PSALM 7:
COMPLAINT OF THE INDIVIDUAL; PROTESTATION OF INNOCENCE

Text

The textual difficulties of v. 13a have a bearing on the discussion of genre. The colon reads literally, "If he does not return [or "does not again"], he will whet his sword." Who is *he*? Numerous emendations have failed to resolve this problem (cf. Dahood, I, 46: *'im-le' yāšûb,* "O that Victor would again . . . ," postulating a hitherto unknown Hebrew word *le'*, "victorious"). The sentence most probably is an elliptical oath, serving as a strong assertion: "Indeed, he [i.e., the enemy] again whets his sword" (Kraus, *Psalmen* I, 199; Pss 37:14; 57:5 [*RSV* 4]; 64:3-5 [*RSV* 2-4]). This reading makes vv. 13-15 a renewed complaint.

Structure

	MT	RSV
I. Superscription	1	—
II. Invocation, initial plea	2-3	1-2
A. Appellation	2aα	1aα
B. Affirmation of confidence	2aβ	1aβ
C. Petition	2b	1b
D. Complaint	3	2
III. Confession of innocence	4-6	3-5

IV. Petition	7-10b	6-9b
V. Hymnic praise	10c-12	9c-11
VI. Complaint	13-15	12-14
VII. Imprecation of enemies	16-17	15-16
VIII. Vow	18	17

The particulars of the SUPERSCRIPTION are rather dubious. Is "Cush" identical with the Cushite in 2 Sam 18:20-32? In any case, the reference to David's biography constitutes an early interpretation of the psalm (see Psalms 3 and 54).

For an INVOCATION we have a complex unit (vv. 2-3), comprising all the vital parts of a complaint psalm (cf. outline above). Quite possibly this unit, which now serves as an introduction to the larger prayer, had formerly been used alone as a request for help. For the background of the "scream for help" *hôšî'ēnî*, "save me," see Boecker, 61-67. Similar mixed invocations are found in Pss 6:2-5 (*RSV* 1-4); 12:2-3 (*RSV* 1-2); 31:2-3 (*RSV* 1-2); etc.

After this overture the supplicant, calling a second time on Yahweh, recited a conditional curse against himself (vv. 4-6). In case the charges brought against him should prove correct, he would accept the most severe consequences. This purgatory oath (cf. F. Horst, "Der Eid im Alten Testament," in *Gottes Recht* [TBü 12; Munich: Kaiser, 1961] 294ff. [repr. from *EvT* 17 (1957) 367ff.]) has been integrated into the prayer ritual. It consists of three protases and three corresponding apodoses (Macholz). The closest formal parallel in the OT is Job 31:5-40, containing a series of at least ten purificatory oaths (Murphy, FOTL XIII, 38-39), while Ps 26:4-6 has only plain statements of a confessional character ("I have not done . . . "; cf. the Egyptian Book of the Dead, ch. 125 [*ANET*, 34-36]).

The recital continues with an extensive and vehement appeal for justice (vv. 7-10b; juridical language in petition occurs also in Pss 26:1; 35:23-24; 43:1; Gunkel and Begrich, 195, 221; Schmidt, *Gebet*). Without any hesitation, Yahweh, the Heavenly Judge, is called upon. Some commentators marvel at the boldness and the cosmic dimensions involved and consider this feature a display of individual self-confidence befitting a king (Schmidt, *Gebet*, 17-18; Kraus, *Psalmen* I, 195-96; Widengren, *Königtum*, 67-68). Others, by way of textual emendations and different translations, reduce the appeal for help to its likely family and clan horizon (Delekat, 61ff.; see Setting). In any case, the prayer can in no way be considered an exaggerated outcry of one historical individual (against most interpreters, who link individual complaints with biographical moments instead of with liturgical situations). Psalm 7, however, as well as the other laments, does not report a single incident, for instance, of somebody being accused of theft. Rather, the complaint represents an accumulation of the agonies of generations of supplicants facing unfounded charges of various types. Appealing to the Divine Judge for help is, in fact, part and parcel of the prayer ritual in many cultures, especially those of the ancient Near East (Ebeling; 30:8; 58:16; 152b:6-8, all instances in which the supplicant implores the deity to conduct his trial: e.g., *dajanāti dīni dīnī*, "thou art my judge, lead my trial" [ibid., 120:8]; see also A. Gamper, *Gott als Richter in Mesopotamien und im Alten Testament* [Innsbruck: Wagner, 1966]; Mayer, 212, 221-25).

A fragment of a HYMN (vv. 10c-12; the copulative *wĕ*, "and," connects hymn to petition) is added; it is participial in form (Crüsemann, 81ff.) and descriptive in type (Westermann, *Praise*, 116ff.; a rigid distinction between "declarative" and "descriptive" hymns is impossible, however). The hymnic element refers to Yahweh in the third person to praise his qualities as a judge. He is righteous (v. 12), he investigates people (*bāḥan*, "test," v. 10c), he shelters and saves the oppressed (v. 11), and he avenges those who have been wronged (v. 12b). These statements are all common in administering the law to individuals. The hymnic praise underlines the preceding petition; possibly it was gleaned from a more elaborate song or ritual, since its components seem to be quite formulaic (on v. 10c-d, cf. Jer 11:20; 20:12; 1 Chr 29:17; on v. 12a, cf. Jer 11:20; Ps 9:5 [*RSV* 4]; on hymnic parts within complaint songs see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4B; Ps 5:5-7 [*RSV* 4-6]).

Strangely enough, there is another round of complaining and of condemning enemies (vv. 13-17) before the prayer ends in a vow to keep a thanksgiving service (v. 18; cf. Pss 35:18; 43:4-5; 51:15 [*RSV* 13]; 52:11 [*RSV* 9]). A reiteration of complaint and petition within one prayer is not unusual (Gunkel and Begrich, 241: "Plea and complaint may recur several times"); it is to be understood in the light of the ceremonial procedure. The supplication has to be repetitive in order to reach the divine addressee (cf. also elaborate petitions among humans, e.g., 1 Sam 25:24-31; Ridderbos, 75ff., 111, who mentions repetition as a poetic device). Vv. 16-17 are proverbial in character (cf. Prov 26:27) and are here used in imprecative form.

Genre

There is a heavy emphasis in this complaint psalm upon the innocence of the supplicant. Indeed, we should distinguish between prayers to be recited by people without blemish (see Psalms 17 and 26) and those to be spoken by admitted culprits (see Pss 31:11 [*RSV* 10]; 38:19 [*RSV* 18]; 51) in offices of complaint and petition (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4B). The professional liturgist (Gerstenberger, *Mensch*, 67ff., 134ff.) probably had to decide which kind could be used in a particular prayer ceremony. Psalm 7 definitely was designed for persons whose guiltlessness was beyond doubt; we may therefore call it a PROTESTATION OF INNOCENCE.

Setting

There are two main hypotheses as to the origin and use of this psalm, both centering on juridical-religious procedures and institutions (→ Psalms 3 and 5). One view assumes the setting of an ordeal, i.e., an attempt to solve judicial problems by provoking a divine decision, a process that was well known in Israel

and the ancient Near East (Num 5:11-28; 1 Kgs 8:31-32; Press). Aside from concomitant rituals, such an effort to establish the guilt or innocence of an accused person would call for a curse upon the alleged delinquent, a curse pronounced either by the officiating priest (Num 5:21-22) or by the accused (1 Kgs 8:31; Ps 7:4-6). Consequently, while a protestation of innocence (vv. 4-6) is quite appropriate in this situation, it is hard to understand the fact that the accused was allowed to communicate as freely with his god as is presupposed in Psalm 7. From what we know about the ordeal (T. S. Frymer), we should expect the ones accused to be submissive and to accept what was done to them in the ritual (Num 5:11-28). Delekat finds vestiges of an ordeal by smoke signal in vv. 5 and 8. He translates and interprets v. 8: "Both [contending] clans may gather around you (God), and you ascend to the heights (in the smoke of the sacrifice)."

On the other hand, H. Schmidt, Leslie, Beyerlin, et al. assume the setting of a temple court with general jurisdictional authority (→ Psalms 3–5). The prayer was presumably spoken by an alleged culprit who sought acquittal or protection. The appeal to Yahweh's court—whatever that may have been in the framework of the temple—was to overrule a sentence passed by a civil court. In this case the prayer would originate within the client's own group or with a functionary of the temple who spoke for the client. Unfortunately there is no trace in the OT or in legal documents of the ancient Near East of any such juridical institution or procedure connected with the sanctuary. To my knowledge the administration of law in Israel involved temple proceedings only when a case could not be settled by the means applicable in the gate. In such a situation, however, an ordeal was called for (Deut 17:8-13; 1 Kgs 8:31-32).

While other attempts to explain the origin of protestations of innocence have little to recommend themselves (against derivation from royal cult, as defended by Widengren, *Königtum*, 67-68; et al.) and since there is little indication that Psalm 7 was spoken in ordeal ceremonies (the very oath in vv. 4-6 would testify against it; cf. Frymer), I suggest that the prayer was used in regular complaint and petitionary services for an individual suffering in a legal predicament. Of course it could be recited only by and for people whose guiltlessness had been proven or could be vouched for. The danger of invoking a curse would otherwise have been too great. Such a life situation is well attested also in the book of Job. There Yahweh is called upon to pass a just sentence (Job 9:33; 10:2-6; etc.). Likewise, 1 Kgs 8:31-32, 37-38 reflects a regular petitionary service for the individual rather than an ordeal ceremony or any kind of juridical proceedings. The imagery of Yahweh sitting on the bench (cf. Ps 9:8 [*RSV* 7]) and administering justice to the world does not refer to cultic institutions of legal assistance but has grown out of liturgical practice that favors those wronged by society. Perhaps the "peripheral intermediaries" (R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978]) acted on behalf of clan structure and against centralized society.

Intention

Release from evil and suffering and restoration of falsely ostracized members to their group were the primary concerns of prayer ceremonies in which Psalm 7 and other protestations of innocence (see Psalms 17 and 26) had their original setting. Those scribes who incorporated the psalm into the present collection wanted to broaden its audience and use. The written edition served as a vehicle for the complaints of a wider circle of people in distress (note the generalizing expressions "nations," "the wicked," and "the righteous" in vv. 9-10).

Bibliography

T. S. Frymer, "Ordeal, Judicial," *IDBSup* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 638-40; F. Grössmann, "Der šiggājôn," *Augustinianum* 8 (1968) 360-81; J. Leveen, "The Textual Problems of Ps VII," *VT* 16 (1966) 439-45; C. Macholz, "Bemerkungen zu Ps 7:4-6," *ZAW* 91 (1979) 127-29; R. Press, "Das Ordal im alten Israel," *ZAW* 51 (1933) 121-40, 227-55; N. A. Schumann, "Gods gerechtigkeid en de 'wet' van de vangkuil," in *Loven en geloven* (*Fest.* N. H. Ridderbos; Amsterdam: Bolland, 1975) 95-110.