the lawless prowl When rudeness is prized by human beings	}	Bicolon (3+3)

(b) *Movement between lines:*

- (1) Synthetical or next step development can be seen in lines 1, 4, 5-8.
- (2) Synonymous development is found in lines 2, 3 and 7.

(c) *Imagery:*

(1) Metaphor:

- a. Line 2: 'a lip with divisions with a heart and heart' is used to emphasize the duplicity and the lies in the speech of the *lawless*.
- b. Line 6: 'silver purged in a furnace/refined seven-times in an earthen works' helps the reader or hearer concretely understand *how pure* the sayings of the Lord are.

(2) Anthropomorphism:

- a. Line 3: the psalmist asks God to 'cut off' the liars with internal divisions of their own. It seems like an action done with a person with a sword giving God, thus, a body.
- b. Line 5: 'Now I do arise!' gives us the image of God, with a body, getting up -possibly from the temple- and going to help the needy.

(3) Synecdoche can be found in line 3 where 'all duplicitous lips' and 'any tongue speaking' are used to referred to human beings although the image is concentrating in their lips and tongues.

(4) Apostrophe may be seen in line 4 were the *liars* and *lawless ones* swear to do damage by referring directly to their tongues and lips.

(5) There may be some intentional ambiguity in lines 2 and 3. In line 2 the psalmist describes they *liars* as people with 'lip with divisions.' In line 3,

however, the author asks that those with ‘*lip with divisions*’, which he now refer to as ‘*duplicitous lips*’, may be ‘*cut off*’ by the Lord creating ‘*divisions*’ among them. Therefore, we may see a play on words were *division* in line 2 is a description of the liars and *divisions* in line 3 is what God is going to cause among the *liars* if the plea of the psalmist is heard and answered.

CULTIC FUNCTION

- (1) **Gunkel** – According to this method, this psalm is one of **Special Occasion of Distress**. From the start this psalm is asking for God’s help (v.2) amid a problematic and dangerous situation (v. 2-5). It probable that this may be a psalm written after a defeat in war seeing as these *liars* and *lawless ones* are described as prowling about and as already bringing some suffering to the people (v.5,6, and 9).
- (2) **Westermann** – This is a **Lamenting Praise** because it is directly challenging God to do something about the situation that the people are in. This can be gathered, specially, from verses 2, 4, and 8. The psalmist first asks for help, for God to punish the *liars*, and then challenges God to act.
- (3) **Brueggemann** – There is no doubt that this is a **Dislocation** psalm. The author is definitely “acknowledging a place of discontinuity” (v.2), “and the emotional effects it has brought about” (v.5, 6), and “appealing for God’s attention and activity in that place”¹ (v. 2, 4, 6, 8).
- (4) **Elements** –
 - (a) *Acknowledge* – that there are *liars* and *lawless ones* surrounding the people of God and that the most vulnerable are suffering.
 - (b) *Articulate* – the trouble is coming, apparently, from the inside of Israel were people are giving way to the *lawless* by being too lenient with those who don’t obey God’s Law. In this respect, it is an external struggle.
 - (c) *Affirm* – Even though the situation is dire, God’s presence is affirmed from the very beginning of the psalm (v.2) to the end (v. 8). The psalmist is appealing to God to do something about their situation because He knows God has the power to act and be effective.

APPLICATION

We may encounter ourselves in many a situation where we are surrounded by people invested in lying and glorifying behaviors that are contrary to the character and Word of God. We may have to endure times were corrupted and ill intended people seem to have control of our church, workplace and government. In those times we must lift our voices to God in protest and ask for his help. We must be reassured that following His word will help us fight back the lies of the lawless ones and that they will be put to shame by our very obedience to the Word of God.

¹ Handout from professor Widbin: **What the Psalms Do: Prayer for Belonging and Becoming.**