

EXEGETICAL PAPER: PSALM 142

A Paper

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by

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an exegesis of Psalm 142. A variety of *Bibles*, biblical commentaries, and other reference sources will be used for the exegesis and will be noted, as appropriate, within the text. Also, an application of the psalm to address selected current events is included.

Exegesis

The literary genre of Psalm 142 is a lament psalm, specifically, an individual lament. Futato describes a lament psalm as one having been composed under the darkest times of the soul when it is believed that lostness, anger, or despair is deeply felt.¹ Lament psalms are categorized as being either communal, those reflecting national crises, or individual, those reflecting individual crises and will contain elements consisting of an address to God, a complaint, a request for God's help, an affirmation of trusting in God, and a vow to praise once the crisis has been overcome.² Broyles indicates that an individual lament psalm will have six component parts consisting of (1) an address and introductory petition to God, (2) the lament consisting of the words I and or you that reference God or that references the foe or enemy, (3) a confession of trust, (4) a petition addressed to God for a favor or intervention as well as a motive for God's intervention, (5) a promise or vow to praise God following deliverance from the crisis, and (6) a thanksgiving in anticipation of God's response.³

A variety of reasons are posited for the origin of Psalm 142. Dahood indicates that the psalm is a lament of an Israelite who was on his deathbed, pleading for God's protection when death arrived, and to lead him from Sheol's dungeon into eternal life. Dahood identifies the

psalmist's foes as being Death and his emissaries and the word prison in verse four of the psalm as a translation of the Hebrew word "masger," that means prison.⁴ The relationship of prison to the underworld is also corroborated by Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman.⁵ Taylor suggests that the psalmist was literally imprisoned as a consequence of having been falsely accused of persecutors.⁶ Goldingay, however, suggests that rather than being literally imprisoned within a facility, the psalmist is metaphorically imprisoned either at death's door or is in some other dangerous situation. Also, Goldingay interprets the psalmist as praying in the presence of other people, perhaps within the temple.⁷ Alter also suggests that rather than the psalmist writing from a literal prison context, the prison reference is a metaphor for the state of anyone's encountering acute distress.⁸ Allen's research summary substantiates the idea that biblical scholars hold wide and variant suppositions about the psalm's setting.⁹

Just as scholars vary about their determining the setting of the psalm, so do they vary when it comes to the dating, use, and authorship of the psalm. McCann indicates that neither the origin nor ancient use of the psalm is known.¹⁰ Dahood writes that although precise dating of the psalm is not possible, such references as the psalm's attribution to David favors a preexilic dating.¹¹ McCann believes the psalm's language would be appropriate to either the exilic or postexilic era.¹² Ballard indicates that neither the psalmist's name nor the date of the psalm can be ascertained.¹³ Crenshaw states that although David's name appears in superscriptions of many psalms, David's authorship should not be confirmed because the preposition "lamed" that precedes David's name in the various psalms could mean that a given psalm was written by him, concerned him, written to him, or written for him.¹⁴

Alter and Kugel indicate that there has been a historical attempt to apply Greek meters to the study of Psalms, a trend they believe has been redirected by applying the concept of poetic parallelism.¹⁵ An example of the metrical concept is found in Taylor's exegesis of Psalm 142 that identifies the psalm's meter as being 3+3 in verses one through five but changes to that of 3+2 in verses six and seven. Because McConnell, among others, suggests that applying the rules

of meter to the exegesis of biblical poetry yields little in contrast to applying the elements of parallelism, parallelism will be used in analyzing Psalm 142 in this paper.¹⁶

Psalm 142 has been structurally or thematically divided differently among biblical commentators. Allen divides the psalm into three divisions of Heading (Ps 142:1), Cries in Present Crisis (Ps 142:2-5), and Cries for a New Future (Ps 142:6-8).¹⁷ Dahwood's translation and analysis writes the usual heading as verse one, a change that substantially differs from other translations but holds to a three-section division that includes the heading (Ps 142:1), an introduction (Ps 142:2-3), and the psalmist's prayer (Ps 142:4-8). This translation results in eight rather than seven verses.¹⁸ Taylor uses a three-section division that includes An Appeal to the Lord (Ps 142:1-3b), The Psalmist's Plight (Ps 142:3c-4), and The Appeal Renewed (Ps 142:5-7).¹⁹ Goldingay provides a four-divisional structure that includes A Declaration of Intent to Cry Out to Yahweh (Ps 142:1-2), The Suppliant Addresses Yahweh: This Is My Need (Ps 142:3-4), The Suppliant Appeals for Yahweh to Give Ear (Ps 142:5-6), and The Suppliant Appeals for Yahweh to Act (142:6c-7).²⁰ I agree with McCann's assessment that the psalm's structure and movement depend upon the criteria any scholar chooses, can operate at more than one level, and no proposal should be considered exclusive of any other one.²¹

Many *Bibles* provide a heading for Psalm 142 as well as for other psalms in their editions. The New English Bible (NEB) provides no heading. In addition to the heading, the Jerusalem Bible (JB) begins the psalm with the descriptive title, "Prayer for a Hunted Man," the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) begins the psalm with the descriptive title, "Prayer in Persecution," and the New American Standard Bible (NASB) begins the psalm with the descriptive title, "Prayer for Help in Trouble."

The headings in most *Bibles* contain the words "A Maskil of David. When he was in the cave. A Prayer." The NEB contains no heading, the JB uses as its heading the words, "Poem of David. When he was in the Cave. Psalm," and the NJB uses as its heading the words, "Psalm of David. When he was in the cave. Prayer." The Jewish Publication Society's edition of JPS

Hebrew-English TANAKH (TANAKH) only uses the heading, “A Psalm of David,” and the NASB’s heading reads, “For the Choir director. A Psalm of David.”

It is believed that psalm headings or superscriptions appearing in modern translations were added by later editors. However, titles were found in the Septuagint and, therefore, have historical significance. Within a heading, one can find information concerning a psalm’s authorship, historical information about the psalm, musical information, liturgical information, and an identification of the psalm’s type such as song or lament.²²

The word, “Maskil,” sometimes written as “Maschil,” written in the heading is a descriptive term with uncertain meaning and is often described as instruction by recitation and singing, instructional poem, and efficacious song, the last definition perhaps being appropriate for Psalm 142 in that it requests God’s help in deliverance from a crisis situation.²³ Taylor and Goldingay suggest that the heading’s words, “When he was in the cave,” is a reference to David’s being in the cave at Adullam in 1 Sam 24 NIV.²⁴ Dahood states that the heading’s reference to David’s authorship of the psalm cannot be verified based upon current biblical scholarship while Allen cites research that might lead to one’s interpreting David’s authorship such as references to David’s family being with him in a cave of Adullam as a stronghold written in 1 Sam 24:1-4 NRSV.²⁵

The first verse of Psalm 142 presents an example of synonymous parallelism where the word, “voice,” in the first line repeats the same word in the second line. In addition, the second line indicates that the psalmist makes a supplication to the Lord, which is synonymous with the psalmist’s crying to the Lord in the first line. The psalmist’s use of the word, “cry, written in verse one and repeated in verses five and six, shows his or her extreme distress and, according to Goldingay, was a plea for God’s deliverance from danger.²⁶ The words, “with my voice,” also indicate that the words were not uttered silently but highly audible. Also, no mistake can be made that the psalmist is crying out to God because that is spelled out in the verse.

Taylor discusses the negative impact that Hannah's silent prayer for a male child had upon Eli the priest who thought she was drunk as written in 1 Sam 1:12-13 NIV.²⁷ Crying out to God is not an unfamiliar human activity. This is reminiscent of Solomon's loud prayer before the crowd at the temple pleading for God to hear his chosen people when they cry out against possible exile as written in 1 Kgs 8:52 NIV. Crying out, as written in Ps 3:4 NIV, indicates the hope for and trust in a positive response coming from God in delivering the psalmist from his or her foes.

The psalmist uses the literary technique of anaphora, the repetition of initial words at the beginning of lines one and two in the first verse with the direct and immediate repetition of the words "with my voice."²⁸ The NRSV's wording, "I make supplication to the Lord," in line two of verse one is compatible to the NIV's rendering, "I lift up my voice to the Lord for Mercy," and is a similar plea found in Ps 30:8 NIV, where the psalmist cried to the Lord for mercy. Anaphora is also used in the JB's repetitive rendering of the words, "To Yahweh, my cry," in lines one and two and the repetitive words, "To Yahweh, I cry out," in the first and second lines of verse one in the NJB.

Psalms 142:2 NRSV presents, similarly to verse one, an example of synonymous parallelism. The first line of the verse indicates that the psalmist pours out his complaint to God while the second line states that the psalmist will tell his troubles to God. This verse also continues the psalmist's intent to plead his case to God for deliverance. The psalmist's intent to pour out his complaint before God is a probable support that the psalmist might be praying in the temple with others to God.

Verse three tells of the psalmist's spirit growing faint, the type of wording used in many Bible versions. I found the NASB's using "overwhelmed" rather than faint and the TANAKH's choice of the word, "fails" to more adequately speak to the psalmist's courage growing weak because of being overwhelmed with distress. This assumption is made from Strong, Kohlenberger, and Swanson's use of "courage" for "spirit" and Goodrick, Kohlenberger, and

Swanson's use of "ebbing or weak" for the term, "faint."²⁹ The psalmist's cry from desperation from being pursued by enemies leading the heart or courage to fail is found in Ps 143:3-4 NIV, Jeremiah's grief and faintheartedness over God's anger at the Hebrew's sins in Jer 8:18 NIV, and Jerusalem's heart being faint because of God's anger toward them are all reminiscent to "fainthearted spirit" written in Ps 142:3a NIV.

The second line of verse three shows confidence in God's knowledge of the psalmist's condition whether it is the path (NIV, NEB, REB, JB, NJB, NASB) or way (NRSV, RSV). The JB version indicates that God knows the psalmist's path, which leads me to believe that path and way are metaphor's for the psalm's situation. In addition, the psalmist alludes that he has trust in God's knowledge of and deliverance from the distressful condition.

Taylor indicates that in Ps 142:3b RSV the psalmist is aware of the trap or snare his adversaries have placed for him and believes he lacks the ability, strength, faith, or courage to disengage from it or fight it.³⁰ Psalm 40:5 NRSV complements Psalm 142:3b NRSV where the psalmist recognizes that, figuratively, entrapments have been set by others in order to create distress in his life's journey as does Ps 141: 9 NRSV where the psalmist pleads for God's help to overcome the traps. However, unlike in Ps 142, the psalmist, in Ps 141:10 NRSV calls upon God to invoke *Old Testament* retribution theology where the psalmist's adversaries will fall into their own traps and allow the psalmist to pass without harm.

In Ps 142:4 NRSV, one finds a synonymous parallel structure where in lines one and two the psalmist does not see anyone who cares for him or her while the same idea is expressed in lines three and four in that no one cares for the psalmist's life. In Psalm 142:4a (NRSV, NIV, TANAKH, JB, NJB, and NASB), the psalmist appears to ask God to look right and left where no help is available. The NEB, RSV, and REB translations indicate that in Ps 142:4a, the psalmist is the one doing the action of looking.

Taylor indicates that the psalmist's looking to the right is a metaphor derived from military action where the soldier, in battle, has the shield covering the left shoulder and needs a

protector at his or her right.³¹ Psalm 142:4c NRSV implies that after looking to the right, no hiding place is found from the psalmist's pursuers. Psalm 22:11 NIV suggests the loneliness one can feel when trouble strikes and there appears to be a separation from God. There can also be a feeling of separation and loneliness when one senses isolation from one's friends during troubling times as stated in Ps 38:11 NIV as well as the isolation Job felt during his affliction as found in Job 4-37. Although Bildad, Zophar, Eliphaz, and Elihu visited Job, they did not appear to be the types of caring and supportive friends he would have expected of them.

Rykey, Wilhoit, and Longman discuss the *Old Testament's* images of refuge where one can seek protection, relief from stress, and the believer's trust that God is the one to whom a person can turn for safety in troubling times.³² Jeremiah 25:35 NIV echoes Psalm 142:4 NIV where, when God takes up the sword, even the shepherds will find themselves having no place to flee for refuge. Although in Ps 142 the psalmist appears to believe there is no place for his or her refuge, he or she deeply believes that God will ultimately provide relief as is found in Ps 142:5ab NRSV.

In Ps 142:5 NRSV, one finds the psalmist crying out again as was done in verse one. In this verse, the psalmist expresses his or her belief that God is the protector and pleads for God to hear the cry. The psalmist indicates that God is his portion in this time of distress. Allen, Goldingay, and McCann indicate that just as God gave every Hebrew family or tribe an allocation of land for sustenance and security, God is the source of sustenance and survival for the psalmist in this time of need.³³ Ps 46:1 NIV provides the very positive knowledge that God is humanity's refuge and ever-present help in trouble. Psalm 142:5 NRSV incorporates a metaphor where "refuge" in line two and portion in line three refer to Lord in line one. Dahood sees a poetic device used verse five where the word "Lord" in line 1 separates "refuge" in line two, a device that separates the two composite phrases.³⁴ In addition, the psalmist's pleading for his or her portion to be given in the land of the living is a metaphor for his overcoming the problem in this life or while he or she is still living.³⁵

Psalm 142:6 NRSV pleads for God's help because the psalmist has reached a very low point in his or her hour of need. Goldingay suggests that the psalmist feels very close to death because of the depth of his or her suffering.³⁶ This verse is reflected in Ps 79:8b,c NRSV where the psalmist begs for God's compassion to come quickly because he or she is very low in spirits. In addition, the psalmist believes that his or her distress is to the point that he or she has no remaining strength to overcome the situation because the problem has become overbearing.

Ps 142:7a NRSV begs that God deliver the psalmist from his prison so that God's name can be praised. Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman believe that this reference to prison is a metaphor referring to the psalmist's personal circumstance rather than being a literal prison.³⁷ Ps 66:11 NIV attests to the metaphorical prison where the psalmist praises God for answering people's prayers to deliver them from the prison of their burdens under Egyptian oppression. Goldingay suggests that the metaphor of being in prison is the state of being in which the psalmist hopes that she or he will not arrive for being so overcome by the present situation.³⁸

Dahood takes the position that the psalmist uses the prison metaphor to refer to the psalmist's Sheol through death. He argues that if the psalmist referred to any form of earthly prison he or she would be able to praise God with thanks as he intends to do in the last section of the verse. Praise to God would be possible while living any place on earth while it would be impossible to do so in Sheol.³⁹ Allen also leads one to believe that the reference to prison is a metaphor for death because death can sometimes be perceived as being the only way out of a grim situation.⁴⁰ Although this psalm was written during the *Old Testament* era, Revelation 1:18 NIV informs us that Jesus holds the keys of death and Hades so that for the Christian, even the burden of death can be overcome.

Taylor and Ballard appear to interpret prison as being a literal prison where the psalmist has been placed and offers prayer for release.⁴¹ McCann believes that prison does not refer to a literal place of incarceration or jail but relates it more to the exile as Isaiah 42:7 NRSV discusses God's bringing his people from the exile.⁴²

Ps 142:7 NRSV ends with the psalmist's promise to glorify God after being released from his or her unbearable situation and, once again, being in the presence of the righteous, a situation that shows God's mercy in answering the psalmist's prayers. Allen views this portion of the psalm as indicating the psalmist having an uplift in morale, Dahood believes that the psalmist expects to be delivered from Sheol and be surrounded by the righteous in paradise or heaven, and Goldingay suggests that the psalmist will praise God for being released from whatever danger he or she experienced as David praised God from being rescued from his foes in 2 Sam 22:50 NIV.⁴³

The ending of the psalm where the psalmist vows to praise God after being delivered from oppression is not unlike other psalms of lament, although the vow to praise does not always end the psalm. For example, Psalm 7:17 NRSV indicates that the psalmist will give due thanks to God for his righteousness and will sing praises to him. Ps 9 NRSV differs only in that the psalmist's giving praise to God began the psalm rather than ending it. Psalm 22 NRSV consists of 31 verses with the psalmist's vow to praise God appearing in verses 22-26. However, Ps 13 NRSV ends with the psalmist promising to sing to God after being released from trouble, Ps 57 NRSV closes with an exaltation to God throughout the heavens and earth, and Ps 71 (NRSV) has the psalmist praising God all day for being granted relief from his or her troubles. However, Ps 88 NRSV is one lament that does not contain a vow of giving thanksgiving to God.

Theological and Practical Applications

Often during times of affliction, a person feels despondent, alone, and friendless. This is not uncommon in the United States of America where an emphasis is placed upon individualism rather than community. At this time in the history of the United States and the global arena, growing anxieties exist over issues of lost or reduced finances, reduction or elimination of jobs,

rising costs, and in some cases the nonexistence, of health care, rising crime among youth, and feelings of isolation are taking its toll on the human population. Ps 142 reminds us that calling upon God as our refuge is sorely needed in 2009. A small number of references from a potentially unknowable quantity related to this need will be briefly reviewed.

In 2007, four children, with three of them dying, were shot to death in a Newark, New Jersey school yard as a consequence of youth gang activity. The United States lost almost 600,000 jobs in January 2009 with the jobless rate standing at 7.6 percent and at least 3.6 million jobs lost since December 2007. In January 2009, a Los Angeles, California man committed suicide after murdering his wife and 5 children as a consequence of his job loss. A growing number of Americans are having to choose between feeding their families, paying their mortgages, or purchasing medical prescriptions due to the rising costs of healthcare. Many elderly people in the United States are resorting to eating pet food because they are unable to afford food fit for humans. They cannot afford to purchase groceries and are too prideful to inform other people about their situations. In February 2009, a man committed suicide in the presence of others in the Crystal Cathedral in Los Angeles, California. A 2006 Duke University research study found that a growing number of Americans believe they have two or fewer close friends in whom to confide and have social outlets. Military deployments are creating growing rates of depression upon family members. In February 2009, The UNC Board of Governors chose to raise tuition rates within the University of North Carolina System, thus creating anxieties among already financially-strapped families causing them to question their abilities to afford their children's college costs. Children in Caribbean, South American, and African nations are encountering growing health problems due to the spread of HIV/AIDS and global warming.⁴⁴

As dire as those reports are, a greater theological risk looms for Christians. A recent research study found that a significant number of younger people are finding themselves isolated from church because of perceived unChristian behaviors exhibited by believers. Some of the

study's respondents who approached churches for comfort in times of despair became bitter and refused to return because of unwelcoming Christian groups.⁴⁵ Although it has become less difficult for me to share my own journeys and travails within church communities, I can identify with the concerns expressed by the participants of the study. Theologically and practically, the church should be God's refuge on earth for everyone experiencing despair in his or her life rather than exhibiting behaviors that are in direct opposition to God's love, protection, and redemption. Psalm 142 is an ideal source of comfort for those who experience difficulties and choose to put their confidence in God for refuge and deliverance.

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