

## ***Psalm 73: Pilgrimage from Doubt to Faith***

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*A fresh translation of Psalm 73 with textual notes is provided. In form the psalm has elements of a thanksgiving song composed from a wisdom perspective. It celebrates the end of physical suffering and accompanying religious doubt. The poem is dominated by wordplays which describe first the psalmist's earlier view of himself as a loser over against the wicked and then his conviction that eventually they would fail, as surely as the wicked generation in the wilderness. God's moral providence would prevail.*

*Key Words: thanksgiving song, wisdom thinking, stylistic structuring, wordplay, intertextuality, theological contemporization, divine providence*

This article fulfills the intention of a paper presented on Psalm 73 as the 1981 Tyndale Old Testament Lecture, delivered at Tyndale House in Cambridge, England.<sup>1</sup> The original intent was to give a comprehensive analysis that moved from genre and structure to an exegetical overview of the psalm. Unfortunately the first two topics turned out to be so complex that it proved impossible to reach the satisfying conclusion of the third. Here at long last is the missing exegetical portion, written a decade and a half later.

### TRANSLATION

- 1 In spite of everything, God is good to Israel,  
to the pure in heart and mind.
- 2 For my part, I came near to losing my footing,  
my legs almost collapsed beneath me.
- 3 The reason was, I envied the braggarts,  
seeing the *shalom* they enjoy, wicked though they are.
- 4 No worries do they have,  
their bodies are sound and far from scrawny.

1. L. C. Allen, "Psalm 73: An Analysis," *TynBul* 33 (1982) 95-118.

- 5 They lack the troubles of other mortals  
and are free of human misfortunes.
- 6 So they can vaunt arrogance like a lei  
and deck themselves with violence.
- 7 The wrongdoing they commit springs from within,<sup>2</sup>  
their minds and hearts are full of evil fantasies.
- 8 They mock and talk maliciously,  
from their position of power they talk menacingly.
- 9 They speak as if the sky was theirs,  
as if the earth was under their control.
- 10 So they have their fill of bread<sup>3</sup>  
and plenty of water to drink!
- 11 Yet they declare, "How does God know?"  
Does the Most High have any knowledge?"
- 12 Here then are the wicked,  
constantly content and possessing wealth galore.
- 13 On the other hand, it got me nowhere to keep my heart and  
mind clean  
or to wash my hands, doing no harm.
- 14 I was suffering daily misfortune;  
my affliction never missed a morning.
- 15 I could not declare and tell my problem,  
else I would have let your family down.
- 16 Trying to think it through,  
I found it troubled me--
- 17 until I entered God's sanctuary,  
where I realized their eventual fate.
- 18 In spite of everything, you have set them on a slippery path,  
making them fall and be ruined.
- 19 On what a course of sudden destruction they are set,  
destined to suffer a terrifying doom!
- 20 After you wake, like a dream  
you will despise them, when you arouse yourself, like figments.
- 21 Because my heart and mind was embittered,  
my conscience has been pricked.

2. The MT "their eyes come out from fat" is strange and provides a poor parallel to v. 7b. The Greek and Syriac versions presuppose עֲוֹנוֹתָם "their iniquity" עֵינֵיהֶם "their eyes." Then הֶלֶב "fat" is to be taken as the fat of the stomach, a seat of thinking or feelings as in 17:10. Cf. the NIV "from their callous hearts comes iniquity."

3. In "Psalm 73" (117-18) I argued for a reading יִשְׁבְּעוּ מִלֶּחֶם in place of the odd MT יָשׁוּבוּ עִמּוֹ הַלֵּם "his people returns here," and in v. 10b a repointing of מִצְאוּ (from מִצָּה) "are drained, drunk" as an active verb, יִמְצְאוּ (from מִצָּץ) "they drink." Verse 10 sarcastically comments that the wicked enjoy blessings reserved by rights for the pious: cf. Isa 33:16.

- 22 For my part, I was stupid and not thinking,  
like a brute beast in relation to you.
- 23 In fact, I am with you continually,  
you take hold of my right hand.
- 24 You guide me with your advice  
and will eventually bring me to a position of honor.
- 25 Whom else do I have in heaven?  
Apart from you, I want nothing on earth.
- 26 My body failed,<sup>4</sup> along with my heart and mind,  
but God is the rock of my mind and heart,  
and the constant ground of my support.
- 27 Here is the truth: those far from you will lose their lives.  
You do away with anyone who strays wantonly from you.
- 28 I, for my part, find it good to come near to God,  
taking shelter in the Lord Yahweh,  
in order to tell of all the works you have done.

### FORM

Particular psalms fall into a variety of form-critical categories. While there has been dispute over the category of Psalm 73, the most favored one is that of a song of thanksgiving.<sup>5</sup> The thanksgiving song celebrated the resolution of a personal crisis that had at an earlier stage been voiced in an individual lament. The song was typically recited at a service of thanksgiving and accompanied by a thank offering, whose meat would be eaten later at a thanksgiving meal. The song of thanksgiving tends to have six elements. They are: a resolve to give thanks, an introductory summary of the resolution of the crisis, a description of that crisis, a report that God had heard the prayer of lament and in response acted affirmatively, generalized teaching, and renewed thanksgiving. These elements may be seen clearly in Psalm 30.<sup>6</sup>

Here v. 1 reflects two elements, the resolve to give thanks and generalized teaching, learned in the school of recent experience and passed on to the congregation.<sup>7</sup> The combination of elements causes

4. The perfect verb קָלַח is to be taken as a past tense with M. E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (Dallas: Word, 1990) 228, 230.

5. For documentation and detailed argumentation see my "Psalm 73," 107-18. In general, bibliographical references given there will not be repeated in this essay.

6. There the first two elements appear in vv. 1-3 [Heb. 2-4], the third in vv. 6-7 [7-8], the fourth in vv. 8-11 [9-12], the fifth in vv. 4-5 [5-6], and the sixth in v. 12 [13].

7. In "Psalm 73" (112, 114), I followed L. G. Perdue (*Wisdom and Cult* [Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977] 287-89), in analyzing v. 1 as a proverb. However, it can be adequately explained as a thanksgiving element.

it to lack the personal note common in the thanksgiving song.<sup>8</sup> It presupposes and echoes the brief hymn sung at the thanksgiving service:

Give thanks to Yahweh of hosts,  
for Yahweh is good . . . (Jer 33:11)

The second element, summarizing the resolution of the crisis, appears in v. 2, as the emphatic position of the two Hebrew terms for "almost" suggest.<sup>9</sup> The sentiment appears in a fuller form in 94:17, where one of the Hebrew terms recurs:

If Yahweh had not been my help,  
my soul would quickly have dwelt in the silent land.

The third and fourth elements, describing at length the crisis and its resolution, seem to be reflected in vv. 3-26, while the final element of renewed thanksgiving is found in v. 28.

There is more going on in Psalm 73 than the simple designation "thanksgiving song" suggests. The standard song celebrated release from a physical crisis, sickness and/or persecution by particular enemies. While physical trouble is mentioned in v. 14, it is part of a much larger problem, a problem of the mind and heart (v. 26).<sup>10</sup> The crisis is the spiritual and intellectual problem of v. 3, which the psalmist's own suffering compounded. The psalm is thereby stamped as belonging to the wisdom tradition of Israel. Its use of wisdom vocabulary supports this attribution, while its contrast between the wicked and the righteous constitutes a standard motif of wisdom compositions. Was Psalm 73 primarily composed for use in the wisdom school or for recitation in the temple court? Reference to a congregation is characteristic of the cultic song: its absence might suggest the former alternative.<sup>11</sup> However, the explicit reference to an earlier visit to the sanctuary in v. 17 and the implicit reference to temple attendance in v. 28 points to the latter option.

### FINAL STRUCTURE

The best stylistic analysis of Psalm 73 has been given by K.-J. Illman.<sup>12</sup> It falls into six sections, vv. 1-2, 3-12, 13-17, 18-20, 21-26, and 27-

8. While the psalm lacks any direct appeal to the congregation, it does exhibit the thanksgiving song's characteristic mixture of testimony and prayer, indicated by third and second person references to God.

9. "It did not happen! Yahweh did not let him fall!" (H.-J. Kraus, *Psalms 60-150* [trans. H. C. Oswald; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989] 87).

10. The Hebrew term  $\text{לֵבָב} \text{ } \text{לֵב}$  "heart, mind" occurs in the psalm no less than six times.

11. But see n. 8 above.

12. "Till tolkningen av Psalm 73," *SEÅ* 41-42 (1976-77) 120-29, esp. 123-24.

28. The first, third and fourth sections are introduced by an adversative particle **וְ**, and the others by **כִּי**, a causal or asseverative particle. In three cases the particle is followed at the beginning of the next line by **וְאִנִּי** "and/but I" (Verses 2, 22 [also in v. 23], 28), and once by the similar **וְאִנִּי־וָאֵל** "and I was" (v. 14).

This structuring is supported by the proportionate length of sections, Illman noted. Verses 3-12 devote ten lines to the wicked, while vv. 13-17 give five lines to the righteous psalmist. This proportion is reversed in the next two units: vv. 18-20 describe the fate of the wicked in three lines while vv. 21-26 discuss the psalmist's good fortune in six lines. Verses 1-2 and 27-28 are the introductory and closing two-line borders of the psalm. The intervening material falls into two parts, dealing with the apparent conditions of the wicked and the psalmist (vv. 3-12, 13-17), and vv. 18-26 presenting the "true" state of affairs for both parties (vv. 18-20, 21-26).

Illman's structural analysis has laid bare the psalmist's arrangement of the composition in its final form. It represents the wrapping paper and ribbon, as it were, in which the completed psalm has been presented for recitation. However, the structure Illman uncovered only determines the size and general significance of the sections of the final composition. There is a host of cases of repetition and near-repetition which his analysis leaves unexplained. They point to a dynamic composition, over against Illman's final static one. This dynamic composition relates to the creative and piecemeal growth of the poem, as it was written stage by stage. As we shall see, it takes us into the heart of the poem and reveals the writer's working through aspects of his problem.

#### DEVELOPMENT AND MEANING

Verses 1-20, two-thirds of the entire psalm, comprises the first block of material. It falls into two parts, vv. 1-12 and 13-20. This material is characterized as a single entity by the pointed repetition of key terms and motifs from its first part in the second. The psalmist's eventual claims of God's favor to the pure in heart, presented at the beginning (v. 1), was seemingly disproved by the providential blows that attended his own endeavors to cleanse his heart (v. 13). Three contrasts between the radically different experiences of the wicked and of the psalmist exacerbated his problem. First, they seem immune from human misfortune, yet he experiences it every day (**יִנְגַעוּ**, v. 5; **נִגְיַע**, v. 14). Second, they lack the troubles of other mortals, while he has the severe problem of spiritual and intellectual perplexity (**עִמְלָה**, v. 5; **עִמְלָה**, v. 16). Third, they make insolent declarations about God, but he is constrained against declaring his problem out of respect for God's people (**וְאָמְרוּ**, v. 11; **וְאָמְרוּ־הֵי**, v. 15).

Yet his near tumble from a firm faith (v. 2) is later matched by a consoling conviction that the wicked would slip and fall fatally at God's hands (v. 18). Two cases of wordplay reinforce the reversal they would incur. The prosperity of the wicked (שָׁלוֹם, v. 3) would be turned to ruin (לְשֹׁמֵה, 19).<sup>13</sup> Their physical soundness (תָּם, v. 14<sup>14</sup>) would give way to their destruction (תָּמוּ, v. 19).

There is then a sense of completeness, as one reaches v. 20, both stylistic and thematic. The intellectual problem of the prosperity of the wicked (v. 3) has been resolved by receipt of a revelation of their future downfall (vv. 17-20). The personal distress of vv. 13-14 has evidently given way to a renewed experience of divine favor and blessing, v. 1 implies.

Verse 17, which relates a visit to the sanctuary, is clearly the turning point of vv. 1-20 and indeed of the whole psalm. In terms of Israel's religious culture it represents a visit to the temple at festival time. Personal crisis was no barrier to the pilgrim, for there was wise provision in the temple routine for individuals to bring their laments or emergency prayers, somewhat like Hannah at the Shiloh sanctuary in 1 Sam 1:10-11. It was customary for the sufferer to receive from the temple personnel a response in God's name, and doubtless at least such a response is presupposed as the basis for the ensuing note of confidence.<sup>15</sup>

However, the conviction of the doom of the wicked in vv. 18-20 is expressed with such a rich variety of language that it could well be an echo of a narrative tradition used in temple worship, whether recounted in prose or poetry. The historical hymn of Psalm 78 has two possible parallels. First, in 78:33 Yahweh wiped out the generation of the exodus in the wilderness, consuming their years "in terror" (בַּפְּהֵלָה). Here in v. 19 the wicked were to perish "from terrors" (מִן־בְּלֵהוֹת, a metathesized form). Second, Yahweh's sudden intervention in Israel's history, causing the military successes of David against the Philistines is expressed by the metaphor of awaking from sleep in 78:65: "and the Lord awoke like a sleeper" (וַיִּקְוֶן כִּי־שָׁן אֲדָנָי). In 73:20 future divine activity directed against the wicked is described similarly: "like a dream after the Lord awakes" (כַּחֲלוֹם מֵהִקְיִין אֲדָנָי).

In Psalm 106, a communal lament that delves into Israel's history, the fate of the exodus generation is described in terms of an oath that

13. J. C. Cann, Jr. (*Psalm 73: An Interpretation Emphasizing Rhetorical and Canonical Criticism* [Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1985] 76 n. 62) misrepresented this wordplay, cited from my "Psalm 73" (101-2), as שָׁלוֹם, and שֹׁמֵה, and then dismissed it as sharing only two consonants and so "hardly adequate to qualify as a case of repetition."

14. The MT לְמוֹתָם "to their death" is generally regarded by scholars as a false running together of two words in different clauses, לְמוֹתָם, "to them, sound." The stylistic factor of wordplay supports this division.

15. Cf. the implication of such responses in 6:8-10 [9-11]; 28:6-7.

Yahweh would "make" them "fall" (לְהַפִּיל, 106:26) in the wilderness. Correspondingly, here in v. 18 he was to "make them fall" (הַפִּילֵם) in ruin. The basic prose parallel for the death of the exodus generation that features in Psalms 78 and 106 is the divine curse of judgment in Num 14:28-35. There the use of the verb הָאָם and יִתְמוּ "they (will) come to an end" in Num 14:33, 35 is matched by יִתְמוּ "they will come to an end" in Ps 73:19. Another possible point of correspondence in this verse with the historical traditions of Numbers is the use of בְּרִיָּע "suddenly," which in Num 16:21, 45 [Heb. 17:10] is used in Yahweh's promise to destroy Korah and his fellow rebels in the wilderness.

This exploration of possible intertextuality points in two directions, to the deliberate echoing of either such a poetic survey of history as Psalm 78 or a prose narrative of the wilderness period, in particular Numbers 14 and 16 or, of course, to a poetic composition akin to it. There do appear to be impressive links with the destruction of the exodus generation, preventing their entry into the promised land.

Harold Kushner has written of the distinctive faith of Jews and Christians as follows:

I once heard Bishop James Pike define a Christian as a person who took the story of the crucifixion and resurrection personally. He then went on to define a Jew as a person who took the story of the exodus from Egypt personally.<sup>16</sup>

The obvious basis of this definition where Judaism is concerned lies in the Passover celebration in which the spiritual perspective of the participant is to be "as if one had come out of Egypt."<sup>17</sup> Something comparable seems to underlie the evident use of historical traditions in Psalm 73. There is a "personal" application of Yahweh's ancient threat and execution of judgment to the contemporary situation of moral and religious chaos.

The development of the psalm finds a natural pause after v. 20. Thematically, the basic problem of the prosperity of the wicked (v. 2) has been resolved by a fresh assurance of divine providence. Stylistically, a scheme of repetition and wordplay has been used to achieve balanced symmetry. However, there are two loose ends to which the text turns in vv. 21-28. First, the psalmist's envy at the wicked (v. 2) and evident resentment over his own suffering (vv. 13-14) had estranged him from God. Second, that very suffering constituted an unresolved part of the overall problem of divine providence. These two elements needed to be tackled in order to justify the initial, yet

16. *To Life!* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993) 124.

17. Cf. the theological contemporization in Amos 2:10, "I brought you up from Egypt and led you forty years in the wilderness," and similarly in Mic 6:4.

chronologically final, statement of thanksgiving for life-giving blessing in v. 1: "God is good."

The two concerns are expressed by means of a further series of wordplays and repeated terms. The psalmist uses them to distance himself both from the wicked and from his earlier attitude of alienation from God. In v. 22 his confessions of his former lack of knowledge ("unthinking," *וְלֹא אֶזְכָּר*) harks back to his period of unavailing quest for such knowledge, in v. 16 ("think through," *לְדַעַת*). Then he had been tempted to take seriously the defiant claim of the wicked that God had no moral knowledge of or concern for the world, in v. 11 ("know," "knowledge," *דָּעָה, יָדָע*). Now he is able to affirm God's providential involvement in the world, not only in eventually turning the tables on the wicked but also in intervening in the life of one such as himself who is committed to God.

This involvement in the psalmist's life is expressed in terms of guidance on the journey of life. The sentiments of vv. 23-24 are best exegeted by reference to Ps 91:15: "I will be with him . . . and I will honor (or glorify, *וַיִּשְׁבַּח*) him." Whereas the latter text has to do with rescue from crisis, here positive blessing appears to be in view, including the warding off of any future crisis. In v. 24 the term *אַחַר*, rendered "eventually," deliberately correlates with the *אַחֲרֵיהֶם* or "eventual fate" of the wicked in v. 17. Both are to be located within the providential course of human history. So too is the "honor" or glory the psalmist expects: "The person who has a lowly spirit will obtain honor" (*כְּבוֹד*, Prov 29:23). The tide has already turned for him. Demoralization and sickness were things of the past (v. 26, cf. v. 1), but he looked for further, ongoing blessing.<sup>18</sup>

Three further reversals follow in vv. 25-26. The boastful claim to universal power ("sky . . . earth") made by the wicked in v. 9 calls forth by contrast devotional praise of Yahweh's incomparable role in heaven and earth in v. 25. The characterization of the wicked as "constantly (*עוֹלָם*) content" in v. 12 gives way to the psalmist's sense of "constant" (*לְעוֹלָם*) dependence on God in v. 26. The description of God as *חֵלְקִי* "my portion" in v. 26 provides a wordplay with the *בְּחֵלֶק* "slippery path" that was to be the lot of the wicked in v. 18. The formula at the close of v. 26 is a frequent affirmation of faith in the Psalms. It is a metaphor derived from the dependence of the tribe of Levi on religious dues, whereas the other tribes had land assigned to them as their portion or means of life. A spiritual metaphor, the for-

18. In this respect the wisdom tradition is not far from the covenant tradition of Lev 18:5 which promises life for those who obey the Torah. Such life means that "Israel will have a secure, healthy life with sufficient goods in the promised land as God's people" (J. E. Hartley, *Leviticus* [Dallas: Word, 1992] 293).

mula expresses a sense of reliance on God as the giver of daily blessings without which life could not continue.

The final pair of verses polarizes the contrasts that pervade the psalm. To distance oneself from God and God's moral purposes is to break covenant loyalty, which can only lead to a tragic end. On the other hand, partaking in the temple service of thanksgiving was for the psalmist an expression of trust and of close fellowship with God. It gave an opportunity to testify that the ancient works of God had been supplemented with a further work of deliverance. Earlier he had been embarrassed to "tell" his problem (אֶסְפְּרָה, v. 15); how he is glad to "tell" (לְסַפֵּר) his praise.

In terms of wisdom teaching, Psalm 73 represents a painful retreat from the naiveté of instant retribution. It envisions a slower but no less sure view of divine providence as in Prov 24:16: "A righteous person falls seven times and rises again"; or in Ps 92:7 (8): "Though the wicked sprout like grass and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to be destroyed." There is no trace of eschatology in such a view: God's moral sovereignty conquers misused human freedom on the battlefield of the everyday world.

Modern readers are aware that at times this philosophy is glaringly difficult to justify. The Christian reader is tempted to fall back completely on an other-worldly, eschatological concept of a Last Judgment, in accord with a frequent New Testament emphasis (e.g., 2 Thess 1:5-10), which itself depends on the late Old Testament perspective of Dan 12:2-3. Nevertheless, a doctrine of divine providence that holds human life on a moral and spiritual leash should not quickly be abandoned. Paul could celebrate not only the truth that "Jesus . . . delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess 1:10), but also deliverance from existential danger in this world: "God . . . delivered us from such a prospect of death, and he will deliver us; we have set our hope on him that he will deliver us again" (2 Cor 1:10). Suffering believers are still called to wait and work with optimism for divine resolution of their suffering and for renewal of life—and, when they come, to celebrate them as the very acts of God.