

The Permanent Preservation of God's Words: Psalm 12:6-7 Expanded Dr. Thomas M. Strouse

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 (cf. Pss. 78:1-8; 105:8; 119: 89, 111, 152, 160, Isa. 40:8; Mt. 4:4, 5:18, 24:35; Lk. 4:4; I Pet. 1:23-25).¹ Although some dismiss or deny the declaration of the Lord that He will preserve His Words forever, the exegesis of the Hebrew text 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 the Hebrew text). The KJV, in contradistinction to some modern versions,² gives this aforementioned rendering: *"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 "chief Musician" (*lamanatstsach* לְמַנְצִיחַ)⁴ to be sung with the eight stringed harps or "Sheminith" (*hashsheminith* הַשְּׁמִינִית).⁵ It was a "Psalm" (*mizmor* מִזְמוֹר) that David authored (*ledavid* לְדָוִד).⁶ David obviously lamented the evil words of his enemies, but the psalm's specific occasion is not revealed.

Structure

¹The Christian exegete should not be surprised that the enemy has attacked some of the clearest passages on key doctrinal subjects (cf. Eph. 6:12; I Tim. 4:1-2). For instance, the clear teachings on the ubiquity of Christ (Jn. 3:13), on the incarnation of God (I Tim. 3:16), on the requisite faith for baptism (Acts 8:37), and on the Trinity of the Godhead (I Jn. 5:7) have been under attack since their respective inscripturation.

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" (Ps. 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.]).

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

The structure of the psalm is asymmetric. This structure causes the focus to be on the middle or odd strophe, "C" The Promises of God (v. 5). David's lament carries the reader from the need for divine help, because of the words of the ungodly, to a focus on the promises of God for deliverance, which include the permanent preservation of His Words, the antidote to the word of the ever-present wicked.

Graphic Structure of English Text

- A. The Recognition of the Need for Divine Help (v. 1)
- B. The Threat of the Words of the Ungodly (vv. 2-4)
- C. The Promises of God (v. 5)
- B.' The Antidote of the Words of God (vv. 6-7)
- A.' The Recognition of the Need for Divine Help (v. 8)

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" (*hoshiy'ah* הוֹשִׁיעָה),⁷ fearing that the "godly man" (*chasiyd* חָסִיד)⁸ would come to an "end" (*gamar* גָּמַר) and "faithful men" (*'emuniym* אֱמוּנִים) would "vanish" (*phassu* פָּסוּ)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 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)

The psalmist David acutely sensed this great threat of words from the ungodly around him. Using two different verbs ("they speak" [*yethabberu* יִתְבַּרְרוּ] {3x} and "said" [*'ameru* אָמְרוּ]) the wicked told "vanity" (literally "empty lies" *shawe'* שָׁוְא)¹¹ 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

⁷The verbal root *yasha'* (יָשַׁע) is behind the names Joshua, Jesus, and Hosanna.
⁸The consonants of this word relate to *kesed* (חֶסֶד) that refers to the Lord's covenant love.
⁹This *hapax legomena* verb comes from *pasas* (פָּסַס) and means "to disappear."
¹⁰Elijah manifested this attitude of "solipsism" ("I only exist") and was rebuked by the Lord (I Kings 19:14-18).
¹¹This masculine singular noun means "worthless, empty" speech.

"prevail" (*gabbar* גַּבַּר)¹² and that they were autonomous. "Who is lord (*'adon* אֲדוֹן) over us?" suggests the rebellious attitude of those who said, "There is no God" (Ps. 14:1). The "atheists" in this latter instance were those who rejected God's lordship (cf. Ps. 14:2, 4). David asserted or prayed that the Lord would "cut off" (*yakerath* יָכַרְתָּ) the braggarts he was facing. This *Hiphil* (causative stem) imperfect verb could be understood as an assertion, "the Lord will cut off," or as a prayer, "may the Lord cut off."

C. God's Promises (v. 5)

The structure of the psalm focuses on the promises of God.¹³ 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" (*'aniyyim* עֲנִיִּים) were despoiled and the "needy" (*'evyonim* אֲבִיוֹנִים) were groaning, the Lord made significant promises. "Now will I arise (*'aqum* אֶקְוֶם), the Lord promised, and set the psalmist "in safety" (cf. v. 1). The LORD promised to arise (cf. Ps. 9:19) and intervene on the part of the faithful. The enemy made boastful threats, and if fulfilled, this verbal antagonism would lead to the injury and destruction of the saints. Jehovah's promise was to place David in safety, the very help for which the psalmist asked (v. 1). The safety was physical deliverance from those that "puff at" (*yaphiyach* יָפִיחַ)¹⁴ 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 (cf. Dt. 30:11-14), with the inherent promises of deliverance, as an antidote to the words of the wicked. After all, the wicked asserted that their words would prevail, or *be preserved indefinitely*. The Lord's response to this boastful claim was that *His* Words, and not man's, would be preserved, each and ever one of them, for ever. The psalmist reflected on the quality and endurance of the greatest tangible help that the Lord desires to give man--His perfect Words (cf. Prov. 30:5-6). The quality of the Lord's Words is likened to purified silver from a refining furnace. The results of the seven-fold refining process produced one hundred percent perfect silver in the ancient world, and 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)

¹²The stem of this first person common plural imperfect verb is *Hiphil*, suggesting the force of "we will cause to prevail." The root consonants are related to *gever* ("strong man").

¹³Paul 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).

¹⁴The root of this *Hiphil* imperfect verb is *puach* (פָּיַח) 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).

David concluded the psalm by recognizing his need for the Lord's help because the wicked were "all around" (savev סָבִיב) him. Their "vilest" (zulluth זָלָת) nature was not only prevalent but "exalted" (rum רוּם)¹⁵ among the sons of "men." 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

The Hebrew grammar of the OT prepares for the exegesis Ps. 12:6-7. The serious student of Scripture must recognize the biblical phenomenon of feminine antecedent nouns taking masculine pronouns. Once this is recognized, then careful exegesis may be achieved.

The Biblical Phenomenon

It is important for the careful exegete of the Hebrew Scriptures to recognize the biblical phenomenon wherein the biblical writers employed masculine pronouns in reference to feminine antecedent nouns when those feminine nouns were synonyms for the Words of God (cf. Ps. 119). Since the words of Jehovah are an extension of this strong patriarchal God, the OT writers occasionally seemed to use masculine pronouns for the following synonyms. The Hebrew words Law (*torah* תּוֹרָה), Testimony (*`eduth* עֵדוּת), Commandment (*mitzwah* מִצְוָה), Statute (*chuvqah* חֻקָּה), and Word (*'imrah* אִמְרָה) are feminine in gender. The normal Hebrew grammatical pattern is that concordance occurs between the gender and number of the pronoun with its respective antecedent noun. For instance, a masculine singular (m.s.) noun would take a masculine singular pronoun, and a masculine plural (m.p.) noun would take a masculine plural pronoun. However, the biblical writers deviated from this "grammatical norm" for theological purposes, emphasizing specific truths. The inspired Scripture is the only authority for the biblical languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), including their respective vocabulary and grammar. There are examples in all three divisions of the *Tanak* illustrating this Scriptural Hebrew phenomenon of gender discordance for theological purposes.

The following are examples of the phenomenon:

Law (*torah*)

1. "That thou mayest observe to do according to all the **law** (*torah*--f.s.)...turn not from **it** (*mimmennu*--מִמֶּנּוּ m.s.)," (Josh. 1:7).
2. "For he established a **testimony** (*`eduth*--f.s.) in Jacob, and appointed a **law** (*torah*--f.s.) in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make **them** (*lehodiy`am*--לְהוֹדִיעֵם m.p. suffix) known to their children" (Ps. 78:5).

¹⁵The exaltation of the wicked parallels the vanishing of the godly in verse one.

Testimony (*`eduth*)

1. Ps. 78:5 (see above)
2. "Thy **testimonies** (*`edoth--f.p.*) have I taken as an heritage for ever: for **they** (*hemmah--הִמָּוֶה m.p.*) are the rejoicing of my heart" (Ps. 119:111).
3. "Thy **testimonies** (*`edoth--f.p.*) are wonderful: therefore doth my soul keep **them** (*netzaratham--נִצְרָתָם m.p. suffix*)" (Ps. 119:129).
4. "Concerning thy **testimonies** (*`edoth*), I have known of old that thou hast founded **them** (*yesadtam--יָסַדְתָּם m.p. suffix*) for ever" (Ps. 119:152).
5. "My soul hath kept thy **testimonies** (*`edoth--f.p.*), and I love **them** (*wa'ohavem--וְאוֹהַבְתִּי m.p. suffix*) exceedingly" (Ps. 119:167).

Commandment (*mitzwah*)

1. "Therefore shall ye keep my **commandments** (*mitzwoth--f.p.*), and do **them** (*'otham--אָתָם m.p.*): I am the LORD (Lev. 22:31).
2. "If ye walk in my **statutes** (*chuqqoth--f.p.*), and keep my **commandments** (*mitzwoth--f.p.*), and do **them** (*'otham--אָתָם m.p.*)" (Lev. 26:3).
3. "And remember all the **commandments** (*mitzwoth--f.p.*) of the LORD, and do **them** (*'otham--אָתָם m.p.*)" (Num. 15:39).
4. "If thou wilt walk in my **statutes** (*chuqqoth--f.p.*), and execute my judgments (*mishpat--m.p.*), and keep all my **commandments** (*mitzwoth--f.p.*) to walk in **them** (*bahem--בָּהֶם m.p. suffix*)," (I Ki. 6:12).

Statute (*chuqqah*)

1. "And you shall keep my **statutes** (*chuqqoth--f.p.*), and do **them** (*'otham--אָתָם m.p.*)" (Lev. 20:8).
2. Lev. 26:3 (see above).
3. I Ki. 6:12 (see above).
4. "For they have refused my judgments (*mishpat--m.p.*) and my **statutes** (*chuqqoth--f.p.*), they have not walked in **them** (*bahem--בָּהֶם m.p. suffix*)" (Ezk. 5:6).
5. "And hath kept all my **statutes** (*chuqqoth--f.p.*), and hath done **them** (*'otham--אָתָם m.p.*)" (Ezk. 18:19).
6. "They shall also walk in my judgments (*mishpat--m.p.*); and observe my **statutes** (*chuqqoth--f.p.*), and do **them** (*'otham--אָתָם m.p.*)" (Ezk. 37:24).

Word (*'imrah*)

1. "The **words** (*'imroth--f.p.*) of the LORD are pure **words** (*'amaroth--f.p.*)...thou shalt keep **them** (*tishmerem--תִּשְׁמְרֵם m.p. suffix*), O LORD, thou shalt preserve **them** (*titzzerennu--תִּצְרְנֵנוּ m.p. suffix*) from this generation for ever" (Ps. 12:6-7).

The Exegesis

The psalmist recognized the tangible help that God gives for the believer in the midst of the threats and claims of the wicked is His "Words" (*'imroth אִמְרוֹת*). He likened the pure "Words" (*'amaroth אִמְרוֹת*) of the Lord unto "silver" (*ceseph כֶּסֶף*). The verbs and pronominal suffixes of verse seven are critical. The LORD is addressed as the subject of the verbs "thou shall keep them" (*tishmerem תִּשְׁמְרֵם*) and "thou shall preserve them" (*titzzerennu תִּצְרֵנּוּ*). The object of the first verb "thou shall keep them" must be its closest antecedent, which is "words." Although "words" is feminine plural and the suffix on the verb is masculine plural, this gender discordance is not unusual in other psalms dealing with God's Words (see above). For instance, in the great psalm on the Words of God, Ps. 119,¹⁶ the psalmist deliberately masculinized the verbal extension of the patriarchal God of Scripture. As this phenomenon exists throughout the *Tanak*, the interpreter has been prepared for gender discordance in this psalm. Furthermore, the examples set forth in Ps. 119 preclude the exegete from moving prior to the closest antecedent for the sake of gender concordance. It would be ridiculous to seek gender concordance where this phenomenon occurs in Ps. 119:111, for then the gender concordance would teach that the psalmist rejoiced in his heart for the masculine plural "wicked" (v. 110). Again in v. 129, applying the exclusive "rule" of gender concordance, the psalmist promised to keep the Lord's masculine plural "precepts" (v. 128)--a synonym for "testimonies" which is the closest antecedent anyway. Observing v. 152, the psalmist recognized that the Lord had "founded" what "forever"--the feminine plural "testimonies" or masculine plural participle "they that follow after mischief"? Finally, what did the psalmist love "exceedingly" (v. 167)? Was it the feminine plural "testimonies" or the masculine plural participle "they which love" (v. 165)?

Throughout the Hebrew OT, pronouns usually correspond to their antecedent nouns in proximity and with gender/number concordance. However, a phenomenon exists, which fresh Hebrew exegesis observes,¹⁷ that feminine synonyms for Word of God are addressed by masculine pronouns for the apparent purpose of masculinizing the patriarchal Jehovah God.

The second verb "thou shalt preserve them" has the masculine singular pronominal suffix (*titzzerennu תִּצְרֵנּוּ*) which refers to the individual Words. Since Hebrew does not have the neuter pronoun "it," the pronoun "him" (v. 7) refers to the individual item of "them" (v. 6).¹⁸ The KJV has the marginal note "Heb. him: i.e., everyone of them," which of course would then refer to every individual word. The first verb refers to all the Words that the Lord preserved, and the second to the very individual Words He preserved (cf. Lk. 4:4). The Lord promised to preserve every one and all of His Words for every generation, because every generation will be judged by the

¹⁶This is the *locus classicus* psalm detailing the full panoply of the attributives for the complete and perfect Word of God.

¹⁷It is a tragic day in fundamental "scholarship" when capable Hebrew exegetes defer to the interpretations of four hundred years of conservative interpretation rather than applying prayer and true biblical study to texts such as Ps. 12:6-7.

¹⁸That is, the masculine pronoun refers to every individual word, and NOT to every individual man (v. 5).

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, both preparatory and immediate, of the Masoretic Hebrew text of Psalm 12 all argue forcefully and irrefragably for the promise of 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 and are temporal; God's ever-present Words are Truth and are everlasting. This is the tangible help that the righteous man has in every generation--the perfectly preserved Words of the LORD.