

POETIC ARTISTRY IN THE EXPRESSION OF FEAR IN PSALM 49

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AS POETIC TEXTS THE PSALMS ARE TYPICALLY MARKED by the expression of emotions. The Psalter evidences the full range of feelings, from the most tender to the most turgid sentiments experienced by humans. One recurrent emotion in the psalms is fear. Most frequently the object of fear is God, as His worshipers demonstrate respect for Him, as in Psalm 115:11: "You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD; He is their help and their shield." It is not, however, unusual for the object of fear to be human or impersonal enemies, as in Psalm 56:2-5 (English, 1-4).¹ "Be gracious to me, O God, for man has trampled upon me; fighting all day long he oppresses me. My foes have trampled upon me all day long, for they are many who fight proudly against me. When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You. In God, whose word I praise, in God I have put my trust; I shall not be afraid. What can mere man do to me?"

Psalm 49 offers an instructive case for analyzing the expression of the emotion of fear in the Psalms. After his initial proclamation addressed to all of humanity in verses 2-5, the psalmist asked a rhetorical question in verses 6-7 that sets forth the problem: "Why should I fear in days of adversity, when the iniquity of my foes surrounds me, even those who trust in their wealth, and boast in the abundance of their riches?"

This question "communicates a real situation of distress; it introduces us to the fearful perplexity of those who are helplessly

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¹ Numeration of verses is based on the Hebrew text, even when the text is quoted in English translation.

at the mercy of the rich and powerful."² In verses 8-16 the psalmist probed this problem, and by this means exposed its logical and theological flaws. His conclusion (vv. 17-21) begins with the prohibition, "Do not be afraid," in verse 17, which provides a corrective balance to "Why should I fear?" in verse 6.

There are numerous Hebrew terms for fear,³ but the two uses in Psalm 49 are both verbal forms of אָרַא. The semantic range of אָרַא includes nuances such as "to be terrified," "to fear," "to respect," and "to worship." In discussing the aspects of fear encompassed by this term, van Pelt and Kaiser state, "Terror and worship are, in some sense, polar opposites; the former is characteristic of complete anxiety while the latter suggests trust. The aspect of respect, however, can be either a weakened sense of fear or worship. Therefore, the concept of terror can be weakened to express respect, which can once again be intensified to express worship. Only by context can the particular sense of each occurrence be determined"⁴ Fuhs concludes, "The content of the verb is varied by context-sensitive classifiers in such a way as to cover the entire semantic range in all its variety, from alarm in the face of everyday threats through fear of numinous powers to fear of God."⁵

In Psalm 49 the psalmist focused on the aspect of אָרַא that relates to fear in the face of a threatening situation in life. "He speaks of a fear that is a deep apprehensive anxiety about the meaning and destiny of life, a worry in the face of the faith of the rich in their wealth that one has failed and missed it all. That is a fear that disorients one from the only fear that belongs to faith, the fear of the LORD (Prov. 1:7)."⁶ Recent psychological analyses of emotions have elucidated the dynamics inherent in fear. Although caution must be exercised lest contemporary scholarship attribute anachronistic insights to the psalmist, such research can be useful for enhancing the interpreter's appreciation of the psalmist's sense of fear. Berkowitz states that "fear is typically associated with a

² Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, Continental Commentary, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1978), 482.

³ H. F. Fuhs, אָרַא in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. David E. Green, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 293-95.

⁴ M. V. van Pelt and W. C. Kaiser, "אָרַא," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:528.

⁵ Fuhs, "אָרַא" 295.

⁶ James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 192.

relatively predominant avoidance tendency, an urge to get away from the perceived danger," and he contrasts this impulse with anger, which "is usually linked to an urge to approach and strike at some target."⁷ Similarly Izard and Youngstrom note, "Because of the potency of fear feeling, the motivation to escape or to reduce threat dominates all functional systems. Any emotion feeling tends to bias perception. Intense fear feeling exercises such tight control over information processing that it tends to eliminate all parts of the perceptual field that hold no promise of an escape route."⁸

As Ben-Ze'ev explains, the emotional object of fear can be a certain situation (e.g., "I am afraid of the dark") or of a person (e.g., "I am afraid of this violent person") or of oneself (e.g., "I am afraid of losing my reputation"). In each of these cases fear prompts one to avoid the perceived threat. Fear, then, causes a person to try to flee from a situation that threatens his or her feeling of security or well-being.⁹ In Psalm 49 the psalmist endeavored to untie the tangled thoughts and feelings that fear produces by expressing, or opening up by explanation, the riddle (הַתְּיָבִי) of the relationship between life and death.¹⁰

Psalm 49 has been examined frequently in terms of its philology,¹¹ theology,¹² and provenance.¹³ What have not often been

⁷ Leonard Berkowitz, *Cause and Consequences of Feelings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 190.

⁸ Carroll E. Izard and Eric A. Youngstrom, "The Activation and Regulation of Fear and Anxiety," in *Perspectives on Anxiety, Panic, and Fear*, ed. Debra A. Hope (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 12.

⁹ Aaron Ben Ze'ev, *The Subtlety of Emotions* (Cambridge: MIT, 2000), 480.

¹⁰ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 359.

¹¹ Mitchell Dahood characteristically suggests new meanings of the Hebrew terms by appealing to potential parallels in Ugaritic (*Psalms 1-50*, Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965], 295-303).

¹² Of particular theological interest to interpreters has been the possible reference to resurrection and immortality in verse 16. See, for example, T. D. Alexander, "The Psalms and the After Life," *Irish Biblical Studies* 9 (1987): 2-17; Philip S. Johnston, "Psalm 49: A Personal Eschatology," in *Eschatology in Bible and Theology*, ed. Kent E. Brower and Mark W. Elliott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 73-84; J. Lindblom, "Die 'Eschatologie' des 49. Psalms," *Horae Soederblomianae* 1 (1944): 21-27; Leonard Ramarosan, "Immortality et Resurrection dans les Psaumes," *Science et Esprit* 36 (1984): 287-95; and Markus Witte, "'Aber Gott wird meine Seele erlösen'-Tod and Leben each Psalm XLIX," *Vetus Testamentum* 50 (2000): 540-60. Additional bibliographic references to the theological studies of Psalm 49 are listed in J. David Pleins, "Death and Endurance: Reassessing the Literary Structure and Theology of Psalm 49," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 69 (1996): 246 n 6.

¹³ Pierre Casetti, *Gibt es ein Leben vor dem Tod?* Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis (Got-

studied, however, are the rhetorical techniques by which the psalmist expressed and overcame his feelings of fear. "The fact that the psalms are artistic means that they display in fuller measure and with greater frequency the components of artistic form, including patterns, design, unity, balance, harmony, and variation. The psalmists were imaginative and creative; they regarded their artistry as crucial to the meaning of its content."¹⁴ Unfortunately, as Miller laments, poetic analysis has only rarely been reflected in commentaries on the Psalms.

To date, stylistic analysis often stands by itself without engaging other issues of interpretation. But it is also the case that interpreters of the psalms whose attention is particularly given over to form-critical exegesis or to theological, liturgical, and pastoral dimensions of interpretation, have tended on the whole to ignore stylistic aspects as features of the text's expression. No modern commentary in English reflects any serious concentration on matters of style. The full hearing of the psalms will be greatly enhanced when the familiar tendency to abstract content from form or to empty form of its content is overcome. To know the psalms are poetic is not to forget that they are Scripture. To read and hear them as Scripture requires that one receive them also as poetry.¹⁵

This article seeks to remedy a deficiency in the scholarly literature by analyzing some of the salient features in the literary artistry of Psalm 49, including the psalmist's use of repetition, interlocking semantic fields, lexical exploitation, and sound play, which are essential elements in the thematic development of the psalm. By this means the content and the form of Psalm 49 will be viewed as integrated components in an exquisitely crafted text¹⁶

REPETITION

The Hebrew text of Psalm 49 is replete with repetitions, for the psalmist used at least twenty-eight terms numerous times. Among the exact repetitions are אָדָם (vv. 3, 13, 21), אִישׁ (vv. 3, 8, 17), יָחַד (vv. 3, 11), אֱלֹהִים (vv. 8, 16), (vv. 9, 13, 21), and עוֹלָם (vv. 9, 12). In addition the clause כְּבִהְמוֹת נְדָמוֹ נִמְשַׁל is used to close the two major

tingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982); and Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Sons of Korah*, JSOT Supplement Series 20 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1982), 181-95.

¹⁴ Allen P. Ross, "Psalms," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985), 780.

¹⁵ Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 17.

¹⁶ The approach taken in this article has been anticipated in part by F. de Meyer, "The Science of Literature Method of Prof. M. Weiss in Confrontation with Form Criticism, Exemplified on the Basis of Ps. 49," *Bijdragen* 41 (1979): 152-68.

sections of the psalm in verses 13 and 21.¹⁷ These repeated expressions signal the focus of the psalm on the tension between possessions and perpetuity as humans stand before God.

Many other instances of repetition include subtle variations that are not always apparent in translation. For example the psalm begins in verse 2 with a universal call, "Hear this [זאת], all peoples," and then verse 14 picks up the demonstrative pronoun again: "This [זה] is the way of those who are foolish." Also in verse 2, the psalmist urged his hearers, "Give ear [האזינו], all inhabitants of the world," and then in verse 5 he acknowledged that he himself was giving ear to wisdom: "I will incline my ear [אזני] to a proverb." By the repetition of the verbal root אָזַן, he indicated that the message he was communicating derived from proverbial wisdom, that is, from the divine order built into the creation.

Several times combinations of nominal, adjectival, and verbal forms of a single root are used to reinforce a motif. This technique is demonstrated by עָשָׂר, 'which appears as עֲשִׂיר (v. 3), עֲשָׂרָם (v. 7), and יַעֲשֶׂר (v. 17). Similar examples include the following: חֲכָמוֹת (v. 4) and חֲכָמִים (v. 11); תְּבוּנוֹת (v.4) and יְבִין (v.21); רָב, (v.7) and יִרְבֶּה (v.17); פָּדָה יִפְדֶּה (v. 8), פָּדִיוֹן (v. 9), and יִפְדֶּה (v. 16); וַיְחִי (v. 10) and בְּחַיָּו (v. 19); יָמוּתוּ (v. 11), מָוֶת (v. 15), and בְּמוֹתוֹ (v. 18); and (v. 11) and כִּסֹּל (v. 14).

Another form of repetition occurs when a noun is combined with different objects or pronominal suffixes, and/or with different introductory prepositions, as in פִּי (v. 4) and בְּפִיהֶם (v. 14). This feature is also evidenced in these examples: נִפְשָׁם (v. 9), נִפְשֵׁי (v. 16), and נִפְשׁוֹ (v. 19); עוֹד לְנֶאֱחַח (v. 10) and עַד־נִצַּח (v. 20); אַחֲרֵיהֶם (v. 11), אַחֲרָיו (v. 14), and אַחֲרָיו (v. 18); לְשֹׂאוֹל (v. 15), לְבָלוֹת שְׂאוֹל (v. 15), and מִיַּד־שְׂאוֹל (v. 16); יִקְחֵנִי (v. 16) and יִקַּח (v. 18); כְּבוֹד בֵּיתוֹ (v. 17) and כְּבוֹדוֹ (v. 18).

Twice the psalmist combined repetition with negation. This literary technique produces a particularly powerful contrast when the psalmist's rhetorical question in verse 6, "Why should I fear [אִירָא]?" is answered by the prohibition in verse 17, "Do not be

¹⁷ Paul R. Raabe argues cogently that the repetition of נִדְמָו: in verses 13 and 21 actually includes a significant example of deliberate ambiguity. "This is a classic example of antanaclasis, where a word is repeated with a shift of meaning. In v. 13 the verb נִדְמָו is paired with בַּל יִלֵּין (does not survive the night'). Therefore one takes it as the niph'al of דָּמָה II (or III?), which sometimes is glossed 'to be destroyed, perish.' In v. 21, a refrain with v. 13, one at first assumes the same meaning. But upon closer examination, the reader sees that its parallel has changed to 'without understanding.' That makes the nuance 'to be dumb, speechless,' which is possible for the niph'al of דָּמָה II, more appropriate. Humans in their pride and wealth are like cattle that are slaughtered and that are speechless and stupid" ("Deliberate Ambiguity in the Psalter," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 [1991]: 216).

afraid (אֶל־תִּירָא). In the three uses of רָאָה, the psalmist began with the negative "he should not undergo (לֹא יִרְאֶה) lit., 'should not see'] decay" (v. 10), then used the affirmative "he sees [יִרְאֶה] that even wise men die" (v. 11), and finally returned to the negative "they will never see [לֹא יִרְאוּ] the light" (v. 20).

The two remaining uses of repetition feature a change from the plural to the singular. In verse 12 wealthy fools think that "their houses [בְּתִימוֹ] are forever," but the psalmist urged his readers not to fear when the glory of the rich man's house [בֵּיתוֹ] is increased (v. 17). By this means the author subtly signaled a diminution in the possessions of the wealthy people who caused him to feel intimidated. This parallels the argument of the psalmist that the affluence of those who are foolish, when seen from the viewpoint of wisdom, is in reality not nearly the threat that it appears at first. In the same way those who suppose that their dwelling places will continue "to all generations [לְדֹר וְדֹר]" (v. 12) are subsequently depicted in individual terms, as one who will "go to the generation [דֹּר] of his fathers" (v. 20). The wealthy will not be able to secure future perpetual success, and they also will have to assume their place with their ancestors in death. Instead of enjoying perpetual prosperity, they will be consigned to the same unenviable fate as their predecessors.

In Psalm 49 the extensive use of lexical repetition with a number of variations serves to reinforce the psalmist's major points of emphasis and to introduce significant developments in his message. It is important to note that of the twenty-eight repeated roots in the Hebrew text in this psalm, only fifteen are reproduced in the New American Standard Bible, which is one of the most literal biblical translations. To appropriate fully both the psalmist's literary artistry and the message he is communicating through that poetic medium, it is necessary to analyze the Hebrew text. As Psalm 49 demonstrates, sound is notoriously difficult to translate, so without recourse to the author's original language much of his poetic brilliance and thematic content is obscured.

SEMANTIC FIELDS

In addition to his extensive use of repetition in Psalm 49 the psalmist also drew deeply from six semantic fields that manifest significant interconnections. The largest semantic field includes terms referring to wealth or commercial transactions, and it is represented in thirteen out of the twenty verses of the psalm. This concentration of references demonstrates that wealth is the key motif of the psalm.

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"Rich and poor [אֲבִיּוֹן וְעָשִׂיר] together" (v. 3). "Even those who trust in their wealth [חַיִּלָּם] and boast in the abundance of their riches [בְּרֵב עֲשָׂרָם]" (v. 7). "No man can by any means redeem [יִפְדֶּה] his brother, or give to God a ransom [כֶּפֶר] for him" (v. 8). "For the redemption [פְּדֵי יוֹן] of his soul is costly [יָקָר]" (v. 9a). "And leave their wealth [חַיִּלָּם] to others" (v. 11). "Their inner thought is that their houses [בְּתֵימָו] are forever and their dwelling places [מִשְׁכְּנֵיהֶם] to all generations; they have called their lands [אֲדָמוֹת] after their own names" (v. 12). "But man in his pomp [בְּיִקָּר] will not endure" (v. 13). "So that they have no habitation [לֹא מִזְבֵּל לוֹ]"¹⁸ (v. 15). "But God will redeem [יִפְדֶּה] my soul from the power of Sheol" (v. 16). "Do not be afraid when a man becomes rich [יַעֲשֶׂר], when the glory of his house is increased [יִתְוַד כְּבוֹד בְּיָתוֹ]" (v. 17). "His glory [כְּבוֹדוֹ] will not descend after him" (v. 18). "And though men praise you when you do well [תִּיטִיב] for yourself (v. 19).

These references to wealth yield several principles. (1) Financial wealth is valued by humans (v. 19), and those who are wealthy may place undue confidence in their affluence (v. 7). (2) Even though humans are often divided along economic lines into the rich and the poor (v. 3), with the result that the wealthy use their power to intimidate those with modest means,¹⁹ in fact all people are united in a common humanity (vv. 2-3). (3) The wealth that some enjoy should not cause those who do not have it to feel fearful (v. 17), because it is only a temporary possession that cannot survive death (vv. 11-13, 15, 18). (4) Wealth is inadequate to redeem a person from death (vv. 8-9), for redemption is solely a divine prerogative (v. 16).

A second prominent semantic field encompasses terms referring to wisdom, which are contrasted to terms relating to folly. In his introductory call the psalmist took the role of the wisdom teacher. Employing language that is familiar from its frequent usage in Proverbs, he wrote in verses 4-5, "My mouth will speak wisdom [חִכְמוֹת], and the meditation of my heart will be understanding [תְּבוּנוֹת]. I will incline my ear to a proverb [מִשְׁל]; I will express my

¹⁸ Pierre Bordreuil argues that *z^ebul* refers to a Ugaritic deity and that the preposition מן should be rendered as an interrogative pronoun ("Mizzebul Lo: A Propos de Psaume 49:15," in *Ascribe to the Lord*, ed. Lyle Eslinger and Glen Taylor, JSOT Supplement Series 67 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 19881, 98]. His changes to the customary interpretation of the term seem unwarranted, because "habitation" fits so well the psalmist's concentration of words referring to material wealth.

¹⁹ Kraus comments, "The question introduced by למה communicates a real situation of distress; it introduces us to the fearful perplexity of those who are helplessly at the mercy of the rich and ;powerful. The singer himself has experienced this situation" (*Psalms* 1-59, 482).

riddle [חִידָתַי]²⁰ on the harp." In verse 11 the antithetical groups of wise men (חֲכָמִים) and the stupid and senseless (כְּסִיל וְבַעַר) are seen together in view of their common fate of death. The term (כְּסִיל) in verse 14 is a general description of those who are foolish in presuming that their wealth can surmount the eventuality of death (cf. vv. 11-13). It is especially significant that the final climactic 'verse of the psalm states, "Man in his pomp, yet without understanding [לֹא יָבִין], is like the beasts that perish" (v. 21). This concluding assessment brings the psalm back to the opening resolution in verse 4, in which the meditation of the psalmist's heart will be understanding (תְּבוּנוֹת). As Pleins reasons, "The shift to yabin in verse 21 functions to underscore the critical insight that it is wisdom, not wealth, that ought to command our listening and our silence before God.... It is a lesson which the wise will heed and the foolish ignore to their peril when death threatens."²¹

The semantic field of wisdom and folly is clearly linked to the themes of wealth and death.²² Those who fix their hopes on their material wealth are foolish, because they cannot survive death with their wealth intact. On the other hand the psalm promotes the attitude of wisdom, which views the presence or absence of temporal wealth in the light of mortality.

A third group of related terms in Psalm 49 focuses on humanity as a single entity that transcends individual differences based on financial status. In the opening verse the psalmist addressed all humans in two parallel expressions: "Hear this, all peoples [כָּל־הָעַמִּים]; give ear, all inhabitants of the world [כָּל־יְשׁוּבֵי הָאָרֶץ]" (v. 2).

²⁰ Leo G. Perdue argues that "Psalm 49 is an elaborate answer to a riddle residing within the psalm itself, and upon which the literary structure of the psalm has been built" by endeavoring to draw parallels to Judges 14:14 and 18 and ancient Near Eastern hero stories ("The Riddles of Psalm 49," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 [1974]: 533). Perdue conjectures that the riddle is found in verse 21, and its answer is given in verse 13. A better analysis of the riddle in Psalm 49 is given by Johnston, who explains that the riddle of the oppression of the pious by the wealthy is presented in verses 6-7, and then the remainder of the psalm answers the riddle in terms of death and resurrection ("Psalm 49: A Personal Eschatology," 74-78).

²¹ Pleins, "Death and Endurance: Reassessing the Literary Structure and Theology of Psalm 49," 26-27.

²² John Goldingay says insightfully, "Because the Psalms are concerned with life, they [are-] concerned with death also-for there can be no satisfying understanding of the meaning of life which has not grappled with the meaning of death. Psalm 49 approaches the question from a particular theological perspective (one not otherwise widely represented in the Psalter), that of the Wisdom tradition in Israel.... Like Job and Ecclesiastes, it takes up basic questions about the meaning of human life in the context of experiences which suggest that in reality there is no meaning" (*Songs from a Strange Land, The Bible Speaks Today* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978], 132-33).

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To make specific his point that all humans are being considered together, he continues by calling to "both low and high, rich and poor together [גַּם־בְּנֵי־אָדָם גַּם־בְּנֵי־אִישׁ יַחַד עֲשִׂיר וְאֶבְיֹן]" to listen to the wisdom that he is speaking.²³ This emphasis on humanity as a single category was reinforced when the psalmist wrote, "No man [אִישׁ] can by any means redeem his brother" (v. 8), and when he reassured his readers, "Do not be afraid when a man [אִישׁ] becomes rich" (v. 17). Identity and value as a human, then, are constants that encompass everyone, but wealth is a variable condition attained only by some people, and it is of secondary significance.

In contrast to the terms that refer to humanity, the psalmist also employed terms referring to animals. This antithesis is presented explicitly in the varied refrains in verse 13, "But man [אָדָם] in his pomp will not endure; he is like the beasts [בְּבֵהֵמוֹת] that perish," and verse 21, "Man [אָדָם] in his pomp, yet without understanding, is like the beasts [בְּבֵהֵמוֹת] that perish."

In both of these examples, when inherent human value is replaced by the measures of mere financial wealth (בְּיָקָר) humans are then viewed on a subhuman level, as though they were animals. The same assessment is implied in verse 15, where wealthy fools are pictured as sheep (בְּצֹאֵן) that are appointed for Sheol, and who will be shepherded (רָעִים) by death.²⁴ This striking metaphor, perhaps an intentional parody of Yahweh's beneficent role as shepherd in Psalms 23:1; 78:52; and 80:2,²⁵ suggests that those who value

²³ "The poet craves a hearing from all the peoples and from all inhabitants of the earth, rich as well as poor. This is understandable, as it is, after all, one of the universal problems of mankind which he prepares himself to answer for all men. It is not without reason that he calls special attention to people in humble circumstances and to people of rank, to the poor and to the rich; for these classes are at the heart of his problem, and he has something to say to both of them" (Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, Old Testament Library, trans. Herbert Hartwell [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962], 386).

²⁴ "While the affluent self-reliantly and self-importantly prattle away (cf. Ps. 73:6 ff.), they are already like a large herd being driven into the underworld by death. We could ask whether the 'personification' of מוֹת includes reminders of the divinity motif, which has become familiar through the Ras Shamra texts. It is important that the rich even now, in the midst of life, are being driven down into שְׂאוֹל by מוֹת.... But מוֹת is in the employ of God and executes his judgment over the wicked potentates" (Kraus, *Psalms* 1-59, 483).

²⁵ C. John Collins argues convincingly for "death will shepherd," as it is rendered in the Jewish Publication Society of America version, New American Standard Bible, and Revised Standard Version, and against the alternative "death will feed," represented in the Authorized Version and the New International Version ("Death Will Be Their Shepherd" or "Death Will Feed on Them"? *mawet yir'em* in Psalm 49.15 [EVV v 141], *Bible Translator* 46 [1995]: 320-26). This position is also supported by Staffan Olofsson, "Death Shall Be Their Shepherd: An Interpretation of Psalm 49.15 in the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint," in *The Interpretation of Scripture in*

material riches above humanity will themselves be treated as animals under the rod of mortality.

The final two semantic fields are the antithetical pair of perpetuity and death. Verses 8 and 10 together form a unified thought that is explained by the parenthesis in verse 9. In countering his fear of those who trust in their riches, the psalmist reasoned, "No man can by any means redeem his brother or give to God a ransom for him ... that he should live on eternally [וַיְחַי־עוֹד לְנֶצַח] that he should not undergo decay [הַשְׁחָת]."²⁶ The explanation for the impossibility of paying God off for the eternal life of another is that the redemption of a soul is costly. He should therefore "cease trying forever [לְעוֹלָם] (v. 9). In contrast to this fact wealthy fools wrongly suppose that they can achieve at least social immortality through their possessions. "Their inner thought is that their houses are forever [לְעוֹלָם] and their dwelling places to all generations [לְדוֹר וָדוֹר]; they have called their lands after their own names" (v. 12).²⁷ Contrary to this strategy of securing life against death by wealth,²⁸ however, the rich man "shall go to the generation of his fathers; they will never [עַד־נֶצַח] see the light" (v. 20). He will join his affluent predecessors in the realm of death, and none of them will ever enjoy immortality. Noting the parallel to Psalm 36:10, Dahood remarks, "The light of God's face in the fields of life will be denied those who put their trust in riches and boast of financial success."²⁹

Early Judaism and Christianity, Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series 23 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 75-105.

²⁶ Goldingay compares this to the law regulating a ransom price in cases of accidental homicide in Exodus 21:30 (*Songs from a Strange Land*, 143). The situation envisioned in Psalm 49, however, is different. Although in many human interactions, money has influence, the wealthy "just cannot rescue from God's hands a man who is destined for death." This may be contrasted to the observation of life in Proverbs 13:8, "The ransom of a man's life is his wealth."

²⁷ Verse 12 has been variously interpreted. Raabe suggests that the psalmist is using an ambiguous expression that says both that the rich are deifying themselves and that they claim to own many lands by naming them after themselves ("Deliberate Ambiguity in the Psalter," 2211-22). Mark C. Smith rejects both of Raabe's renderings in favor of the cultic sense of the comfort that the rich receive by summoning their deceased ancestors ("The Invocation of Deceased Ancestors in Psalm 49:12c," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 [1993]: 105-7). This proposal, however, is convincingly rejected by Johnston ("Psalm 49: A Personal Eschatology," 79-80). Arguing from the content of the whole psalm, Pleins presents a compelling case for his conclusion that "the inscriptions of the rich ironically give mute testimony to the realization that while buildings and monuments may endure, their rich owners simply do not" ("Death and Endurance: Reassessing the Literary Structure and Theology of Psalm 49," 26).

²⁸ Cf. James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 192.

²⁹ Dahood, *Psalms* 1-50, 303.

The semantic field of terms referring to death casts a long shadow across Psalm 49. In addition to the cases in which death is juxtaposed with perpetuity, other references to death occur frequently in the psalm. "For he sees that even wise men die [יָמוּתוּ]; the stupid and the senseless alike perish [יֵאָבְדוּ] and leave their wealth to others" (v. 11). "As sheep they are appointed for Sheol [לְשְׂאוֹל] death [מָוֶת] shall be their shepherd; and the upright shall rule over them in the morning, and their form shall be for Sheol to consume [לְבַלֹּת שְׂאוֹל] so that they have no habitation" (v. 15). "But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol [לְשְׂאוֹל] for He will receive me" (v. 16). "For when he dies [בְּמוֹתוֹ] he will carry nothing away; his glory will not descend after him" (v. 18).

Particularly significant are the refrains in verses 13 and 21: "But man in his pomp will not endure (בְּלֹ-יָלֵךְ);³⁰ he is like the beasts that perish" [וְנִדְמָוּ] (v. 13). "Man in his pomp, yet without understanding, is like the beasts that perish [וְנִדְמָוּ]" (v. 21).

Of all of the prominent semantic fields in Psalm 49 the words referring to death are most interconnected with the other clusters of related terms. In addition to linkages to perpetuity in verses 10 and 20, this field is also linked with animals in verse 21 and with humanity in verses 13 and 21. Moreover, death and wealth are juxtaposed explicitly in verses 11, 16, and 18.

The frequency of the interconnections between the six semantic fields suggests strongly that the psalmist is intentionally using literary artistry to advance the message of the psalm. By this rhetorical means, material wealth, which is often wrongly presumed to be an indicator of personal worth, is viewed through the sapiential lenses of wisdom and folly. The person who receives the wisdom and understanding taught by the psalmist realizes that humanity is a category that transcends wealth, and that those too foolish to recognize that fact are functioning on the subhuman level of animals.³¹ Wealth is a temporary possession, because it cannot sur-

³⁰ Craigie comments, "The word 'survive' is more precisely 'lodge overnight' and is probably used in irony: the wealthy persons of this world devoted much of life to constructing for themselves a solid lodging place in this world, but the reality of death was that the grave (v. 12) would be their only permanent lodging place" (^{Psalms} 1-50, 359-60).

³¹ "The purpose of the psalm was to instruct all men, including the rich, in the path of wisdom. The psalmist did not intend to disparage the godly rich who received their wealth as a blessing from God. The difference between man and beast lies in the degree of 'understanding.' If man has no understanding of himself as man, of his mortality, and of his God, he lives and dies 'like the beasts that perish'" (Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991]: 372).

vive death to achieve perpetuity. As Mays comments, "Death is the great equalizer. The teacher is relentless in driving this gloomy lesson home. It is a bitter counsel to his audience, but it does deflate and debunk those who live by and for riches as the real and significant clue to life and its destiny."³² By linking together these fields of meaning the psalmist used poetic form to reinforce the content of the psalm.

LEXICAL EXPLOITATION

Besides making frequent use of repetitions and interconnected semantic fields, Psalm 49 also exploits the lexical potential of several terms in unusual ways. The psalmist employed five words that are typically attributed to the worship of Yahweh as he described the groundless exaltation of those who are wealthy. These startling divergent directions of meaning highlight his point that those who equate wealth with worth have in reality engaged in a form of idolatry, in which material possessions take the place that rightly belongs to God alone.

The following verses demonstrate this subtle but significant literary strategy. "Even those who trust [הַבְּטְחִים] in their wealth and boast [יְתַהַלְלוּ] in the abundance of their riches" (v. 7). "Do not be afraid when a man becomes rich, when the glory [כְּבוֹד] of his house is increased; for when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory [כְּבוֹדוֹ] will not descend after him" (vv. 17-18). "Though while he lives he congratulates himself [יְבַרְךָ]--and though men praise you [וַיְוַדְּךָ] when you do well for yourself" (v. 19).

By giving to their possessions the trust, praise, honor, and thanksgiving that the psalms elsewhere direct to Yahweh, the wicked are in effect elevating their gold as their god. Instead of extolling the glory of Yahweh, they are striving to exalt their personal glory through the acquisition of riches. By using theologically loaded terms such as בְּטַח, הֶלַל, כְּבוֹד, בָּרַךְ and יָדָה, the psalmist drove home his point that the wicked are seeking vainly to usurp prerogatives that belong only to Yahweh.

Just as material wealth may prompt false confidence, it may also arouse unjustified fear.³³ In light of the terms in Psalm 49 that

³² Mays, *Psalms*, 192-93.

³³ "It, is not only the wealthy and powerful who may fail to understand; the teacher's audience have also not understood. If they do understand, they will not make the mistake of succumbing to the temptation to seek a solution to death in wealth or position; they will recognize the wisdom of seeking fullness of life in the present moment in the experience of God's presence (Craigie, *Psalms* 1-50,360-61).

the wicked have wrongly appropriated to themselves, the psalmist's use of אִירָא in verses 6 and 17 takes on added significance. "Why should I fear [אִירָא]³⁴ in days of adversity, when the iniquity of my foes surrounds me" (v. 6). "Do not be afraid [אַל־תִּירָא]³⁵ when a man becomes rich" (v. 17).

The proper object of fear is Yahweh (cf. 33:18-19), so to fear humans is to shift the focus of one's respect or reverence away from God, who alone deserves it. As stated in 56:5, the antidote to fear of humans is trust in God. As Craigie observes, "The wisdom teacher in Ps 49 eliminates two possible kinds of human fear: the fear of foes in times of trial (v. 6) and the fear that the wealthy have some kind of advantage in the face of death (v. 17). The teacher eliminates those fears, without explicitly stating a more positive message; yet the positive message is clear in the whole tradition to which he belongs, that wisdom may be found in the fear, or reverence, of the Lord."³⁶ In other words the only thing that will answer to fear (of humans or death) is fear (of God) itself.

SOUND PLAY

Of all the rhetorical strategies in the psalm sound play is the least apparent in translation. It is clear, however, that the nine examples of sound play in Psalm 49 are not accidental, for they manifest conscious craftsmanship by a highly skilled and creative poet.

In addressing all humans in verse 2 the psalmist called, "Give ear, all inhabitants of the world [קִלְקִלֵּם]." This rare term in the place of the common אֶרֶץ, which is typically used to speak of the earth, is

³⁴ Erhard S. Gerstenberger notes the significance of this expression within the Book of Psalms: "Why should I fear?" (v. 6a) strikes the note of trust (see Pss 3:7 [RSV 6]; 23:4; 27:1; 56:5, 12 [RSV 4, 11]; 118:6), being originally a response to an oracle of salvation (Pss 23:4; 91:5)" (*Psalms: Part I with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry*, Forms of the Old Testament Literature [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 204).

³⁵ "The formula 'al tira', "do not fear!" occurs 75x throughout the OT. Typically the reasons for such an exhortation follow either in an independent clause or in a subordinate clause introduced by *ki*, meaning 'for' or 'because' " (van Pelt and Kaiser, XXXX," 2:531).

³⁶ Craigie, *Psalms* 1-50, 361. In a similar way Weiser reasons, "Thus at the root of the psalm in a way is the social problem and question of how earthly possessions are to be valued from the moral and religious point of view, and what man's attitude to them should be in his everyday life. The poet searches for an attitude of mind which will grant him the inner freedom from being subject to human beings and to earthly things and will open his eyes to the things which alone are to be feared and which alone are trustworthy. And he finds that attitude of mind in the vision of eternity and of the God who has ordained man's death" (*The Psalms*, 385-86).

found elsewhere in the Book of Psalms only in 17:14; 39:6; and 89:48, and it has the temporal sense of "lifetime," rather than the notion of a physical location. In verse 9 the consonants of the root are interchanged from **חלד** to **לחל**, where the psalmist said that the wealthy person should "cease [**לחל**] striving forever" to give to God a ransom for his brother.³⁷ Subtly the psalmist was indicating that since all humans will die, they must not measure their worth in terms of temporal wealth.

The term **אדם** is used three times in the psalm (vv. 3, 13, 21), in each case linking all people in their common humanity. The wealthy, however, try to distinguish themselves as beyond the mortality that afflicts all people by calling "their lands [**אדמות**] after their own names" (v. 12). Their aspiration is dashed, because "man [**אדם**] in his pomp will not endure" (v. 13).

Another word, **עשר** (vv. 3, 7, 17), speaks of the wealthy and their riches. Despite their prominence during their lifetimes on earth, they will be ruled over by the upright (**ישרים** v. 15). Of the many Hebrew terms available to refer both to wealth and to righteousness, the psalmist chose two words similar in sound. By this means he hinted that by a slight transposition by the sovereign God the upright (**ישר**) will supplant the wealthy (**עשר**) even though they seem to have such different experiences in life.

In his opening call the psalmist said in verse 5 that he would incline his ear to a proverb (**משל**). Using a homonymic root, he concluded in his refrains that "man in his pomp ... is like [**נמשל**] the beasts that perish" (vv. 13, 21). The identical consonants direct the reader to discern the central maxim of the psalm.

The similar sounding verbs **ירא** ("to fear") and **ראה** ("to see") play prominent roles in the psalm. As the psalmist moved from the opening propensity to fear (v. 6) to his eventual counsel against fear (v. 17), his change in attitude was prompted by what is seen. The wealthy person cannot give God a ransom for his brother, "that he should not undergo [**לא יראה**] decay" (v. 10). In addition, "he sees [**ראה**] that even wise men die; the stupid and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others" (v. 11). Even the rich "shall go to the generation of his fathers; they will never see [**לא יראו**] the light" (v. 20).

Verse 20 in the Masoretic text has an additional example of sound play. "You will go [**תבוא**] unto the generations of his fathers

³⁷ De Meyer notes the semantic nuances of **חלד**, but he does not comment on the additional sound play involved in the selection of the term ("The Science of Literature Method of Prof. M. Weiss in Confrontation with Form Criticism, Exemplified on the Basis of Ps. 49," 160).

[אַבוֹתַי]. The obvious difficulty in reconciling the second person verbal form with the third person pronominal suffix casts suspicion on the reliability of the textual reading at this point. Nevertheless it is interesting to note that this use of consonantal transposition is consistent with the practice in the rest of the psalm.

A comparable sound play can be observed in verses 15 and 18. The upright will rule (יִדְרֵי) over the wealthy in the morning (v. 15). But when the wealthy person dies, he will carry nothing away, because "his glory will not descend [יִרְדֹּ] after him" (v. 18). The exact duplication of consonants draws together two inversions of the present condition: the wealthy will not be able to maintain their esteemed position, and the upright will move from subordination to superiority with respect to the wealthy.

The final example of sound play is especially prominent because it occurs in the refrains of the psalm. Verses 13 and 21. speak of the transitory nature of humans as "man in his pomp [בְּיִקְרָ],"³⁸ which brings to the reader's mind בְּקָר, a common word for cattle, as well as בִּיקָר, which is used in verse 15 to designate the time when the upright will rule over their wealthy oppressors. Verse 13, however, describes this wealthy person as one who will not endure (בַּל־יָלֵךְ), whereas verse 21 says that he is without understanding (לֹא יָבִין). A few Hebrew manuscripts read יָלֵךְ in both verses, but the Septuagint, followed by the Syriac version, reads *συστηκεν* in verse 13, thus harmonizing it with the reading in verse 21. The New English Bible and the Revised Standard Version and some commentators such as Kraus have rendered the refrains in verses 13 and 21 in identical language by emending יָבִין in verse 21 to match יָלֵךְ in verse 13.³⁸

Even though many psalms do use exact repetitions for refrains,³⁹ it is not unusual for the psalmists to use variation in their refrains with conscious intention. As Goldingay cautions, "Our preference for exactly corresponding refrains and repetitions may be culture-relative; perhaps the psalmists were more pleased by a new twist to a familiar line. This suggests that the exegete's task in approaching these passages is to see what the psalmists might

³⁸ Judah Jacob Slotki retains the sound play between יָלֵךְ and יָבִין, although he proposes that בִּיקָר be given a meaning similar to בְּקָר "cattle," and that יָלֵךְ, be viewed as being derived from לֹא, "to complain, murmur." His reading of verse 21, which parallels the New English Bible, says, "Man is (as) cattle and does not complain; he is comparable to the beasts that perish." In light of the psalmist's literary strategies documented in this article Slotki's proposed changes are not necessary or justified ("Psalm XLIX 13,21 (AV 12,20)," *Vetus Testamentum* 28 [1978]: 361-62).

³⁹ Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part I with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry*, 203-4.

be conveying by the differences as well as to note the similarities."⁴⁰

In this case the sound play between יָלַי (v. 13) and יָבַי (v. 21) plays a vital role in the psalmist's thematic development. The first refrain summarizes the content of verses 6-11, in which the arrogant presumption of those who trust in their wealth is subverted. Thus man in his pomp, like the beasts that perish, will not endure (יָלַי - לָלַי). The second reference follows verses 14-20, in which God redeems and receives the upright, that is, those who possess spiritual understanding. Verse 21, then, is an appropriate conclusion: In contrast to the upright person who enjoys God's favor, "man in his pomp, yet without understanding [יָבַי לֹא], is like the beasts that perish." The change of a single consonant⁴¹ signals that possession of the understanding taught in this psalm (cf. תְּבוּנוֹת in v. 4), although easily overlooked by the wealthy fool, is of the utmost eternal consequence.

CONCLUSION

This article has analyzed how the poet in Psalm 49 expressed and overcame his emotion of fear. In particular it has focused on several prominent rhetorical techniques-repetition, interlocking semantic fields, lexical exploitation, and sound play-by which the psalmist presented and countered his fear of wealthy oppressors. Using a remarkable array of poetic devices, many of which are apparent only in the Hebrew text, he refused to succumb to an impulse to flee in the face of intimidation. He instead drew deeply on his faith in God as he assessed the bankruptcy of material wealth in light of the inevitability of death.

The extensive use of repeated terms, often combined with subtle formal variations, highlights the key components of the psalmist's theme. The interconnections between six major semantic fields place wealth and wisdom in counterpoint, thus demonstrating that those who trust in their riches are in fact foolish. They are in reality acting as though they were animals, rather than humans, because material wealth cannot survive death to produce perpetual

⁴⁰ John Goldingay, "Repetition and Variation in the Psalms," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 68 (1978): 150-51.

⁴¹ The same phenomenon recurs in Psalm 59:10, 18. "The slight but not unimportant difference in the wording of the refrain . . . which should not be obliterated by a mechanical equalization of these two verses, delicately indicates the inward freedom which the poet has gained for himself, and which makes his soul, like a lark, soar upward to his God with shouts of joy" (Weiser, *The Psalms*, 437).

enjoyment. By interlocking the semantic fields, the psalmist drew together aspects of human existence, such as wealth and death, which when viewed separately caused him to feel intimidated. By considering them as connected elements within the larger picture of reality, however, the psalmist presented a compelling rationale for faith that transcends his previous fear.

The psalmist also used the familiar poetic device of exploiting unusual but legitimate nuances of terms. In Psalm 49 five words used prominently in the Old Testament for the worship of Yahweh are employed instead for the exaltation of those who have material wealth. In their own minds as well as in the estimation of other people the wealthy have taken on prerogatives that rightly belong only to God. Because of this, the psalmist feared them, even though the biblical texts are clear that Yahweh alone is the proper object of fear. By this subtle but powerful poetic device, the psalmist communicated that fear emerges when in one's thinking God has been supplanted by an oppressor. The corrective to fear, then, must entail the psychological reinstatement of God to His rightful place of superiority, because then all factors leading to fear must necessarily be seen as subservient to Him.

Psalm 49 is also replete with sound plays that compel the reader to observe the connections intended by the psalmist. These associations of sound are almost always obscured in translation, but in the Hebrew text they point the reader toward clearer comprehension of the psalmist's theme.

In seeking to supplement the existing literature on Psalm 49, this article has investigated four of the poetic strategies used by the psalmist as he skillfully integrated literary form with his thematic development. This study has also demonstrated the importance of reading biblical texts in their original language and according to their appropriate genre distinctives. If this poetic analysis of Psalm 49 is a typical case, then there is ample fallow ground in the study of biblical literature for interpreters who will combine exegetical precision and artistic sensitivity in their research, thereby enriching their understanding and appreciation of the ancient songs of Zion.

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