Human Flattery and Divine Speech (12:1–9)

Bibliography

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Translation

1 For the musical director. Upon the octave.[a] A psalm of David.
2(1) *Help,*[a] *Lord, for the faithful one has come to an end,* (4+4)
for the honest persons[b] *have disappeared*[c] *from among the sons of man.*
3(2) *They speak vanity, each man with*[a] *his neighbor;* (4+4?)
with flattering[b] *lip and double heart they speak.*
4(3) *Let the Lord cut off all flattering lips,* (4+3)
the tongue[a] *that speaks great words,*[b]

5(4) *those who have said: "By our tongues, we will establish strength.*[a] (4+4)
Our lips are our own![b] *Who will be our master?"*
6(5) *"Because of the devastation*[a] *of the afflicted, because of the groaning of the poor,* (4+4+3)
I will now arise," says the Lord.
"I will set him in safety. I will shine forth[b] *for him."*
7(6) *The utterances of the Lord are pure utterances,* (4+3+3)
silver refined in a furnace,
gold[a] *purified seven times.*
8(7) *You, O Lord, will watch us,*[a] (3+3?)
you will guard us[a] *from this generation for ever.*[b]
9(8) *All around the wicked strut about,* (3+3)
as the vileness of the sons of man is exalted.[a]

Notes

1.a. "Octave": see the discussion of this term at 6:1.

2.a. *G* opens with "Help *me,*" implying the existence of a suffix on the opening imperative, but MT is satisfactory and conveys the appropriate sense of urgency.

2.b. "honest persons": more precisely, "(persons of) faithfulness."

2.c. פסו "disappear": several Heb mss (De-Rossi, IV, 6) read פצו, "are dispersed," which would provide equally good sense to the line.

3.a. "with" (את): several Heb mss read אל: *"to* his neighbor" (De-Rossi, IV, 6).

3.b. The word חלקות ("flattering") is derived by Dahood (*Psalms I,* p. 73) from Ugaritic *ḫlq* ("to perish") and translated *pernicious;* see the critical remarks on this possibility in the *Note* on Ps 5:10.

4.a. *G* and *S* indicate a reading ולשון, *"and* the tongue," which is possible, but not necessary.

4.b. גדולות: literally, "great ones," the sense "great *words*" being implied by the preceding participle referring to speech.

5.a. נגביר ("we will establish strength"): the precise nuance of the Hiph. of גבר is uncertain.

5.b. "Our lips are our own" (cf. *G* on this translation); literally, "our lips are with us," though the Heb. expression is difficult (see further Anderson, *Psalms I,* 125–26).

6.a. "Devastation" (שד): Dahood translates the term שד by "sobs," including among his reasons the proposed meaning of the Ugaritic term *šdm* (*Psalms I,* 74). The text in question is *CTA* 16.i (*UT* 125). 34: *ʾal.tšt. bšdm(.)mmh.* Dahood's translation ("Let her not dry up [root *nšt*] her waters by sobbing") is similar to the earlier translation of Ginsberg (*The Legend of King Keret,* 26). But Ginsberg later admitted of this text that the "sense of lines 31–37 (is) obscure" (*ANET,* 147), and his early translation is effectively criticized in J. Gray, *The KRT Text in the Literature of Ras Shamra* ², 1964, 67–68. Gray, who had originally held a position similar to that of Ginsberg and Dahood (in the first edition, 1955, of the work cited above), later rejected that position as untenable. The line in question should probably be translated: "Let her set in the fields her clamor . . . ," reading *šdm* in the more conventional sense (parallel to the following *bsmkt,* "heights," or perhaps "heavens": cf. Aistleitner, *WUS,* #1923), and translating *mmh* not as "her waters," but as "cry, clamor" (Aistleitner, *WUS* #1587). See further Caquot et al., *Textes ougaritiques I,* 553; Gibson, *CML* ², 95. In summary, there is no clear evidence for an Ugaritic word *šd* meaning "sobs, sobbing." Despite the other arguments adduced by Dahood, the conventional translation of שד (above) seems most appropriate in context.

6.b. "I will shine forth": MT reads יפיח ("he will puff for it"), of which the sense is uncertain. The above translation assumes the emendation אופיע (Hiph. of יפע), following the suggestion of *G* and *S,* and providing a parallel to the preceding אשית, but the emendation is by no means certain.

7.a. The latter part of the verse (v 7b-c) poses a variety of problems, and the disparity between the principal versions at this point indicates the possibility of early corruption in the text (the majority of the early translators do not appear to have worked from a consonantal text identical to that which is now MT). The solution adopted above involves only two small changes with respect to לארץ "to the land": (i) the introductory *lamedh* is removed (on the basis of dittography; see the preceding word); (ii) the initial *aleph* is emended to ח, giving חָרֵץ "gold" (cf. L. H. Brockington, *The Hebrew Text of the Old Testament,* p. 123). This minor emendation provides good sense and good parallelism: כסף//חרץ, "silver//gold" (on this parallel word pair in Hebrew and Ugaritic poetry, see Dahood in *RSP I,* p. 234–35); צרוף//מזקק, "refined//purified."

8.a. The two verbs of this verse in MT have 3 pers. plur. and 3 pers. sing. suffixes respectively. The translation above assumes 1 pers. plur. suffixes on both verbs, for which there is good support in the Heb. mss (De-Rossi, IV, 6) and the versions (cf. *G* and *Vg*).

8.b. זו לעולם could be interpreted as a divine name, "O Eternal One" (Dahood, *Psalms I,* 75).

9.a. The latter part of v 9 has been the source of difficulty for a long time, as is evident from the differences between the various Greek versions. Modern attempts at a solution have involved a redivision of the consonants and a resolution through reading ("stars, constellation"), hence finding a reference here to astral worship; cf. J. Leveen, *VT* 21 (1971) 48–58; W. E. March, *VT* 21 (1971) 610–12. In the translation above, I have retained MT (judging the proposals of Leveen and March to be too radical): ךָ is interpreted in a temporal sense (see GKC §118u) and ל in a genitive sense (GKC §129). Thus v 9 describes "this generation" (v 8) and develops further the theme of the flattering lips and evil speech (vv 3–5). The use of the expression "sons of man" in v 9 links up the end of the psalm with the use of the same expression in v 2, to form an inclusio.

Form/Structure/Setting

Psalm 12 is in the form of a lament; it is probable that it functioned as a *communal lament,* though the internal evidence is ambiguous and the psalm could be interpreted in *individual* terms (cf. *G*'s "help *me*" in v 2). Presumably, the psalm would have been utilized in some specific context in Israel's temple worship, though a precise context cannot be determined. It is possible that v 6, expressed as the words of the Lord (in language of a prophetic character), was addressed to the worshipers by a priest or prophet (cf. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship,* I, 218). But even this cannot be certain, for the use of direct speech is a useful poetic device and need not imply an additional participant in a cultic context; the imagined words of the enemy have already been utilized in v 5, and it is entirely natural, simply from a literary perspective, to balance them with the divine words of v 6.

The date and author of the psalm cannot be determined; the nature of the wicked as described here, and of the innocent sufferers, are too general and common to be fitted into a particular period or event in Israel's history. There are no good reasons for supposing that the psalm should be dated any later than the time of the Hebrew monarchy.

The psalm is finely constructed and makes effective use of repetition and contrast (cf. Ridderbos, *Die Psalmen,* 150–51; Weiss, *VT* 13 [1963] 474). The principal contrast concerns speech, the evil and flattering speech of the "sons of man" being contrasted with the pure and true utterances of God. There are two basic sections: (1) the vain speech of wicked persons (12:2–5); (2) the sure speech of God (12:6–9).

Comment

The vain speech of wicked persons (12:2–5). The psalm begins abruptly with a cry for help, and then goes on to explain the reason for the request. On the one hand, good persons appear to have disappeared from the land; on

the other hand, the wicked are rampant. In his distress, the psalmist encounters the experience of Elijah who, in a time of testing, also felt that he was the last upright person left in the land (1 Kgs 19:10). The psalmist could no longer discern the existence of a "faithful one," viz. a covenant member whose life was characterized by that faithfulness and loving kindness which were of the very essence of the covenant relationship and life. But if honest persons could not be seen, wicked persons could be both seen and heard. Their speech is described as "vanity" (v 3, "emptiness, nothingness"), "flattering" (vv 3–4; "smooth") and issuing forth from a "double heart" (v 3).

The essence of evil is presented here in terms of speech, not action, though that speech had precipitated the crisis which evoked the psalmist's cry for help. Wicked persons spoke fine-sounding words which contained no substance. They spoke the "easy speeches that comfort cruel men" (G. K. Chesterton, cited by Kidner, *Psalms 1–72,* 74), but threatened the lives of the innocent. They spoke from a "double heart": the heart, in the Hebrew conception, was the seat of the mind. The "double heart" does not indicate the sense of the English metaphor "in two minds" (viz. uncertainty), but rather indicates a double standard, and hence implies lies and deceitfulness. They knew one thing, but said another; they would not speak truth, though they knew it, when a lie would accomplish their goal. The imagined words of the wicked (v 5) indicate the power within their grasp through the mastery of speech (cf. Jas 3:6–12), but their ultimate crime was that of *hubris: Who will be our master?*—and they believed the answer to be "No one"! The pride within them came forth in arrogant speech; refusing to acknowledge the mastery of God, they oppressed with their tongues the servants of God. So the psalmist prays that such speech be terminated (v 4).

The sure speech of God (12:6–9). The words of the wicked (v 5) are suddenly and strikingly contrasted with the spoken words of God (v 6: on the possibility that this verse was spoken by a prophet or priest, see *Form/Structure/Setting* above). God declares his intention to *arise;* on the use of this verb with respect to divine action, see further 7:7 (and *Comment*) and 9:20. God would arise because of the sad estate of the afflicted and the *poor,* who were suffering as a consequence of wicked persons and their words. And God states that he will set his servant in safety (בישע); the term is a different form of the word used by the psalmist in opening his prayer, "help" (הושיעה), and indicates that the action of God in deliverance would be a direct consequence of answered prayer. "I will shine forth" (v 6c): just as the Lord had *shone forth* to his covenant people at Mt. Sinai in the awesome theophany (cf. the use of the same verb in Deut 33:2), so too he would reveal himself again.

The quotation of the divine words (v 6) is followed immediately by a meditation on the nature of the divine words, in which they are contrasted sharply with the words of wicked persons (vv 3–5). The *utterances* (or "promises," RSV) of the Lord are *pure;* the purity is demonstrated in the metaphor of refining metal (see further 11:5–6 for a different use of this metaphor). The word of the Lord is by its very nature valuable (as are silver and gold), but through refinement and purification, in the language of the metaphor, there is no dross in it. By implication, the speech of wicked persons is all dross, devoid of silver and gold! That of God is pure silver, pure gold! It is devoid of the dross of flattery, vanity, and lies, and can therefore be relied upon absolutely. So, from a position of newly found confidence, the psalmist expresses his conviction: "You . . . will watch us, you will guard us . . ."; God had said he would arise (v 6), and that true word could be believed. Protection was coming. Yet the reality of evil circumstances continued; the wicked still strutted about, their vile speech (v 9; cf. v 5) exalted as if it were a divine word. It was not a change of circumstances which prompted the confidence of v 8, but a conviction that God's word was pure and true.

Explanation

Human life, in its normative forms, would be virtually impossible without speech, for speech provides the fundamental means of communication between human beings. Religion as we know it would also be virtually impossible without speech; though religious language borders upon the mysterious, it is through forms of speech that God has made himself known and speech is also a central part of human response to God's revelation. In the context of Hebrew theology, speech is fundamental to the creative activity of God (e.g. Gen 1), and the speech of the creature, if it is to be proper, must be marked by the characteristics of the Creator's speech. God's speech is pure (12:7), free from any falsity or impairment; human speech should also be pure.

It is generally true that the finest things or qualities within the order of creation are those most vulnerable to debasement or perversion. The more pure or good a thing may be, the more impure or rotten it may be made to become. Love, the greatest quality within creation, may be sadly abused, as the prophets (e.g. Hos 1–3) made clear. And speech, which is so central to relationships between human beings, and between persons and God, may also be radically abused. The psalmist has painted a picture of speech that has been raped—worth has been exchanged for vanity, truth for flattery, and humility for arrogance in word and thought. The gift implicit in the tongue has been twisted and tortured to evil purposes by proud mortals.

The psalmist is not merely concerned to enunciate the existence of evil speech; he suffers from its lash and falsehood, and so is compelled to seek divine help. The deliverance from the power of impure speech is to be found in hearing the pure speech of God; having heard God's speech, and having reflected upon its reliability, the psalmist achieves the trust and confidence (v 8) for which he had prayed (v 2). The danger experienced in mortal speech was to be repelled by the power inherent in divine speech. For those who experience the assault of evil speech, the solution is not to be found in the return of evil speech to enemies, but in confidence in the Word of God, which is firm and cannot be moved.

"How Long, O Lord?" (13:1–6)

Bibliography

Airoldi, N. "Note ai Salmi." *Augustinianum* 13 (1973) 345–50. **Westermann, C.** *Der Psalter,* 48–51.

Translation

1 For the musical director. A psalm of David.
2(1) *How long, O Lord, will you continually forget me?* (4+4)
How long will you hide your face from me?
3(2) *How long must I set pain* [a] *in my soul,* (4+3(4)+4)
grief in my heart by day [b] *(and night)?*
How long will my enemy be exalted over me?
4(3) *Look! Answer me, O Lord my God!* (4+4)
Enlighten my eyes, lest I should fall into the sleep of death, [a]
5(4) *lest my enemy should say, "I have prevailed over him,"* (4?+4)
(lest) my adversaries should rejoice because I am shaken.
6(5) *But I have trusted in your lovingkindness,* (3+3)
my heart shall rejoice in your deliverance.
I shall sing praises to the Lord, (2+3)
as soon as [a] *he has dealt bountifully with me.*

Notes

3.a. עצות, literally "counsels," provides a curious sense: "I will set counsels in my soul," and though such a translation is in accord with *G* and some other versions, it leaves the unusual combination of *counsels* (intellectual activity) with *soul* (here implying the seat of the emotions). Several scholars, following the suggestion of *S*, emend to עצבות, "hurts, griefs," which would provide good sense and assumes only the loss of *beth* from the consonantal text (cf. the textual apparatus in *BHS* and see also *Textual Notes on the New American Bible,* [Patterson, N.J.: St. Anthony's Guild] 380). Dahood has suggested an alternative solution, namely that the term should be translated "doubts," on the basis of Arabic *naġaḍa,* "to shake, totter," which—he claims—is also found in the Ugaritic word *nġṣ,* "to wobble, shake." The origin and etymology of the Ugaritic word is itself a source of considerable discussion and has provoked a variety of possible Arabic etymologies: (a) *naġaḍa* (Dahood, Aistleitner, Caquot, Gibson, and Gordon); (b) *naġaṣa* ("to be interrupted," Gray, *Legacy* 2, 27); (c) *naġaṭa* ("to oscillate," Driver, *CML,* 156—though this equation poses severe linguistic problems); (d) *tanaġġaṣa* ("to be disquieted," Speiser, *JCS* 5 [1951] 64–66). In summary, an Arabic etymology for Ugaritic *nġṣ* is not without problems, and those problems are compounded with respect to Hebrew עצות by the absence of an initial *nun,* which (while it can be explained) leaves open a variety of other possibilities with respect to the resources of comparative Semitic lexicography (e.g. Syriac *ʿeṣyānā,* root *ʿṣy,* "contentiousness, compulsion"). The simplest and most satisfactory solution is to retain עצות and translate "pain" (literally, "pains"), a possible sense of the term for which Driver has made a plausible argument (*WO* 1 [1947–52] 410, cited by Anderson, *Psalms I,* 129; cf. *NEB*).

3.b. יומם: "by day." G (Alexandrinus) adds "and night," which has been added provisionally above; the addition is uncertain, but see Ps 1:2. Dahood, however, reads יוֹמֵם, a Qal partc. from **ymm,* a by-form of Ugaritic *ybm,* which he suggests may have the meaning "to create, beget" (*Psalms I,* 77); hence, he translates: *"creating* grief in my heart." For a number of reasons, Dahood's proposal fails to be convincing. (a) MT makes acceptable sense as it stands. (b) There is considerable debate over the precise meaning of Ugaritic *ybm,* rendering unsafe any comparative philological equations which may be based upon it. For further discussion of the possible etymology and meaning of *ybm,* see Caquot et al., *Textes ougaritiques I,* 90–92; J. C. De Moor, *The Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic Myth of Ba'alu,* (AOAT 16. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukrichener Verlag, 1971) 97; Craigie, *ZAW* 90 (1978) 376–77. (c) The by-form **ymm* is rare in Ugaritic, contributing still further to the precarious nature of the linguistic equation, as noted in (b) above. In summary, the suggestion of Dahood is not followed in the translation above, given the uncertain character of the comparative data.

4.a. "I . . . fall into the sleep of death": literally, "I sleep the death." Dahood has suggested reading פני אישן, "avert the sleep. . . ." (*Psalms I,* 78), taking פני to be a Piel impv. of פנה (rather than the negative particle פן "lest"). Though such a rendering is possible, the reoccurrence of פן in v 5 suggests that it should be taken in the conventional sense in v 4, introducing a series (vv 4–5) of potential consequences which would result if God failed to *look* and *answer* (v 4a).

6.a. On the use of כי plus perf. to designate "as soon as," see Airoldi, *Augustinianum* 13 (1973) 345–50.

Form/Structure/Setting

The psalm is an *individual lament,* in which the worshiper comes to God with a desperate inquiry—"How long?"—and concludes on a note of hope and confidence. It is possible that the psalm, in its initial context, was utilized in the context of some ceremony in the temple, though there is little internal evidence to specify a cultic-context. It has been suggested that the change in tone between vv 5 and 6 resulted from some kind of intervention in the context of worship (cf. Ridderbos, *Die Psalmen,* 152), perhaps a word from the priest which inspired trust, but this cannot be certain. The view that Ps 13 was a national or congregational psalm (Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship,* I, 219) is unlikely with respect to its initial composition and purpose, though it is quite appropriate with respect to its subsequent use in the history of Israel's worship. Such general usage in worship may be implied by the reference to the "musical director" in the title.

The distress which the worshiper laments is probably the fear and proximity of death, brought on perhaps by grave illness (see further the *Comment*). The psalm begins with a series of lamenting and nagging questions, but eventually the psalmist calms down and is able to look forward to a time of deliverance and joy. As Delitzsch puts it: "The hymn as it were advances in waves that are constantly decreasing in length, until at last it is only agitated with joy, and becomes calm as the sea when smooth as a mirror" (*Biblical Commentary on the Psalms,* I, 252).

There is little in the content of the psalm to enable a firm dating of it, though its language and general sentiments are such that it may be assumed to be old, in its original form at least. There are general parallels to the psalm in Babylonian laments and the type has a long history in Israel's worship (Westermann, *Der Psalter,* 48–51). It is reasonable to assume that the psalm originated early in the period of the Hebrew monarchy.

The psalm has three basic sections. (1) The psalmist's lament (13:2–3); (2) a prayer for deliverance (13:4–5); (3) the expression of confidence (13:6).

Comment

The psalmist's lament (13:2–3). The psalmist finds himself torn between two poles. On the one side is the "Lord," to whom he addresses his lament; on the other side is the "enemy" (v 3c) who, at that moment in time, was exalted and appeared to have the upper hand. The tormented "How long?", which is repeated four times, is rooted in this tension. It is because the enemy is in ascendancy that it seems as though God has forgotten his servant and

turned his face from him: he asks, how much longer must this go on? And the exaltation of the enemy and the turned face of God aggravate still further the pain and grief of the psalmist: how much longer must it continue? There is no confession or statement of sin to suggest that the trial was a judgment deserved; the urgency of the psalmist's plea springs from a sense of profound anxiety, not penitence. As a member of the covenant people, his expectation was to be remembered by God and to see the light of his countenance (Num 6:25–26), but the long absence of such privileges evoked the anguished cry of lament.

It cannot be certain, but it is probable that the enemy of whom the psalmist speaks is death (v 4). The approach of death made more acute the sense of God's distance. Death would come to all mankind, but the desire to live springs eternal, and the psalmist is not willing to capitulate to the enemy who is already in a state of exaltation. But he is near to capitulation and his hope has almost gone, for the question "How long?" expresses despair precisely because the psalmist, in his opening words, cannot provide an answer to the question. He does not know how long, but it looked like forever—and "forever" in the mind of a dying man means the grave. So he must move from lament to prayer.

A prayer for deliverance (13:4–5). In the lament, the psalmist had expressed the conviction that God's face was turned from him; but now he implores God to *look,* and to do that, God would have to turn his face back toward him. "Answer me"—that is, answer the fourfold question "How long?" in the opening lament. Thus the prayer for deliverance takes up the themes of the lament; lament is pointless unless it culminates in prayer. Specifically, the psalmist prays that the Lord would "enlighten" his eyes; the eye that was dim was clouded with both ill health and its consequent grief (cf. Job 17:7), so that the prayer is a request for restoration to health and deliverance from grief. When the eye was enlightened, it would signify a state of health (cf. Deut 34:7). But there is more than a prayer for physical health in the psalmist's plea; at a deeper level, he desires to return to close fellowship with the Lord. Thus, when God's face was hidden, the light of his countenance could not shine upon the psalmist (see vv 2–3), but when God turned to him again, not only would the psalmist see the light of the divine countenance, but his own eyes would be enlightened. When his eyes were enlightened, both spiritually and physically, he would not fall into the sleep of death which seemed so imminent.

In v 5, there is reference to both a singular "enemy" (v 5a) and to the plural "adversaries" (v 5b). Some interpreters have taken the singular term in a collective sense and interpreted both terms as referring to the psalmist's enemies in a general way, but it is probable that the distinction in number has been made deliberately. The singular enemy is no doubt the personification of death; the plural enemies are the psalmist's foes in general. If the psalmist should "fall into the sleep of death," then that great enemy of mortal mankind would be able to say: "I have prevailed over him!" If he should die, all his enemies could rejoice because he was "shaken," which is probably a euphemistic expression for death (see Anderson, *Psalms I,* 129–30). The

psalmist prays for deliverance both from death and from the exaltation of evil persons which would accompany such death.

The expression of confidence (13:6). The confidence is expressed within the tension which exists between past experience and future hope. The past experience of the psalmist has been one of *trust* in God's "lovingkindness," namely the faithful covenant love of God which characterized all his dealings with his chosen people. The present reality was of such a nature as to undermine that past experience of trust, but it is in the nature of confidence to transform the present on the basis of past experience and thus to create hope for the future; and so the psalmist can affirm that he will "rejoice" in God's deliverance, even though it has not yet come. The actual song of praise would burst forth once deliverance had been accomplished, but the knowledge that deliverance was coming created an anticipatory calm and sense of confidence.

Explanation

The divine gift of life brings with it many mysteries, not least of which is the intimate connection between what we commonly call "body and soul." From the perspective of Hebrew anthropology, the essence of a person could not be conveniently split into parts—for example body, spirit and soul—as was done at a later date in the context of Greek thought. Human life was a whole, a single entity. Yet, from a more practical perspective, there were clearly different dimensions to the life of a person: there was the physical body, the mind (in Hebrew "heart"), and the emotions ("soul," v 3). But, as is demonstrated so clearly in this poignant lament, the parts did not function independently. The health of the physical body affected the mind and the emotions; conversely, the mind and the emotions could affect the physical body, or at least the interrelationship between the parts.

It is the dominance of the body with which the psalm begins; the physical body was engulfed in sickness and near to death. But because, in the Hebrew conception, there could be no life apart from the body, the inner person was profoundly affected by the state of the physical body. The nearness of death created a chasm in the sense of relationship with God; when death came, that relationship could not continue. Yet the inner being of the psalmist was not willing simply to submit in resignation to the affliction of the body; if such were the case, the psalm would end after v 3. Recognizing the danger, the psalmist calls for help and deliverance; the cry comes from within, though it relates to the external life of the body as much as to the torment of mind and emotion.

The confidence which finally comes (v 6) is based primarily upon a change of attitude, not a change in physical well-being. The essence of life was a relationship with God—for that, the inner and outer beings existed. And so the personal threat afflicting the body was countered by memory of past trust (v 6a) and anticipation of future deliverance (v 6b). Such a counterattack did not in itself change the state of the body; it simply provided the framework of confidence within which the present could be accepted and the future anticipated with joy.