

Essay

Dr. Thomas M. Strouse
Emmanuel Baptist Theological Seminary
296 New Britain Avenue
Newington, Connecticut 06111

Psalm 12:6-7 and the Permanent Preservation of God's Words

Introduction

Psalm 12 is a psalm of contrasts. It contrasts the godly with the ungodly and the Words of the Lord with the words of men. The latter contrast provides the backdrop to one of the clearest promises in the OT of the preservation of God's Words. Although some dismiss or deny the declaration of the Lord that He will preserve His Words forever, a Hebrew exegesis of this Psalm will demonstrate unambiguously this proper understanding of verses 6-7 that God has indeed promised to preserve His Words (vv. 7-8 in Heb.)¹ The KJB, in contradistinction to some modern versions,² gives this aforementioned sense: *"The words of the Lord are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, O Lord, thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever."*

Psalm 12

Title

The title³ of this psalm reveals several important facts. The psalm was for the "choirmaster" (לְמַנְחֵם הַשֵּׁט) ⁴ to be sung with the "eight stringed harps" (חַדְשֵׁי חַרְמוֹן).⁵ It was a "psalm"

¹Because of the inclusion of the title in the Masoretic text, these verses are numbered seven and eight in the Hebrew text, respectively.

²For instance, the NIV reads "And the words of the Lord are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times. O Lord, you will keep us safe and protect us from such people forever" (Psm. 12:6-7).

³The title of this psalm as well as others is part of the Masoretic text and should be considered part of the *autographa*.

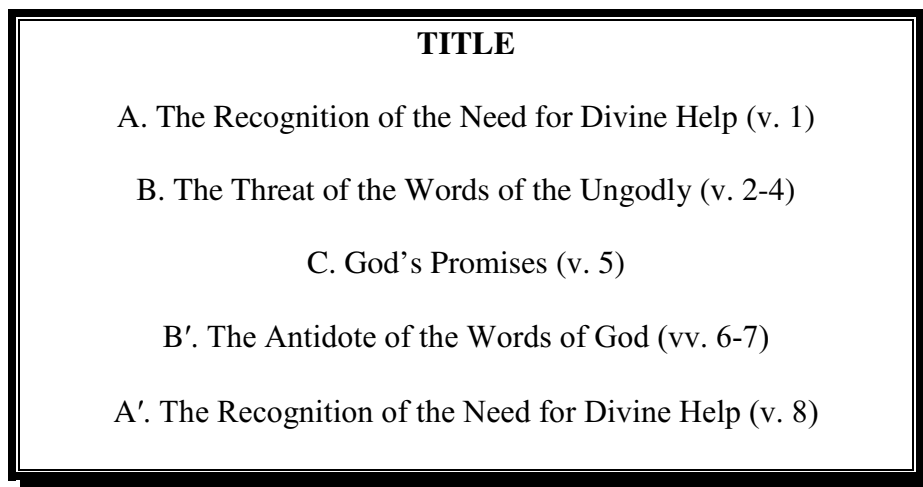
⁴This word is found in the titles of fifty-five psalms as well as in Hab. 3:19.

⁵It may refer to the octave (cf. Psm. 6:1 [Heb.]).

(לְהַזְמִיר) that “David authored” (לְדָוִד).⁶ David obviously lamented the evil words of his enemies, but the psalm’s specific occasion is not revealed.

Structure

The structure of the psalm is asymmetric. This structure causes the focus to be on C., God’s Promises. David’s lament carries the reader from the need for Divine help, because of the words of the ungodly, to focusing on the promises of God for deliverance, which include the permanent preservation of His Words which is the antidote to the words of the wicked, who are ever present.



Summary of the Content of Psalm 12

A. The Recognition of the Need for Divine Help (v. 1)

David appealed to the Lord for “help” (הוֹשִׁיעָה),⁷ fearing that the “godly man” (טָמֵסִיד)⁸ would come to an “end” (נִגְדָמַר) and “faithful men” (רְאֵמוֹנִי) would “vanish” (דָּפְסוּ)⁹ from mankind. The reference to the individual godly man no doubt refers to David, and the “faithful men” refers to the larger community of believers, all of whom were on the brink of annihilation, or so the

⁶David is the predominant writer of the Psalter, having written at least seventy-three psalms (cf. Lk. 20:42).

⁷The verbal root שָׁחַץ: is behind the names Joshua, Jesus, and Hosanna.

⁸The consonants of this word relate to אָהַב that refers to covenant love [of the Lord].

⁹This *hapax legomena* verb comes from פָּדַס and means to disappear.

psalmist thought.¹⁰ This apparent obliteration of the righteous was in contradistinction to the Lord's covenant promise for the remnant (cf. Gen. 12:1-3; Isa. 10:20).

B. The Threat of the Words of the Ungodly (vv. 2-4)

David acutely sensed the threat of the words of the ungodly around him. Using two different verbs *דָּבַרוּ* (“they speak” [3x])¹¹ and *אָמְרוּ* (“said”), the wicked told “vanity” (“empty lies” *שׁוֹאָה*)¹² with flattering lips (2x), a double heart, and a flattering tongue (2x). The psalmist recorded the claim of the wicked, who stated: “*With our tongue will we prevail; our lips are our own: who is lord over us?*” (v. 4). These wicked men asserted that they would “prevail” (*נִגְדְּבוּ*)¹³ and that they were autonomous. “*Who is lord (אֵל) over us?*” suggests the rebellious attitude of those who said “*There is no God*” (Psm. 14:1). The “atheists” in this latter instance are those who rejected God's lordship (14:2, 4). David asserted or prayed that the Lord would “cut off” (*בִּיבְחַרְהוּ*) the braggarts he was facing. This *Hiphil* imperfect verb could be understood as an assertion “the Lord will cut off” or a prayer “may the Lord cut off.”

C. God's Promises (v. 5)

The structure of the psalm focuses on the promises of God.¹⁴ The Lord promised that, because “*of the oppression of the poor,*” and “*of the sighing of the needy,*” He would “*arise and set him in safety from him that puffeth at him.*” Since the “poor” (*דָּלִים*) were despoiled and the “needy” (*אֶבְיָוִים*) were groaning, the Lord made significant promises. “*Now will I arise*” (*אָקִים*; cf. Isa. 33:10), the Lord promised, and set the psalmist “in safety” (*בְּיָדָי*).¹⁵ The Lord promised to arise (cf. Psm. 9:19) and intervene on the part of the faithful. His promise was to place him in safety, the very help for which the psalmist David asked (v. 1). The safety was physical deliverance from those that “puff at” (*אֶבְחַרְתֵּם*)¹⁶ the author with manipulative and boastful words.

B'. The Antidote of God's Words (vv. 6-7)

The content of God's help was the assurance of His ever-present Words with promises of deliverance as an antidote to the words of the wicked. The psalmist reflected on the quality and endurance of the greatest tangible help that the Lord desires to give man – His perfect Words. The quality of the Lord's Words is likened to purified silver from a refining furnace. The result of the seven-fold refining process produced one hundred percent perfect silver in the

¹⁰Elijah manifested this attitude of “solipsism” and was rebuked by the Lord (I Kings 19:14-18).

¹¹This verb is translated “they speak”(2x) and “speaketh.”

¹²This m.s. noun means worthless, empty speech.

¹³The stem of this 1c.p. imperfect verb is *Hiphil*, suggesting the force of “we will cause to prevail.” The root consonants are related to *אֶבְיָוִים*, “strong man.”

¹⁴Paul emphasized the importance of the promises of God to the believer, saying “*For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us*” (II Cor. 1:20).

¹⁵This noun comes from *אָבַח* which is the same root as “help” (v.1).

¹⁶The root of this *Hiphil* imperfect verb is *אָבַח* meaning to blow or breathe. The antidote to these man-breathed words are the God-breathed Words of the inspired and preserved Scripture (II Tim. 3:16).

ancient world, an apt illustration for the quality of the perfect Words of the Lord. Furthermore, David revealed the endurance of God’s Words, indicating that they would be preserved from that generation forever.

A'. The Recognition of the Need for Divine Help (v. 8)

David concluded the psalm by recognizing his need for the Lord’s help because the wicked were “all around” (סָבִיב) him. Their “vilest” (רָדִלָה) nature was not only prevalent but “exalted” (רָוַי)¹⁷ among the “sons of man” (וְלִבְנֵי אָדָם). David recognized that the proud words of the wicked flatterers were a constant problem, but the perfect Words of God will always counter man’s lies. Jeremiah expressed succinctly this tension between God’s Words and man’s words, stating “*all the remnant of Judah...shall know whose words shall stand, mine, or theirs*” (Jer. 44:28).

Exegesis of vv. 6-7

This summary of Psalm 12 prepares for the careful exegesis of Psalm 12:6-7. The Masoretic text is exegeted as follows.

The psalmist recognized this tangible help God gives for the believer in the midst of the threats and claims of the wicked is His “Words” (וְאִמְרָתָא [f.p.]). He likened the “pure Words” (וְאִמְרָתָא [f.p.] שְׁהִרָה of the Lord unto זָכָבִיסָה (“silver”). The verbs and pronominal suffixes of verse seven are critical. The LORD is addressed as the subject of the verbs וְתִשְׁמְרֵם [Qal imperfect 2m.s. with 3m.p. suffix] (“shall keep them”) and וְתִשְׁמְרוּם [Qal imperfect 2m.s. with 3m.s. suffix] (“shall preserve them”). The object of the first verb וְתִשְׁמְרֵם (“shall keep them”) must be the closest antecedent וְאִמְרָתָא (“words”).¹⁸ Although וְאִמְרָתָא is f.p. and the suffix on the verb is מָהֵ and m.p., this gender discordance is not unusual in other psalms dealing with God’s Words. For instance, several examples are found in Psalm 119,¹⁹ showing the psalmist’s deliberate emphasis on masculinizing this extension (i.e., pure words) of the patriarchal God of Scripture. In Psalm 119:111 the Psalmist used the personal pronoun הֵמָּה [m.p.] (“they”) to refer to the Lord’s everlasting הִדְקָתָי [f.p.] (“[thy] testimonies”). Clearly the Lord’s testimonies are what made the psalmist rejoice, and not the רָשָׁעִים [m.p.] (“wicked”) of the previous verse (v. 110). Again, in Psalm 119:129, the Psalmist exalted the Lord’s הִדְקָתָי [f.p.] (“[thy] testimonies”) and referred to them with the verb נִקְרְתָם [m.p. suffix] (“keep them”). Psalm 119:152 continues to demonstrate

¹⁷The exaltation of the wicked parallels the vanishing of the godly in verse one.

¹⁸The m.p. nouns רָבִיבִים (“poor”) and צָרִיבִים (“needy”) cannot be the antecedents of the pronominal suffix מָהֵ because they are not the closest antecedents and they violate the Biblically accepted gender discordance examples. Gesenius acknowledges this Hebrew phenomenon and states: “Through a weakening in the distinction of gender, which is noticeable elsewhere and which probably passed from the colloquial language into that of literature, masculine suffixes (especially in the plural) are not infrequently used to refer to feminine substantives.” H. F. W. Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* E. Kautzsch, ed., (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 440.

¹⁹Psalm 119 is the *locus classicus* on the complete and perfect Word of God.

the Biblically accepted gender discordance between the m.p. suffix and the f.p. antecedent. The psalmist knew of God's הַדְּוֹתָי [f.p.] (“[thy] testimonies”) and that He יָסְדָתָם [m.p.suffix] (“founded them”). Another example of accepted gender discordance is found in Psalm 119:167. The psalmist stated “I have guarded” the Lord's הַדְּוֹתָי [f.p.] (“[thy] testimonies”) and that וְאֶהְבֶּהֶם [m.p. suffix] (“[and] I love them”). These examples show the importance of maintaining the Biblically accepted Hebrew grammar of closest antecedent and Biblically accepted gender discordance in exceptional cases for theological reasons.

The second verb וְתִשְׁמְרֵם (“thou shalt preserve them”) has the pronominal suffix נִי [3m.s.] (“him”)²⁰ which refers to the individual words. The pronominal suffix is not נֵנוּ [1c.p.] “us”²¹ and could not contextually be since the first verb does not have נִי as its suffix. The first verb refers to all the Words the Lord preserved and the second to the very individual Words He preserved. The Lord promised to preserve every one and all of His Words for every generation, because every generation will be judged by the canonical Words (i.e., OT and NT) of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord stated this very truth, “*He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day*” (Jn. 12:48).

Conclusion

The structure, context and exegesis of the Masoretic Hebrew Text of Psalm 12 all argue forcefully and irrefragably for the promise of the everlasting preservation of the perfect Words of the Lord. This is one of several clear passages in which the Lord promised to preserve His canonical Words for every generation. Man's pervasive words are lies; God's ever-present Words are Truth. This is the tangible help from the Lord that the righteous man has in every generation.

²⁰“Him” not “us” is the translation of the Hebrew in numerous passages including Psm. 5:12; 8:4; 21:3; 28:7; 34:19; 43:5, *et al.*

²¹The support for you shall keep “us” and preserve “us” (cf. the NIV) is found in the penultimate authorities of 11 Hebrew Mss. and the LXX (ἡμᾶς...ἡμᾶς).