

Psalm 57

Historical Motivation for Seeking the Global Glorification of God

Type

This psalm bears many of the features of an individual lament occasioned by the threat posed by life-threatening enemies. The superscription indicates this and the psalm begins with David seeking God's mercy and looking for refuge in God amid a period of seeming disaster. In verse 4 he laments the fact that he is surrounded by enemies whom he likens to deadly ferocious beasts and in verse 6 he reverses the image, portraying them as skilled hunters who have set a net with which to entrap him. As is typically the case with psalms of lament we also find statements of commitment and confidence incorporated. However, the pervasive and closing expressions of faith are so strong that Goldingay describes this psalm as standing between a lament and a psalm of trust¹, while Tate (75) sees it more as a psalm of thanksgiving and praise. This psalm may be classified both as a lament and as a psalm of dedication.

Placement

The superscriptions of Psalms 56-60 indicate that these psalms belong together. Each psalm is called a *miktam*. Psalms 57-59 are all evidently set to the same tune called "Do Not Destroy" (similarly Psalms 58, 59 and 75), or as Dahood attractively proposes, perhaps these words, even if also referring to a tune, are intended to recall Deuteronomy 9:26 where Moses prayed, "O Sovereign LORD, do not destroy your people, your own inheritance that you redeemed by your great power and brought of Egypt with a mighty hand." Perhaps these very words, being part of the Song of Moses, had been set to a tune which is now being re-used for Psalm 57.

The words "Do not destroy"² have even more loaded meaning when read in the light of 1 Samuel 26:9-11 where, when David is presented with yet another opportunity to kill Saul, we read instead:

But David said to Abishai, "Don't destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the LORD's anointed and be guiltless? As surely as the LORD lives," he said, "the LORD himself will strike him; either his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. But the LORD forbid that I should lay a hand on the LORD's anointed. Now get the spear and water jug that are near his head, and let's go."

With the exception of Psalm 58, Psalms 56-60 are linked to key moments in David's life. All of these situations involve David's life being under threat, with David depending on God for deliverance from his enemies.

It is notable that verses 7-11 also basically serve as the introduction to Psalm 108, which also incorporates language from Psalm 60, further confirming that Psalms 56-60 indeed belong to a set.

It is noteworthy that Psalms 51, 52 and 54 all involve superscriptions involving events in David's life, though Psalms 52-55 are each called a *maskil*.

There are also some particular links with Psalm 56 in addition to those indicated above (Goldingay, 193):

- In verse 3 David describes his enemies as those who “hotly pursue” him. The verb used here *šā’ap* may also be rendered “hound” and is the same verb used in 56:1-2.
- In verse 5 David prays that God may “be exalted”, that is, “on high”, in contrast to David’s enemies at 56:2 who literally fight against him “on high” (translated “in their pride” by the NIV).

Setting

The superscription refers us back to the incident recorded in 1 Samuel 24 (or possibly 22:1). David’s location has been treacherously reported to Saul, who took 3,000 men to hunt him. But then Saul went into a cave to relieve himself. Unwittingly, Saul had put his life at Saul’s mercy. While Saul was relieving himself David, unnoticed, cut off a corner of Saul’s robe. He refused to attack Saul because he recognised him to be the Lord’s anointed and allowed him to leave the cave unharmed. Then David came out of the cave and showed Saul the evidence that his life had just been spared, evoking Saul’s temporary remorse and some respite in Saul’s relentless efforts to kill David.

There is language in this psalm that fits well with this historical setting (see below).

Structure

As per Psalm 56 so also Psalm 57 is characterized by a repeated refrain, namely “Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth” (vv5, 11). The psalm falls into two sections, verses 1-5 and verses 6-11:

Relating to God. Emphasis: God’s love and faithfulness (1-3)

Victimised by Enemies (4)

Prayer for the Exaltation and Glorification of God (5)

Victimised by Enemies (6)

Relating to God. Emphasis: God’s love and faithfulness (7-10)

Prayer for the Exaltation and Glorification of God (11)

Relating to a Loving and Faithful God

As indicated in the outline above, the psalmist relates to God in verses 1-3 and verses 7-10. In both instances there is special stress on God’s love and faithfulness.

Verses 1-3

As in Psalm 56, so in this psalm David begins by crying out for God to have mercy on him (vv1-3), which in this context is a plea for protection and deliverance. But he does not do this in despair, as one clutching at straws. Rather, he affirms his faith and trust in God, declaring that his soul will take refuge in God “until the disaster/destruction has passed.” Goldingay (194) comments,

Destruction is on the prowl or hurtling around, like a raging epidemic or a violent wind or a rampaging army. But none of these threatens forever. The object of attack simply needs somewhere safe to sit out the crisis, and the suppliant has such a place.

The psalm resonates with the superscription for indeed the incident to which it refers did not bring an end to the period of disaster. It was not long before Saul resumed his attempt to hunt down and kill David.

But David confidently expects God to fulfil his purpose for him; to intervene to save him and deal with his enemies. That is, when he says “He sends from heaven and saves me”, he explains what he means by adding, “God sends his love and his faithfulness” (v3b). The imagery here is of God sending love and faithfulness as personified guides, to lead David away from danger into safety (cf. Ps 43:3; Clifford, 271), or as warriors sent to fight for him, or as divine weapons that stand in contrast to the spears, arrows and swords of his predatory enemies (cf. v4).³

There is a level at which we might think of the psalmist as a pious Israelite. In this case God’s purpose for such an individual and God’s love and faithfulness presuppose the Sinai covenant. Presumably, it is because God has committed himself to his people that the individual Israelite is encouraged to look to God as his personal Saviour and Lord.

However, given that David is the composer of this psalm, this talk of God’s purpose and of God’s love and faithfulness, has a more particular reference point, namely the experience of having been specially chosen by God and anointed as Israel’s future king by Samuel (1 Sam 16).

Verses 7-10

As Goldingay (198) observes, when David says, “My heart is set, O God, my heart is set” he is deliberately contrasting the setting of his heart with his enemies’ setting of a trap. Since the heart is the seat of the intellect David here speaks about disciplined thoughts and attitudes.⁴ David is so enthusiastic to make music and sing God’s praises for his wonderful act of deliverance, that he can’t wait for dawn to break (v8). Alternatively, and perhaps more attractively, David may have awakened his harp and lyre to play music during the night, so full is his heart with God’s praises, and he is now playing so loudly that his music would wake the dawn itself!⁵ When David speaks of hastening the dawn itself, by awakening it⁶, he is using the language of reversal since it is rather the dawn that awakens people! Tate (81) conjectures that the psalmist expects to experience the theophany for which he prays in verses 5 and 11, when “dawn” comes.

Significantly, the worship of God is more than just a matter of time, it also involves waking up one’s soul and even the musical instruments themselves, the harp and lyre. In seeking to worship God let’s make those musical instruments come alive!

More than all this, David wants the whole world to share his appreciation for God’s greatness and the very fact that we are drinking in this psalm today is proof positive that David’s commitment has been fully honoured by God! In particular, David wants every inhabitant of this planet to acknowledge the greatness of God’s love and faithfulness.

Taking Refuge

David says that he will take refuge “in the shadow of [God’s] wings until the disaster has passed” (v1b). In 1 Samuel 24 we are informed that David cut off Saul’s *kānāp*, that is, the corner of his garment. Given this, the term *kēnāpēkā*, “your wings”, quite possibly involves a deliberate pun.⁷ Since the historical circumstances presuppose David’s outlaw status his reference to God’s “wings” does not mean David will take refuge in the sanctuary. Perhaps David is appropriating sanctuary language⁸, though it

might be urged against this that the wings of the cherubim are not the wings of Yahweh. Clifford (270) reasons that the image is more likely to be that of a "bird hovering protectively over its nestlings, keeping predators away by the rapid fluttering of its wings." Clifford observes that in Egypt "the wing motif was part of the iconography of solar deities or the sun itself; the winged sun represented the sun's daily course across the heavens, repelling evil by its light and bestowing life." In David's case Deuteronomy 32:10-12 may be in mind, which speaks of God shielding, caring for and guarding his people, Israel, "like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions."

At any rate, in context when David speaks of taking refuge in God, he simply means that God alone can serve as his stronghold.⁹ This again fits excellently with the superscription because, as 1 Samuel 23:29-24:1 informs us, David had taken refuge in the stronghold of En Gedi. But no security was to be found there.

It is because of David's confidence that God will be his refuge, fulfill his purpose for him, and send his love and faithfulness, that in verse 4 David can say, "I will lie down among lions" (cf. Daniel 6). That is, David will sleep peacefully even though he is surrounded by vicious predators.¹⁰ There is the additional inference here that David finds it safer to sleep among lions than to be threatened by his human enemies.¹¹

Threats and Traps

David compares those who are seeking to hunt him down with bloodthirsty lions and other deadly "man-eaters"¹² (v4). He describes his enemies as having teeth that are "spears and arrows" and having tongues that are "sharp swords." It is possible David implies here that his enemies' slanderous words against him are like deadly weapons.¹³ Indeed, Dahood, ignoring the superscription, understands the whole psalm to be the lament of a king, harassed by malicious slanderers (50). However, since the context is concerned with attempts to kill David, it is more likely that he is simply continuing the image of a predatory beast. This being so, the point is that whereas a beast literally attacks its prey with its mouth, his enemies are seeking to attack him with spears, arrows and swords.

In verse 6 David speaks of his enemies spreading a net for his feet, just as hunters would spread a net taut and await for their prey to become entangled in it. He also speaks of them digging a pit in his path. This imagery refers to the way hunters would dig a deep pit and then disguise its existence by covering it over with bracken. When a heavy animal ran over the spot it would fall into the pit, perhaps to be impaled on sharpened stakes. The imagery of David physically 'bowing down' (v6), in the context of an attempt made to make him fall to his death, contrasts with the imagery of his enemies actually 'falling into' the pit. Alter (199) takes *nafshi* here to mean "neck" not "life" and renders "they pushed down my neck."

It is also possible that when David speaks of his enemies digging a pit he is making a side allusion to the circumstances described in the superscription. For when Saul went into the cave to relieve himself this may well have involved digging a pit. This would certainly add something to the imagery of David's enemies falling into the pit they had dug!

The Divine Rising

Both at verse 5 and in the very closing words of the psalm David prays,
 Rise up, O God, above the heavens;
 let your glory be over all the earth.

The NIV translation has David praying, "Be exalted", but, as Tate points out (74), this is too static.¹⁴ David is praying for a theophanic event to take place. Keil and Delitzsch (1296) appropriately comment, "Heaven and earth have a mutually involved history, and the blessed, glorious end of this history is the sunrise of the divine doxa over both, here prayed for."

Also, the linking of "heaven" and "earth" may well be paralleled by Jesus' "Your will be done as it is in heaven."¹⁵

This prayer is linked to the prayer for deliverance that occasions the psalm. That is, it is as God fulfils his purpose for David, protecting him from his enemies, that his own greatness will be revealed to the entire world. Evidently, this presupposes that David already has some appreciation of the immense significance involved in having been chosen by God to be the future ruler of God's people.¹⁶

Further, God's greatness consists in the fact that in his deliverance of David he has clearly revealed that his love and fidelity in heaven is well able to protect his servant on earth¹⁷: "God has sent his love and faithfulness, and the psalmist wants others to know their dimensions" (Harman, 216). Presumably, as God fulfils his purpose for David he is also displaying the justice inherent in his universal government¹⁸ and his holiness.¹⁹

¹ John Goldingay, *Psalms Vol 2: Psalms 42-89* (Baker Commentary on the OT Wisdom & Psalms; ed. Tremper Longman III; Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2007) 192.

² See too Isaiah 65:8 for a further use of these words. Kirkpatrick (vol 2, 321) and Tate (77) think the words as used in this text best explain the background, that is, an implicit prayer that Yahweh not destroy Israel.

³ At a more speculative level, Dahood proposes a background in Canaanite mythology which at least sometimes represented gods or dignitaries being accompanied by two attendants. Dahood thinks that this has been demythologized in Hebrew theology (51). Tate (78) favours this view.

⁴ Curtis, 123.

⁵ So Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007) 200 (similarly, Keil & Delitzsch, 1296). Alter cites a parallel example provided by the Brazilian movie *Black Orpheus*, in which the singer Orfeo explains to two boys that it is his song, played on a guitar, that makes the dawn come up.

⁶ Dahood (55) thinks that there is an underlying allusion to the Canaanite god of dawn, whose birth was celebrated in Ugaritic mythology. Tate notes that this deity is one of a pair, Shachar and Shalim, Dawn and Dusk (80).

⁷ Goldingay, 193.

⁸ So, for example, Tate, 77.

⁹ We must dismiss the opinion of some who discount the superscription, that the psalm concerns a troubled individual seeking asylum in the temple like Adonijah (1 Ki 1:49-53) and Joab (1 Ki 2:28-35) - hardly grounds for confidence given these futile attempts by Adonijah and Joab to find refuge. See Clifford, *Psalms 1-72* (Abingdon OTC; eds. Patrick D. Miller et al; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002) 270.

¹⁰ Cf. Goldingay, 195.

¹¹ Keil & Delitzsch, 1295.

¹² Tate's rendering of NIV's "ravenous beasts" (73).

¹³ Cf. Goldingay, 196. Kirkpatrick proposes that blasphemy may be in mind (vol 2, 323).

¹⁴ Alter renders: "Loom over the heavens" (201).

¹⁵ So Tate, 81.

¹⁶ Similarly Keil and Delitzsch remark, "Here we perceive the self-consciousness of a comprehensive mission, which accompanied David from the beginning to the end of his royal career" (1296). I would only add that this psalm belongs to the period before David's coronation.

¹⁷ Clifford, 269.

¹⁸ Cf. Clifford, 271.

¹⁹ Keil & Delitzsch, 1295.