PSALM 12: COMPLAINT OF THE INDIVIDUAL; CONGREGATIONAL LAMENT

Text

Can we take for granted the personal meaning of *ḥāsîd,* "faithful one," and *'ĕmûnîm,* "honest ones," in v. 2, or do we have to alter the consonants to stand for "piety" and "faithfulness"? More important, does *ḥāsîd* point to the particular sufferer who recites the psalm? And does the last line in v. 6 refer to the individual or more generically to all who are oppressed (cf. *RSV,* "I will place him in the safety for which he longs," and *TEV,* "I will give them the security they long for")? Here I follow a modified individual interpretation.

Structure

	MT	RSV
I. Superscription	1	—
II. Initial plea (invocation) and complaint (petition)	2-3	1-2
III. Imprecation against enemies	4-5	3-4
A. Imprecation	4	3
B. Motivation	5	4
IV. Salvation oracle	6	5
V. Affirmation of confidence (hymnic and plaintive)	7-9	6-8

The SUPERSCRIPTION is of the same type as the ones in Psalms 4–6 (→ Ps 11:1).

The plea for help, "Save, O Lord!" (v. 2a), sounds and functions like an SOS call, for it signals near catastrophe. In everyday discourse the addressee would probably reply, "What is the matter?" and "What do you need?" Then the one pleading for help would state the case, complain, and make a request. The same sequence of elements, or steps in ritual, can be observed in vv. 2-3, with only the pitying question omitted. Two narrative sections, 2 Sam 14:4-7 and 2 Kgs 6:26-29, are excellent examples of this formal order. INITIAL PLEA for help and adjoining COMPLAINT serve at the same time as invocation and petition respectively. The most plausible reason for leaving out a specified request for help seems to be that it might sound immodest or superfluous. Needless to say, the OT cry for help, "Save me (plus appellation)," is an expression of elementary human misery (cf. 7:2 [*RSV* 1]; Boecker, 61-66).

Vv. 4-5, a violent IMPRECATION, are tied closely to the preceding section of complaint and petition. They spell out a necessary sequel to the request for help. Refutation, even annihilation, of those responsible for an imminent catastrophe is part of the ritual concern (cf. Gerstenberger, "Enemies"). For different theories concerning the identity of the enemies in the Psalter, cf. Birkeland; Becker, *Wege;* Keel, *Feinde.* A psychological and sociological explanation of the enemies must be preferred over a merely political, ideological, or religious interpretation. The archetypal forces of evil have to be warded off if the sufferer is to be saved. The wicked are characterized by their own words, which prove their hopeless depravation and arrogance (Pss 3:3 [*RSV* 2]; 10:4, 6, 13; 11:1; 22:9 [*RSV* 8]; etc.).

Divine oracles (v. 6) certainly belonged to the prayer service for an individual in need. Often the prayer clearly expects Yahweh's answer (Ps 35:3) or a sign from him (Ps 5:4 [*RSV* 3]). Yet one could not expect the oracle to be incorporated into a text to be recited by worshipers. Either some scribe copied the two different genres from different sources into one psalm, or the prayer represents a later stage of development, when oracles already were integral parts of congregational liturgies (see Psalms 91 and 121). In either case, in Psalm 12 the oracle is central. It is emphasized by the citation formula "says the Lord" (Isa 1:11, 18; 33:10; 40:1, 25; 41:21; 66:9), which is not to be confused with the prophetic "thus said the Lord" (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13). The oracle states motivation (v. 6a) and execution (v. 6b-c) of Yahweh's help, the closest parallel being Isa 33:10 (see Gerstenberger, "Psalm 12"; Genre). As a rule, however, salvation or condemnation oracles in the OT are preserved outside the complaint psalms of the individual (see, e.g., Isa 43:1-3; 48:17-19; 51:7-8; Jer 14:10; 15:11, 19-21; Begrich; Schoors).

The AFFIRMATION OF CONFIDENCE in vv. 7-9 is not homogeneous in form-critical terms. Different motivations lead to different formal expressions. A general, almost proverbial statement (cf. Prov 30:5) responds to the oracle (v. 7). Direct hymnic address of Yahweh (v. 8), according to Crüsemann (p. 291), is appropriate for individual complaints. It is, to say the least, an indigenous form of praise (cf. Pss 4:9 [*RSV* 8]; 5:13 [*RSV* 12]; 16:5; 18:28-29 [*RSV* 27-28]; 38:16 [*RSV* 15]; 62:13 [*RSV* 12]; 82:8; etc.). Because the praise follows the oracle, it does not seek to provoke Yahweh to help, but it strengthens the expression of trust: Yahweh's promise will come true! The shift of suffixes in the MT may be original: "You, Yahweh, safeguard *them* [your words]; you protect *him* [or according to some Hebrew manuscripts and the LXX, *us*] always from that kind of person." The closing couplet (v. 9), in true lament fashion, adds a dark background of continuing danger from wicked people to the affirmation of confidence (cf. Pss 11:2-3; 59:4, 7, 15 [*RSV* 3, 6, 14]) (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4B for a discussion of all form-elements).

Genre

Is Psalm 12 individual or communal prayer? Although Gunkel (pp. 43-44) and Mowinckel (*W* I, 194, 200) stressed the lack of personal profile and the seemingly communal aspects of this psalm (using the catchwords "generalization," "group thinking," and "word theology"), more recent exegetes (e.g., Westermann, *Praise;* Kraus, *Psalmen;* Beyerlin) have argued in favor of individual use. The most frequent classification is (cult) PROPHETIC LITURGY (cf. H. Gunkel, "Jesaja 33, eine prophetische Liturgie," *ZAW* 42 [1924] 177-208; Mowinckel, *PsSt* III, 62-63; Jeremias, *Kultprophetie,* 112-14). Such designation potentially merges individual and collective aspects. The supplicant receives word from Yahweh, within the community of worshipers who are vitally interested in the well-being of all members (see Psalms 3–7), that salvation is certain. The cultic prophet, whoever that may be (see Johnson; R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980]), acts as the officiant. While the communal setting certainly is right for Psalm 12 and related texts (e.g., Isaiah 33 and Psalms 14 and 75), prophetic participation at best remains obscure. The images of the sufferer and the enemy are generalized, which speaks against the ad hoc intervention of a prophet. Rather, a complaint that was originally from an individual became a congregational lament that preserves its concern for the welfare of individuals.

Setting

On the basis of genre analysis, we have to distinguish two successive settings of this psalm. Mowinckel, in his early analysis of Psalm 12, sketches the original situation. Slanderous talk as well as outright cursing was considered dangerous in the highest degree (v. 3; Mowinckel, *PsSt* I, 53-55, 147-48). It needed to be counteracted by official, i.e., cultic, means. Analogies from distant cultures are numerous (Fortune; Kluckhohn). The person threatened by such evil machinations needed a prayer ceremony under the leadership of an appropriate liturgist. The prayer, recited for or by the sufferer, concentrated on two related issues: a call on Yahweh (1) for help and (2) against the "cunning, glib, slick lips" (vv. 3-4) who poison life (cf. Klopfenstein, 315-20). The characterization of the evil ones by their own words (v. 5) suggests that they used magic formulas in defiant rebellion against the official religion. Perhaps the supplicant who would use Psalm 12 had already undergone a clearance by ordeal (Num 5:11-31). If so, he or she had already been proven to be just and could boldly use strong words against the wicked ones. The oracle in v. 6 could be taken for granted. Prayer (vv. 2-5), oracle (v. 6), and response (vv. 7-9) were thus one liturgical unit. Originally the psalm would have been used by small, familiar groups to favor individual sufferers (Gerstenberger and Schrage, 37-41, 122-25). The individual persons, who shine through in v. 2 ("a faithful one is done with"), v. 6 ("at whom he scoffs"), and v. 8 ("you protect *him*"), support this interpretation.

On the other hand, there is abundant evidence of congregational use. The initial cry for help in the LXX is still "Help *me*!" but in the MT it has been generalized to "Help!" The oppressors act as a powerful group; they use malicious, if not magical, words against the supplicants (cf. Pss 10:6-7; 73:6-11; 109:2-5; Isa 28:15; 32:7). The latter are definitely a victimized part of society, described by the old couplet *'ānî wĕ'ebyôn,* "miserable and needy" (note the singular use in Pss 40:18 [*RSV* 17]; 86:1; 109:16; and shift into plural in Jer 2:34; 5:26-28; Isa 14:30; Pss 72:12-14; 140:13-14 [*RSV* 12-13]; 132:15). Psalm 12, especially v. 6, calls upon the poor as a community. The complaining, the pleading, and the certainty of being heard are couched, in the present text, more in congregational than in familial terms. The conclusion is unavoidable. Early Jewish communities have remodeled an old individual complaint to accommodate it to congregational services for the poor and oppressed (cf. Nehemiah 5).

Intention

Services of familial prayer and congregational lamentation were to ward off dangers to individual and community that resulted from abuse of magical or political power (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4B).

Bibliography

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PSALM 13: COMPLAINT OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Structure

	MT	RSV
I. Superscription	1	—
II. Invocation and complaint	2-3	1-2
III. Petition	4-5	3-4
A. Petition proper	4	3
B. Motivation: rebuttal of enemies	5	4
IV. Praise	6	5-6
A. Affirmation of confidence	6a-b	5
B. Vow	6c-d	6

Superscriptions are late additions to the Psalms (see "Introduction to Psalms," section 1). In this case we have a technical musical remark and a reference to Davidic origin or a Davidic kind of performance (see Psalms 4 and 11).

A textbook example of individual complaint (with Gunkel, 46; against Kraus, *Psalmen* I, 240; see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4B), the

prayer begins with a rather impertinent fourfold (or fivefold) query. This COMPLAINT proceeds from Yahweh's having forsaken the supplicant (v. 2; cf. Ps 22:2-3 [*RSV* 1-2]) in unbearable suffering (v. 3a-b) to a desperate outcry against the enemy (v. 3c; cf. Sabourin, II, 12; Ridderbos, 151; Westermann, *Praise*, 68). The rhetorical question "How long?" (*'ad-'ānâ* or *'ad-mātay*) belongs to the stock expressions of ancient Near Eastern psalmography (Baumann; Widengren, *Psalms*, 93-257; Mayer, 92-93, 107). The long prayer to Ishtar, for example, contains these phrases:

> How long, O my Lady, shall my adversaries be looking upon me,
> In lying and untruth shall they plan evil against me,
> Shall my pursuers and those who exult over me rage against me?
> How long, O my Lady, shall the crippled and weak seek me out?
>
> * * * * *
>
> How long, O my Lady, wilt thou be angered so that thy face is turned away?
> How long, O my Lady, wilt thou be infuriated so that thy spirit is enraged?
>
> (*ANET*, 384-85)

The formal similarities are striking (interrogative; vocative with personal suffix; question), as are the parallels in substance (action of enemies; reaction of society; wrath of deity). Analogous use of such phrases in various literary contexts of the OT may tell us something about their function. In Exod 16:28; Num 14:11, 27; Josh 18:3, Yahweh or Joshua rebukes Israel by using the question "How long?" In Exod 10:3 Moses tries to correct Pharaoh; in 1 Sam 1:14 Eli censures Hannah; in Job 8:2 and 18:2 Job's critics open their charge by asking, "How long?" The particle in all these instances introduces reproachful speech, apparently after repeated efforts to amend a situation have failed. Job 19:2-3 is very characteristic in this regard:

> How long will you torment me . . . ?
> These ten times you have cast reproach upon me. . . .

The undertone in all these passages is that a change is overdue (see Ps 6:4 [*RSV* 3]).

The PETITION (vv. 4-5), couched as usual in imperative forms, resumes direct address of Yahweh ("Lord, *my* God"; cf. the prayer to Ishtar cited above; Vorländer), which is typical for the request element (Pss 3:8 [*RSV* 7]; 5:9 [*RSV* 8]; 6:2-3, 5 [*RSV* 1-2, 4]; 35:22-24; Gerstenberger, *Mensch*, 104-10, 119-27). In their content, petitions tend to remain general. Here they plead for divine attention (cf. Pss 80:15 [*RSV* 14]; 102:20 [*RSV* 19]; Isa 63:15), a favorable oracle ("answer me," v. 4; cf. Pss 4:2 [*RSV* 1]; 27:7; 55:3 [*RSV* 2]; 69:14, 17-18 [*RSV* 13, 16-17]; 86:1; 102:3 [*RSV* 2]; 108:7 [*RSV* 6]; 119:145; 143:1, 7), and restoration of life (v. 4b, literally "brighten my eyes"; cf. 1 Sam 14:27, 29; Kraus, *Psalmen* I, 243). To conclude from v. 4b that supplicants reciting Psalm 13 were suffering from eye disease (Schmidt, *Psalmen*, 22) is as ill founded as it is to

argue that one particular refugee to the temple was praying against death during incubation ("lest I die by sleeping," i.e., in the temple; Delekat, 54-55). The "lest" clauses in vv. 4-5 are peculiar to this petition and a few others (Gen 19:19; Pss 7:3 [*RSV* 2]; 28:1; 38:17). They are uttered because the supplicant envisions evil consequences in the event that the intended benefactor does not listen. In Ps 13:4-5, Yahweh himself should act to prevent a disaster. The subordinate clauses serve as strong motivations to fulfill what is being requested.

The main structural problem arises in v. 6, the *Praise* element. Must we imagine a favorable oracle to have been given between vv. 5 and 6, as in Ps 12:6 (*RSV* 5)? Has the whole psalm been recited only after salvation, the complaint section being mere retrospection? Many commentators think so (e.g., Weiser, *Psalms*, 163; Delekat, 54-55; Westermann, *Praise*, 80: "no longer more lament, but lament that has been turned to praise"; Kraus, *Psalmen* I, 240). The prayer would thus become a thanksgiving hymn. Praise elements, however, function in individual complaints in a precursory fashion before salvation materializes, as buttresses of petition (see Pss 5:5-7 [*RSV* 4-6]; 31:8-9 [*RSV* 7-8]; Gunkel and Begrich, 248-49; W. Beyerlin, *"tôdā"* (see listing at Psalm 5). The overall structure of Psalm 13 is classical: complaint-petition-praise, a ziggurat of three liturgical steps (Seybold, *Gebet*, 159), a calming down of agitated waves (Ridderbos, 152).

Genre

Psalm 13 is a true COMPLAINT psalm for individuals (see Psalms 3 and 31). It is not a first-person royal or communal prayer, as Mowinckel and other Scandinavian scholars claim (cf. *W* I, 219, 229-30, 242-46; Bentzen; Widengren, *Königtum*). The reference to *'ōyēb*, "enemy," in v. 3 certainly does not suffice to make it a national lament (cf. Birkeland). Likewise, Weiser's understanding of Psalm 13 as a thanksgiving hymn must be rejected. This poem cannot be bisected: it does not consist of an original complaint (vv. 1-5) to which were added, after the supplicant's cure, some lines of praise (v. 6; against Delekat; Seybold). In light of all we know about the complaint genre, it fits naturally into this category (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4B).

Setting

Individual complaints were used in worship services for suffering persons (see Psalms 3–7). Psalm 13 may have been recited in cases of prolonged illness. As the reproachful questions in vv. 2-3 suggest, previous attempts to secure health and well-being have failed. The prayer service, then, was a renewed effort to gain Yahweh's favor.

Intention

Gunkel and Begrich's assertion that sick or distressed persons in primitive societies were ordinarily left to their fate (pp. 206-8, quoting L. Lévy-Bruhl, *Die geistige Welt der Primitiven* [München: Bruckmann, 1927; repr. Düssel-

dorf/Köln: Diederichs, 1959]) certainly is not the whole truth. Even admitting that every society—including our own, to a horrifying extent—does abandon "dangerous" people, ancient societies, perhaps much more so than modern ones, tried to protect and rehabilitate their weakened or endangered members. Psalm 13 is an example of that struggle for rehabilitation on the familial level of social organization (see Gerstenberger and Schrage, 122-25).

Bibliography

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