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Lamenting a Wasting Disease: A Commentary on Psalm 6

Kyle Ronchetto

Macalester College, kronchet@macalester.edu

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The Book of Psalms is a collection of 150 songs used in the religious life of ancient Israel. Most of these psalms can be categorized as praise, thanksgiving, or lament psalms. Praise psalms serve to extol the attributes of God. Thanksgiving psalms typically thank and praise God for a particular deed of his, but sometimes are broader and thank and praise him for all of his works. Lament psalms are typically cries for help from some particular distress. These categories are quite fluid and often elements from multiple categories are included in a single psalm. The poetry of the psalms is based on parallel structures within two or three adjoining cola. A cola is a single poetic unit, presented in the translation as individual lines.

The psalm that this commentary will focus on is a lament psalm attributed to King David which laments a wasting disease. First the text and translation will be given following the text of the Leningrad Codex as presented in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.¹ Following this will be an explanation of translation decisions as well as notes found in the critical apparatus of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. All notes regarding proposed emendations or references to different manuscripts are made solely on the basis of their inclusion in the critical apparatus of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. The last major section will be a commentary on the psalm where I will put forward an interpretation of the psalm and look at the interpretations of several scholars.

¹לְמַנצַח בְּנִיבֹת עַל־הַשָּׁמַיִם מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד:
²יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי בָאָפֶס תּוֹכִיחֵנִי וְאַל־בְּחַמְתָּךְ תִּיַסְרֵנִי:
³חַנּוּנֵי יְהוָה כִּי אֶמְלֵל אֲנִי רַפְּאֵנִי יְהוָה כִּי נִבְהַלְוּ עַצְמוֹתַי:
⁴וְנַפְשִׁי נִבְהַלָה מְאֹד וְאַתָּה יְהוָה עַד־מָתַי:
⁵שׁוּבָה יְהוָה חֲלֹצָה נַפְשִׁי הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי לִמְעַן חַסְדְּךָ:
⁶כִּי אֵין בְּמוֹת זְכָרְךָ בְּשֵׂאוֹל מִי יוֹדֵה־לָּךְ:
⁷גִּיעַתִּי בְּאַנְחֹתַי
 □ אֲשַׁחֲה בְּכָל־לַיְלָה מִטְּתִי בְּדַמְעֹתַי עַרְשִׁי אִמְסָה:
⁸עֵשׂוּשָׁה מִכַּעַס עֵינַי עָתָקָה בְּכָל־צוֹרְרָי:
⁹סוּרוּ מִמֶּנִּי כָּל־פְּעֻלֵי אֹן כִּי־שָׁמַע יְהוָה קוֹל בְּכִי:
¹⁰שָׁמַע יְהוָה תַּחֲנֻנֹתַי יְהוָה תַּפְלִתִּי יִקַּח:
¹¹יִבְשׁוּ וְיִבְהַלְוּ מְאֹד כָּל־אֲיֹבֵי יִשְׁכְּבוּ יִבְשׁוּ רַגְעֵי:²

¹To the director with music, upon the eighth. A Psalm ascribed to David.

²O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger,
and do not chastise me in your wrath.

³Show favor to me, O LORD, for I have grown weak,
heal me, O LORD, for my bones have been disturbed.

⁴My soul has been greatly disturbed,
and you, O LORD – how long?

⁵Return, O LORD, rescue my soul.
Deliver me for the sake of your kindness.

⁶Because there is no remembrance of you in death.

¹ Rudolf Kittel, Karl Elliger, Wilhelm Rudolph, Hans Peter Rüger, G. E. Weil, and Adrian Schenker, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, Editio quinta emendata (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997).

² Rudolf Kittel et. al., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, Psalm 6.

In Sheol, who will sing your praise?
⁷I have grown tired in my groaning,
 I make my bed swim every night,
 I make my couch dissolve with tears.
⁸My eye has wasted away away from grief,
 it has grown weak from all my enemies.
⁹Turn away from me, all you workers of sorrow,
 for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping,
¹⁰the LORD has heard my supplication,
 the LORD will accept my prayer.
¹¹All my enemies will feel shame and be exceedingly disturbed,
 They continually return and will be ashamed in a moment.³

TRANSLATION NOTES

In the first verse, as shown above, the word *שְׁמִינִיּוֹת* is translated as “the eighth”. The meaning of this isn't entirely clear, but a number of suggestions have been brought forth for what this could refer to. It seems it is some note regarding the performance of the melody. It may refer to an eight stringed instrument, which would then be used to play the accompanying melody.⁴ Or it may refer to a key, such as being on the octave. Along these lines, it may indicate also that it is to be sung up or down an octave, perhaps, matching the lament style of a dirge sung in the lower octave by a bass.⁵ In addition to this *בְּנְגִינֹת* “with music” could have two possible meanings. Either it means the psalm is to be played “with music” or it modifies *לְמַנְצֵחַ* “to the director” and *לְמַנְצֵחַ בְּנְגִינֹת* should be translated “to the director of music.”

The third verse contains a confusing disjunctive mark, that is, a punctuation mark in the text to indicate a break in the text. The *עֹלָה וַיִּנְרַד*, which indicates a major break, is composed of two pieces and typically has both pieces on one word. Here it is spread over two words in *אֶמְלֵל אָנִי*. This could cause some confusion when trying to figure out the breaks in the text. The word *אֶמְלֵל* is here an adjective with the same vocalization as a third person masculine verb, but its use as a predicate adjective makes more sense because of its close connection to the word *אָנִי* as mentioned above, with the Masoretes treating it as one word. In addition to this there are a number of variations present in the critical apparatus of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.⁶ The first *יְהוָה* “O LORD” of the verse is absent in one medieval manuscript of the Hebrew Old Testament. The second *יְהוָה* “O LORD” of the verse is absent in a few medieval manuscripts of the Hebrew Old Testament as well as in the Codex Vaticanus. For the final verb in the verse *נִבְהָלוּ* “they have been disturbed” a correction to *נִבְּלוּ* “they have withered” or *נִבְּלוּ* “they have worn out” has been proposed.

The fourth verse has a variation in the critical apparatus which says that two medieval manuscripts of the Hebrew Old Testament add *עַד* “until” after *נִבְהָלָה* “has been disturbed,” making the translation of the first cola of this verse: “My soul has been disturbed to a great degree.”

³ All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 112.

⁵ Mitchell Dahood, S.J. *The Anchor Bible: Psalms I: 1-50* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 38.

⁶ Rudolf Kittel et. al., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 1090. The same source is used for all variant readings, no particular editor is credited with each suggestion.

The critical apparatus for the fifth verse notes that the Syriac and Vulgate put a copula before קִלְצָהּ “rescue,” and a medieval manuscript of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Syriac insert וְ “and” at the beginning of the second cola.

The sixth verse has the noun זְכָרְךָ “your remembrance.” This may be a monument, or it could refer to people remembering; given that it occurs in the context of death, it seems appropriate to understand it as “memory of you” or as I have “remembrance of you.” This word in the Septuagint is ὁ μνημονεύων σου which corresponds to זְכָרְךָ. Both of these are participles meaning “one remembering you,” so the cola would translate: “There is no one remembering you in death.” The verb יִזְדָּה is a third person masculine singular *hif'il* verb in the imperfect aspect. *Hif'il* refers to one of seven conjugations of Hebrew verbs. It comes from the root י.ד.ה. “[he] will offer you praise,” which is difficult to translate but refers to ritual actions of worship. It could mean “give thanksgiving” or “offer praise,” but whichever translation is used, it is important to note that it is likely connected to ritual temple worship, and possibly to the office executed by the writers of these Psalms.

In verse seven, it has been proposed that several words dropped out after the first cola, according to the critical apparatus.

The word עָתָהּ “it has grown weak” in verse eight comes from the shoshvav ע.ת.ק which means “to advance,” but it is also used to refer to advancing in age, and to becoming feeble, hence the translation here as “grows weak.” Additionally the participle צוֹרְרֵי, which is masculine plural and here functioning as a noun, could have a number of meanings. Its shoshvav ר.צ.ר means “to vex,” or “to show hostility toward,” hence the participle could mean either “one who shows hostility, an enemy” or “a thing which vexes, an irritant.” Because more abstract concepts tend to be feminine and this is masculine, I chose “enemies” in my translation, but it is important to note that “irritations” is just as valid an option. In the critical apparatus on this verse, the verb עָתָהּ “it [my eye] grows weak” in the Septuagint, Aquila's Greek Translation of the Old Testament, Symmachus' Greek Translation of the Old Testament, and Jerome's Translation all have the first singular instead, giving “I grow weak.” A medieval manuscript of the Hebrew Old Testament reads מִכָּל “from all” instead of בְּכָל “with all.” And צָרָתִי “my distress” has been proposed in place of צוֹרְרֵי “my enemies.”

In verse ten, the third person masculine singular imperfect verb יִקַּח, typically is translated “he will take,” here it is used in the sense of accepting.

In verse eleven the verb יָשָׁבוּ “continually return” is likely being used as an imperfect with the sense of continual action, always returning to being shamed. In the critical apparatus, we find the first appearance of the word יִבְשׁוּ “they will be ashamed” with the following וְ “and” probably should be deleted, cutting out “...feel shame and...” from the first cola. The second instance of יִבְשׁוּ “feel shame” has a וְ “and” in front of it in the Coptic, Syriac, and Septuagint giving “and they will feel shame...” For the final word of the psalm, רִגַע “[in] a moment,” the Septuagint has σφόδρα διὰ τάχους “through much speed.”

COMMENTARY

In this psalm, the psalmist is pleading with God for justice. It is also a declaration of trust in God's goodness and mercy. The psalmist, who is suffering currently, firmly believes that his prayer will be heard and will be answered. He trusts that justice will be done to the evildoers who seem to be in some way related to the present suffering, and that justice will take the form of an affliction similar to

what he has suffered. All of this hope is based upon his view of God's justice towards evildoers and his mercy towards the psalmist.

The psalmist's description of his ills, "I have grown weak ... my bones have been disturbed" (Psalm 6:3), shows that he is suffering from some kind of wasting disease,⁷ but it is unclear what the cause is. The cause can only be determined based on a thorough understanding of the full psalm. Terrien suggests that the strophic structure of the psalm shows a search for the source of the despair, beginning with wondering whether God causes it,⁸ when the psalmist writes "O Lord do not rebuke me in your anger / and do not chastise me in your wrath" (Psalm 6:2). He then moves to discuss God's mercy and reasons why God would not do this – "there is no remembrance of you in death" (Psalm 6:6). Then the psalm moves on to a thorough description of the problem, hoping perhaps that in that the source will become clear, and, finally, when the psalmist writes "[my eye] has grown weak from all my enemies" (Psalm 6:8), it becomes obvious that it is the work of enemies, who Terrien believes may be sorcerers. Thus the wasting disease originates as the curse of sorcerers, that is, the psalmist's enemies.⁹ The other possible cause is that it is sent from God. This is based upon the very first line of the psalm which attributes the problems to God's rebuke and chastisement – commonly believed to be the cause of sickness. Mentions of enemies and workers of sorrow do not then refer to the cause, but those who are taunting the psalmist in his humiliation.¹⁰ Whatever the cause, it is clear that the psalmist believes that God can fix it, and the psalm even ends with a confident assurance that he has been heard.

In the first few verses, there is the question or statement of God's involvement, followed by an explicit statement of the infirmity in verse three, where the structure moves from general to specific.¹¹ He has "grown weak" (Psalm 6:3), then more specifically his "bones have been disturbed" (Psalm 6:3). The focus of the verses 2-4a are a supplication coming out of fear, and although Alter reads the first verse as accusing God of sending the wasting disease upon the psalmist, it is worthy to note that no accusation is actually leveled.¹² There is only a petition that God not rebuke or chastise, which does not mean he actually is currently rebuking or chastising (Psalm 6:2). This then is the psalmist pleading with God for healing coming from a place of terror at the circumstances.¹³ Furthermore, throughout the Psalm it seems that God is nearby, he has not abandoned the psalmist in a way that might be expected if this was inflicted by him.¹⁴ The psalmist never cries out that he receives no answer, unlike in many other lament psalms (Psalm 10:1, Psalm 22:3).

Verse four continues with formulaic supplication for help: "and you, O LORD – how long" (Psalm 6:4). Alter notes that this is a recurrent formula which is found in numerous pleas for help.¹⁵ There is behind this phrase a question of God's responsibility for it. The chastisement might be educational – showing God's power in order to prevent future misbehavior. The psalmist may just be wondering how long he must suffer before God in his mercy will heal him. Again, no accusation is actually leveled here, only a question as to why God is not stepping in. This is followed by renewed

⁷ Dahood, *The Anchor Bible*, 38.

⁸ Terrien, *The Psalms*, 112-114.

⁹ Terrien, *The Psalms*, 112-114.

¹⁰ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 15-16.

¹¹ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 15-16.

¹² Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 15-16.

¹³ Terrien, *The Psalms*, 112-113.

¹⁴ Terrien, *The Psalms*, 115.

¹⁵ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 15.

pleading for help, an appeal to God's mercy, even possibly an argument with God to convince him.¹⁶ When the psalmist writes “Return, O LORD, rescue my soul / Deliver me for the sake of your kindness” (Psalm 6:5), he is pleading strongly with God for deliverance.

In his further pleading, there is an interesting point where the psalmist says to God “there is no remembrance of you in death” (Psalm 6:6), which means that no one remembers or praises God in Sheol, the land of the dead.¹⁷ This offers us a glimpse into a theology of the afterlife, an afterlife where it is claimed that God is not really present. This is an almost humorous element, as the psalmist is warning God that he cannot praise God if God lets him die.¹⁸ As mentioned above in discussing the word *הָיִי* “offer praise”, the psalmist's job is to offer psalms for ritual Temple Cult worship, which death would prevent him from carrying out. Perhaps the poet is questioning whether or not God likes his psalms.¹⁹ All together, these verses primarily plead with God for the sake of mercy, rather than out of the stark terror characterizing the earlier verses. This is especially emphasized by the line “Deliver me for the sake of your kindness” (Psalm 6:5), where God's kindness is emphasized as the reason why he should deliver the psalmist.

The next two verses lead the central lament portion of the text, speaking of the distress that the psalmist is in. Throughout this section no sin is confessed, the psalmist maintains innocence, and strong, extravagant metaphor is used to describe the sickness. The psalmist writes of his weeping with the words “I make my bed swim every night / I make my couch dissolve with tears” (Psalm 6:7). In the next verse, the source of suffering then shifts to the enemies, who now are shown to be the cause of the psalmist growing weak.²⁰ As to how these enemies caused the illness it is not clear. Alter suggests that they may have played a part by constant harassment leading to the illness, but he also maintains that the ultimate source of the illness is not the enemies, but God. He further claims that the enemies are merely there to gloat over the humiliation of the psalmist.²¹ However, the words “[my eye] has grown weak from all my enemies” (Psalm 6:8) seem to support the reading that the enemies are in fact the cause.

At this point, the psalmist then explains that it is the enemies who are the cause of the sickness and not God. They are called “workers of sorrow,” which implicates their deeds as the cause of the wasting sickness. Terrien suggests that they caused this through sorcery,²² although it seems more likely to be as Alter suggests that the sickness came about through constant harassment, a psychological response to great stress from enemies.²³ The cause of the sickness now known, the psalmist turns to the LORD, invoking him with a triple invocation of his name, writing “the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping / the LORD has heard my supplication / the LORD will accept my prayer” (Psalm 6:9-10). This is done in confidence that he will be heard. In verse ten, although the nouns remain parallel, “supplication” and “prayer”, the verbs are sequential, “[he] has heard” in the perfect, being complete, and “[he] will accept” in the imperfect, expressing confidence that it will happen.²⁴ Also worth noting is a possible Canaanite influence in the phrase “sound of my weeping,”

¹⁶ Terrien, *The Psalms*, 113.

¹⁷ Dahood, *The Anchor Bible*, 38.

¹⁸ Terrien, *The Psalms*, 113.

¹⁹ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 16.

²⁰ Terrien, *The Psalms*, 114.

²¹ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 16.

²² Terrien, *The Psalms*, 114.

²³ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 16.

²⁴ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 17.

which Dahood claims is Canaanite phraseology.²⁵

The final verse is spoken as a curse upon those who caused the psalmists misery. They “will feel shame and be exceedingly disturbed, / They continually return and will be ashamed in a moment” (Psalm 6:11). There is an exchanging of places between the psalmist and his enemies, in verse 3 and 4 the psalmist is “disturbed,” now in this final verse, it is his enemies who are disturbed.²⁶ There is also the question of the verb יָשָׁבוּ, “They will return.” It has been suggested that the enemies of the psalmist are to return to Sheol,²⁷ but it is much more likely that it is to be understood as their continual return to the action of being ashamed. That is, this verb simply serves to intensify the continual action of the imperfect יִבְשׁוּ “they will be ashamed.” As mentioned earlier, God is present here too, which is the only reason why the psalmist can be so bold against those who were the cause of his sickness.²⁸

Overall, this psalm gives a sense of hope in God's justice. The psalmist, who was in bitter pain and sickness, although he was innocent, will be healed and restored. God has heard his pleading and will accept his prayer. The evil doers who are responsible for this evil, whether by sorcery or by constant harassment, will be appropriately ashamed, punished, and humiliated, an outcome the psalmist believes to be imminently just.²⁹

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²⁵ Dahood, *Anchor Bible*, 39.

²⁶ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 17.

²⁷ Dahood, *The Anchor Bible*, 39.

²⁸ Terrien, *The Psalm*, 114.

²⁹ Terrien, *The Psalm*, 115-116.