

Psalm 6 – A Literary-Structural Analysis and Translation



(Psalm 6:4-6, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/351562314658960300/>)

Introduction

This study is written in honor of my friend and academic colleague, Prof. Christo van der Merwe, on the occasion of his 60th birthday. I will attempt to partially apply just three of the many insights that he has brought to the table of Bible translation and scholarship – namely, that of the pragmatic-functional significance of Hebrew discourse particles¹ and clause constituent word order,² as well as the notion of a “direct translation” of the source text’s “communicative clues”.³ My presentation,

¹ “This study establishes that knowing the meaning of a discourse particle (=DP) entails much more than determining its possible translation values. Insights into the complexity of language and how linguistic meaning works provide some foundational parameters for the investigation of לָכֵן. For example, DPs may have a semantic core, which in the case of לָכֵן is ‘that being so’. Since lexical items are part of language as a complex and dynamic system, their meaning may shift in time, but the semantic core of a DP may also remain part of its semantic potential. On the basis of the contextual frames within which לָכֵן is used, three main categories of use are identified: (1) לָכֵן in argumentative prophetic announcements (prototypical); (2) לָכֵן in argumentative dialogues (seldom); and (3) לָכֵן in ‘fact reporting’ statements (seldom). No ‘emphasising’ or ‘adversative’ sense for the DP could be distinguished”. Christo H. J. van der Merwe, “The Challenge of Better Understanding Discourse Particles: The Case of לָכֵן,” *JNSL* 40/2 (2014): 127–57, from the abstract.

² “The function of BH word order (or more specifically clause constituent order) patterns has received considerable attention during the last two decades. Recently, Lunn (2006) provided an innovative explanation of how the relative [*sic*] frequently occurring instances of fronting and double fronting in poetic texts could be explained. In this paper marked constituent order patterns in the book of Joel are analyzed in terms of the information structure of the strophes and stanzas in which they occur in order to determine whether Lunn’s model also applies to the poetry of the book Joel. Using their own semantic-pragmatic model for explaining constituent order, the authors establish that, on the one hand their findings concur with those of Lunn, but on the other hand, they do not need to resort to the ‘uniquely poetic’ principles formulated by Lunn”. Christo H. J. van der Merwe and Ernst Wendland, “Marked Word order in the Book of Joel”, *JNSL* 36/2 (2010): 109–30, from the abstract.

³ “A ‘direct’ translation of the Bible is not new jargon for a word-for-word translation of the Bible. It is an attempt to ‘interpretively resemble’ in good idiomatic Afrikaans [EW: any target

though limited due to space, begins with an initial analytical examination of the text of Psalm 6, which is situated within the first set of the “Davidic” laments in the Psalter (Pss 3-7). This psalm has been described as “the fullest in exhibiting the key elements of the genre and in ‘performing’ the drama of lament that moves from plea to praise”.⁴ My analysis focuses first of all on the text’s micro-structure, a bottom-up perspective; then some complementary top-down, macro-structural observations are advanced; these lead to a brief consideration of the psalm’s thematic dimension; finally, three samples of a “direct”, literary-poetic mode of translation (including one of my own) are offered for comparative exemplification and practical application. During the praying of this psalm, the plaintiff suddenly receives the very comfort and support that he is longing for – as the chasm of time-space-matter that seemingly separates him from his God is swiftly collapsed in his favor (Ps 6:8-10).

language] all the communicative clues of the source text in the contexts construed for the *source text* audience. This foreignising translation tries to let the Bible speak idiomatic Afrikaans in the time of the Bible. However, whenever the language structure and the conceptual world behind the language and culture of the source text could not be adequately understood and/or represented in the translation, or may be misunderstood by modern readers, additional information is provided in the paratext (e.g. introductions to the biblical books, maps, illustrations, footnotes and a glossary)”. Christo H. J. van der Merwe, “How ‘Direct’ Can a Direct Translation Be? Some Perspectives from the Realities of a New Type of Church Bible”, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72/3, (2016): <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i3.3233> (Accessed: 7 June 2017).

⁴ Walter Brueggeman and William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 48.

The Microstructure of Psalm 6, with textual, literary, and exegetical notes⁵

For the music director, to be accompanied

לְמַנְצַח בְּנִגִּינוֹת עַל־הַשְּׁמִינִית

by stringed instruments, according to the

sheminith style;⁶

a psalm of David.

מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד:

Stanza A: *General APPEAL for help*

1 LORD,⁷ do not rebuke me in⁸ your

יְהוָה אֶל־בְּאַפְּךָ תוֹכִיחֵנִי

anger!

Do not discipline me⁹ in your raging

וְאֶל־בְּחִמְתְּךָ תִּסְרֵנִי:

⁵ The yellow highlights indicate selected textual features of special interest that are commented on in these notes. The English translation is that of the NET.

⁶ The meaning of the Hebrew term שְׁמִינִית (“sheminith”) is uncertain; perhaps it refers to a particular style of music (cf. 1 Chr 15:21) – or to an eight-stringed instrument. John Goldingay, *Psalms, vol. 1 (1-41)* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 135. “Ibn Ezra is probably right when he prefers ‘on the eighth mode’, somewhat similar to Gregorian chant”. Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 112.

⁷ The divine vocative that opens this psalm is an early indication of its urgency and intensity.

⁸ Whether the אֶל of both cola has an *instrumental* (e.g., Prov 3:11-12; Job 5:17) or *causal* (Ps 38:1; 39:11) sense is difficult to determine; perhaps both are intended, an instance of intentional poetic ambiguity – or “semantic density” of expression: “Do not rebuke me *by means of/because of* your anger!” In any case, the fronting of this notion foregrounds its psychological impact upon the psalmist.

⁹ The verb יָסָר suggests a didactic wisdom setting, with reference perhaps to a parent disciplining a child (cf. Prov 3:11). “Separating the negative from the verb ... is very unusual and adds to this emphasis” (Goldingay, *Psalms*, 136).

fury!¹⁰

2 Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am

חַנּוּנִי יְהוָה כִּי אֲמָלֵל אֲנִי

frail!¹¹

Heal me,¹² LORD, for my bones are

רָפְאֵנִי יְהוָה כִּי נִבְהָלוּ עַצְמוֹתַי

shaking!¹³

3 I am absolutely terrified,¹⁴

וְנַפְשִׁי נִבְהָלָה מְאֹד

¹⁰ The negativized adjunct (prepositional) phrases (shaded) in v. 1a and 1b are both fronted (*topical focus*) before the respective verbs, seemingly to accent the Lord’s “anger” (apparent punishment) that the psalmist feels in his desperate plight. The implication appears to be that the psalmist feels that God is disciplining him for some wrongdoing by bringing a life-threatening illness upon him (vv. 2-7), though there is no reference to any explicit sin in the psalm (cf. Pss 32:5; 38:1-3).

¹¹ The two *negative* appeals of v. 1 are balanced and complemented by a pair of *positive* correspondents in v. 2, but now, contrastively, the two verbs appear in clause-initial position.

¹² “The petition ‘heal me’ does not necessarily refer to physical healing [only] but may well include every restorative work that God does upon body and soul”. Herbert C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 85.

¹³ The syntactic, morphological, and phonological (i.e., rhymed) parallelism involving an initial imperative followed by a vocative in the two cola of v. 2 serves to audibly heighten the deep pathos of the psalmist’s appeal. His cry is correspondingly motivated by the two subsequent כִּי clauses that refer to his frail physical condition. Normally the verb נִבְהָל refers to an emotional response and means “tremble with fear, be terrified” (see vv. 3, 10). The “bones” are viewed here as representing the entire body (synecdoche), which has been gravely affected by his illness. Thus, the verb may figuratively refer to one of the effects of his physical ailment, perhaps a fever. In Ezek 7:27, the verb describes how the hands of the people will shake with fear when they experience the horrors of divine judgment. We note also the typical poetic heightening or specification that occurs in the second parallel line (v. 2b).

¹⁴ The suffixed form of נַפֵּשׁ (“inner being”) is often rendered simply as a pronoun in poetic texts, but referentially it seems to denote more than this. It is fronted here as an instance of *constituent focus*: Over and above his desperate physical condition (v. 2), his

and you, LORD – how long will this

וְאַתָּה יְהוָה עַד־מָתַי:

continue?¹⁵

Stanza B: *Specific APPEAL for help*

4 Relent,¹⁶ LORD, rescue me!¹⁷

שׁוּבָה יְהוָה חֲלָצָה נַפְשִׁי

Deliver me because of your faithfulness!¹⁸

הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי לְמַעַן חֶסֶדְךָ:

entire “life-force”, or psyche (וְנַפְשִׁי), has been adversely (מַאֲד) affected! This sad fact is phonologically underscored by a repetition of the verb בָּהֵל – his body is *shaking* and his “soul” is *shocked*! This emphasis upon the psalmist’s suffering self continues from the preceding of עֲצָמֹתַי (“my bones”) v. 2b and the colon-concluding אֲנִי (“I”) of v. 2a.

¹⁵ Literally, “and you, LORD, how long?” This is the first occasion in the psalm in which the divine name is not attached to an imperative petition. The pronoun אַתָּה forcefully contrasts with נַפְשִׁי in the preceding line (v. 3a), as the two protagonists, divine and human, are syntactically placed into prominent opposition. In addition, the broken syntax of v. 3b mimics the psalmist’s shattered physical and mental state. He addresses YHWH forthrightly as well as forcefully with the initial vocative pronoun (אַתָּה), which is itself truncated, but then simply cries out with a brief, but poignant, (rhetorical) question: *How long* will this (i.e., his suffering) continue – OR – *How long* will it take YHWH to respond to his dire situation? “Because of the intensity of his emotions, [the psalmist] cannot complete his thought (cf. 31:1, 35:17, 74:10, *et al.*)”. Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” in *NIV Bible Commentary* (vol. 1: Old Testament; eds. Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger III; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 800.

¹⁶ Terrien proposes “Repent!” However, it does not seem likely that this is a “command” or that the psalmist is “arguing with his God”. *The Psalms*, 113. Why not? Because of the following חֶסֶדְךָ.

¹⁷ A reversal in the order of participant reference marks the boundary with continuity between stanzas A and B, i.e., יְהוָה ... נַפְשִׁי in v. 4a; cf. v. 3ab (a literary device termed “anadiplosis”, or the “overlap construction”).

¹⁸ The psalmist appeals to the LORD for deliverance from his illness on the basis of God’s “steadfast covenantal fidelity” (חֶסֶד) to his people – even when they have sinned against him in some way. The two protagonists in this passionate prayer are foregrounded at the end

5 For no one remembers you in the realm
of death,¹⁹

כִּי אֵין בַּמָּוֶת זְכוֹרָךְ

In Sheol who gives you thanks?²⁰

בְּשֵׂאוֹל מִי יוֹדֶה-לָּךְ:

Stanza C: *LAMENT over psalmist's*
suffering

of each line of v. 4, with “my life” (psalmist) being utterly dependent on “your faithful love” (YHWH).

¹⁹ This verbless motivational clause parallels those that accompany the psalmist’s prayers in stanza A (v. 2): “for (כִּי) there is not in death your remembrance”. The objective 2ps pronominal suffix ך- contrasts with its subjective use at the end of the preceding colon (זְכוֹרָךְ – חַסְדְּךָ). The Hebrew noun זְכוֹר (“remembrance”) here refers to the “name” of the LORD as invoked in liturgy and praise, especially during communal worship (cf. Pss 30:4; 97:12). “Remember” is more than an intellectual act of mental representation. It is an intense spiritual act of bringing to mind what God has done as a basis for gratitude (cf. 111:4). VanGemen, “Psalms”, 800. Such deliberate remembrance could even refer to “recounting God’s great deeds in an act of worship: cf. 71:15f.; Isaiah 63:7”. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 61. “Death” here refers metonymically to the realm of death where the departed spirits reside. “This does not mean that the OT denies life after death, but it puts its emphasis on the present life, lived in relationship to God” (VanGemen, “Psalms”, 800) – and the fellowship of believers (cf. Pss 16:8-11; 17:15; 22:22-31; 49:15; 73:23-25; Isa 26:19; see also Leupold, *Psalms*, 86–87; Kidner, *Psalms*, 62).

²⁰ In Sheol, the dark and unknown place of the dead, who would be able to praise God? Obvious answer: Nobody! (a rhetorical question). The rhetorical question marker מִי emphatically matches the preceding reason marker כִּי. According to common Old Testament belief (though there are exceptions, e.g., Ps 23:6), those who descend into the realm of death/Sheol are cut off from God’s mighty deeds and from the worshiping covenant community that experiences divine intervention (Pss 30:9; 88:10-12; Isa 38:18). In his effort to motivate a positive divine response, the psalmist reminds God that he will receive no praise or glory if he allows the psalmist to die. *Dead men do not praise God!* This is the only verse in the psalm that lacks a first-person pronominal reference in each colon – except for the very last line of the poem (v. 10b). On “Sheol”, see further Kidner, *Psalms*, 61–62.

6 I am exhausted as I groan;

יָגַעְתִּי | בְּאַנְחָתִי

all night long I drench my bed in tears;²¹

אֶשְׁחָה בְּכָל־לַיְלָה מִטָּתִי

my tears saturate the cushion beneath

בְּדִמְעָתִי עֲרֹשִׁי אִמְסָה:

me.²²

7 My eyes grow dim from suffering;²³

עֵשָׂה מְבַעַס עֵינַי

they grow weak because of all my

לְעֵתָקָה בְּכָל־צֹרְרִי:

adversaries.²⁴

Stanza D: *Confident PROCLAMATION*

8 Turn back from me, all you who behave

סֹרְרוּ מִמֶּנִּי כָל־פֹּעֲלֵי אֵוֹן

²¹ Lit., “I cause to swim through all the night my bed” – a graphic image of physical and mental suffering. An isomorphic equivalent of the length of time in suffering being referred to is reflected orally in the lexical length of the poetic line (v. 6b) – that is, in comparison with the shorter, “exhausted” expression of the psalmist in v. 6a.

²² Lit., “*with* my tears my couch I flood/melt” – a line beginning with the last in a series of בִּ- phrases. The initial noun of this third line of the tricolon, בְּדִמְעָתִי, phonologically reflects the final בְּאַנְחָתִי of v. 6a, while the line as a whole figuratively parallels the preceding line (v. 6b) through constituent focus (front-shifting), the non-verbal elements (בְּדִמְעָתִי עֲרֹשִׁי) serving to accent the psalmist’s deepest, darkest emotions.

²³ Lit., “my eye wastes away” – presumably (metaphorically speaking) from losing so much fluid through the shedding of tears (cf. the English idiom, “I cried my eyes out”)!

²⁴ The eyes “grow weak” because they are figuratively “old”; note the rhyme of the initial verbs in this bicolon. The alliterative noun צֹרְרִי complements the alliterative verb עָשָׂה at the beginning of v. 7. The reference to “enemies” may reflect the popular, but erroneous opinion that sick people were great sinners and hence being punished by God (e.g., Job 4:7-11; 8:1-22; 11:13-20). On the other hand, Terrien, *The Psalms*, 114 suggests that “the poet is the victim of sorcerers ... professional magicians”, but this is rather too specific and unsupportable by the textual evidence.

wickedly,²⁵ (A – *imperative*)

for the LORD has heard the sound of my

כִּי־שָׁמַע יְהוָה קוֹל בְּכִי:

weeping!²⁶ (B – *motivation*)

9 The LORD has heard my appeal for

שָׁמַע יְהוָה תְּחִנָּתִי

mercy;²⁷ (B')

the LORD has accepted my prayer.²⁸ (B'')

יְהוָה תַּפְלִיתִי יִקַּח:

²⁵ Lit., “all [you] workers of wickedness” (cf. Ps 5:5). The psalmist, in an outburst of assertive faith at the onset of stanza D, suddenly “turns” in attitude to aggressively confront his “enemies” verbally (v. 7b) – those who were “evildoers” (v. 8a) in the sense that they made his bad situation worse, like Job’s friends, either deliberately or in ignorance. Whether the psalmist actually experienced some significant physical relief – or confidently anticipates that YHWH is about to provide a respite (a common spiritual-psychological “turn-about” found in a typical lament psalm, e.g., Pss 16:8; 22:22; 28:6; 31:21) cannot be established with certainty. The corresponding references כָּל־צוֹרְרֵי and כָּל־פְּעֻלֵי אֹנֶן form a cohesive bridge between stanzas C and D, yet at the same time heighten the jarring incongruity in outlook in the psalmist’s words, from fearing to daring with respect to his opponents.

²⁶ The כִּי motivational clause seems to bear some contextually derived asseverative (emphatic) force here as well – a connotation that is reinforced by the next, semantically parallel line (v. 9a). The three final lines of the psalm express the psalmist’s “certainty of acceptance” before the Lord. Leupold, *Psalms*, 89.

²⁷ The repetition of שָׁמַע יְהוָה strengthens the psalmist’s assertion of the Lord’s favorable response. God’s “hearing” an appeal implies his immediate commitment to salutary action. The psalmist “speaks in faith: the victory is yet to come (v. 10), but he already knows that he is answered”. Kidner, *Psalms*, 62.

²⁸ The prefixed verbal form “has accepted” may be interpreted as a preterite here; it is parallel to a perfect and refers to the fact that the LORD has responded favorably to the psalmist’s request. On the other hand, a translation like NIV’s “accepts” also conveys the correct idea. See Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (WBC 19; Waco: Word Books, 1983), 95. A chiasmic arrangement of syntactic constituents reinforces the psalmist’s confident claims: Verb + Voc/Nobj (v. 9a) // Voc/Nobj + Verb (v. 9b), as does the similar sounding key nominal

10 May all my enemies be humiliated and

יִבְשׁוּ וְיִבְהֲלוּ מְאֹד כָּל־אֹיְבֵי

absolutely terrified!²⁹ (A')

May they turn back and be suddenly

יָשׁוּבוּ יִבְשׁוּ רְגַע:

humiliated!³⁰ (A'')

Literary-structural summary

Psalms 6 may be classified as a “lament,” or “psalm of petition,” since a fervent appeal to the LORD for help dominates the first portion of the prayer (vv. 1-4),³¹ as marked

expressions that reference his appeal: תִּפְלֹתַי and תְּחִנָּתִי. The initial pairing of יִהְיֶה תִּפְלֹתַי may be construed as an instance of double *constituent* focus. “The poetics thus explain the unusual word order in v. 9b, subject-object-verb”. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 140.

²⁹ Lit., “and may they be very terrified”. The psalmist uses the same expression in v. 3 to describe the terror he was experiencing. Now he asks the LORD to turn the tables and cause his enemies to know what absolute dread feels like – in this case, God’s judgment inflicted upon those who unjustly attack his people. Reference to “all my enemies” (כָּל־אֹיְבֵי) in v. 10a forms a stanza-bounding *inclusio* with “all workers of iniquity” (כָּל־פְּעֻלֵי אָוֶן) in v. 8a and a parallel structural “closure” with “all my adversaries” (כָּל־צוֹרְרֵי) in v. 7b.

³⁰ The four prefixed verbal forms in this verse (10ab) are best understood as jussives and form a powerful doubled close to the psalm. The psalmist concludes his “prayer” with an imprecation, calling divine punishment down on his enemies. The reiterated verb יִבְשׁוּ accents the psalmist’s wish, “be shamed”, and forms an ironic audible pun with the hoped-for overall outcome, as expressed in the sound-alike verb יָשׁוּבוּ, “turn” (i.e., a great reversal in fates). The psalm’s final adverbial noun רְגַע (“[in a] moment”) contrasts markedly and thematically with close of stanza A: עַד־מָתַי (“how long”). “Why will the enemies be shamed and dismayed? The fate of Job’s enemies may suggest an answer. They are exposed as people whose fundamental religious perspective is wrong ... Their entire position has imploded”. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 140–41.

³¹ Craigie, *Psalms*, 91–92 observes that Ps 6 “contains a high percentage of formulaic language” in common with other psalms and Old Testament literature. This “common

by a vocative (יְהוָה) in each of the four bicola, and two of them in v. 2. This psalm is often included among the so-called “Penitential Psalms” (along with Pss 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143), but there is no explicit confession of sin (whether specific or general), nor is there any plea for God’s forgiveness (cf. Ps 25:7, 18).³²

The text appears to divide itself topically and functionally into *four stanzas* – two longer outer poetic units, which focus on YHWH, and two shorter inner ones, which focus on the psalmist himself: A (vv. 1-3), B (vv. 4-5), C (vv. 6-7), and D (vv. 8-10).³³ Ps 6 “reflects a dramatic theology in which the speaker and YHWH, who is addressed, engage in a dynamic transaction in which both partners are under way in response to the other”.³⁴ The dynamics of this discourse, however, favors four distinct poetic segments. The rhetorical movement of these four units may be described as follows:

In **stanza A**, the psalmist plaintively lays out his desperate situation before YHWH: spiritually (v. 1, God is angry), physically (v. 2, the psalmist’s body is weak), and psychologically (v. 3, he is terrified) – the three conditions seemingly representing

language gives the psalm a familiar flavor, but at the same time it is distinctive by virtue of the power and pathos of its lamentation”.

³² Craigie, *Psalms*, 92 proposes that perhaps “the psalmist prays not to be rebuked or chastised for bringing this problem to God in prayer”, for God may have had a good reason for allowing this illness to afflict him.

³³ Most commentators combine stanzas B and C into a single poetic unit, e.g., Craigie, *Psalms*, 92; Nancy deClaissé-Walford *et al.*, *The Book of Psalms* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 102; Goldingay, *Psalms*, 135; Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 50 (but this contradicts their text outline on p. 47, which agrees with my proposed structural arrangement, as does Terrien, *The Psalms*, 112).

³⁴ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 52.

a consequential progression. Pragmatically, a pair of negative appeals to God (v. 1)³⁵ are followed by two positive correspondents (v. 2), and then a summary, as it were, of his dreadful state that ends in the formulaic עַד-מָתַי (v. 3), i.e., “how long” will I have to endure such trauma?! Reinforcing his urgent plea, the psalmist invokes the divine covenantal name in every verse of this strophe, four times in total. Whatever the cause of his pitiful condition, the LORD God was the psalmist’s only viable solution.

A much more specific and logically supported appeal to the LORD to act on the psalmist’s behalf begins **stanza B**,³⁶ with three imperatives packed into v. 4: “turn” (שׁוּבָה), “rescue” (חַלְצָה), “deliver” me (הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי)! The requested actions are all based on that essential covenantal relationship that binds the believer with his God in the Old Testament, namely, the key concept of “steadfast faithfulness” (חֶסֶד), which forcefully ends the verse.³⁷ In the next bicolon then, the psalmist offers another cogent reason

³⁵ The Hebrew text as rendered in English may suggest to some readers/hearers that the psalmist is praying that God would not *begin to* “discipline” him. However, as v. 2 indicates, the psalmist is rather appealing that God would not *continue to* apply such discipline so that it seems “wrathful” in nature.

³⁶ “As often happens, the second section of the psalm repeats the first, restating it in different words and thus underlining its concerns”. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 137. This is a macro-structural application of the well-known principle of Biblical Hebrew lineal parallelism, “A – and what’s more, B”. James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 8–23. “The characteristic movement of meaning is one of heightening or intensification ... of focusing, specification, concretization, even what could be called dramatization”. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 19.

³⁷ Thus the psalmist seems to back off from viewing his current adverse situation as being a punishment for sin (v. 1, a common Old Testament understanding, cf. Ps 38:1-4), and now in v. 4 stresses the “faithful love” that binds him to YHWH in a life-long

(leading off with a motivational כִּי, v. 5a) to provoke YHWH's positive response: a person cannot praise and glorify God if s/he is dead – the fundamental connection between deity and worshiper would be broken! (v. 5b).

Stanza C expresses a doleful dirge that summarizes the psalmist's wretched personal (physical and psychological) condition as well as his adverse social situation. He is in a miserable mental state (v. 6), and now suddenly it appears as if many hostile adversaries, or simply pestering onlookers vex him (v. 7), as in the case of Job (e.g., 30:1-15).³⁸ These sad lines, coupled with those of stanza B include “the three relational parties that are often names in prayers for help: God (you), the psalmist (I), and the enemies.”³⁹ The lament reaches its emotional peak (or nadir!) in the tricolon of v. 6 and its pitiful verbal pictures of a grievously ill and sorrowful psalmist.

An almost shocking shift in topic and tone begins the final **stanza D** (v. 8a), which creates a dramatic pause and shift of perspective within the prayer.⁴⁰ The basic

interpersonal relationship (deity–devotee).

³⁸ It is likely that these adversaries were fellow members of the psalmist's own social-religious community, and their threats were not necessarily physical, but rather some “form of speech, slander, or perhaps testimony in court”. Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 51.

³⁹ DeClaissé-Walford *et al.*, *Book of Psalms*, 104. “The Psalms focus on the causes or consequences of illness in the form of attacks from people like Job's friends rather than on the illness itself”. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 136.

⁴⁰ Craigie astutely submits that the sudden shift in tone between stanzas C and D “is vital to the spiritual progress within the psalm, whereas continuity is indicated by the use of similar and related words in both parts. Brueggemann and Bellinger hypothesize that ‘in the dramatic performance of this psalm, an assurance of YHWH was uttered by some trustworthy speaker’ (*Psalms*, 50), such as a priest. Thus, forms derived from רַחֵם ‘gracious’ occur in vv. 3

pragmatic pattern of imperative followed by rationale continues, as in the two preceding stanzas A and B, but now the psalmist unexpectedly turns upon the hostile “mischief-makers” (פִּעֲלֵי אָוֶן) just mentioned in v. 37b and orders them to “get out!” (סוּרוּ). How could he be so bold under the circumstances? Three subsequent cola say essentially the same thing: “YHWH has answered my prayer!” (vv. 8b-9) – either by means of some miraculous act of restoration (from an apparent illness), or through confident anticipation, a personal reaching out in faith to what he’s sure will soon happen.⁴¹ In any case, the psalm’s final line proclaims the Lord’s judgment upon his erstwhile enemies, who will end up being publicly humiliated as a result of the psalmist’s divine vindication (v. 10).⁴²

Thus as a result of the Lord’s real or expected deliverance, a dramatic *reversal* has occurred: In v. 2, it was the psalmist (lit. his “bones”) who was “terrified” (בָּהֵל) – now, in v. 10, his enemies feel the same way. In v. 4, YHWH was called upon to “turn [towards]” (שׁוּב) to help the psalmist – however in v. 10 his enemies will “turn [away]”

and 10, the verb בָּהֵל ‘be disturbed’ is used in both vv. 3-4 and in v. 11, and the verb שׁוּב ‘return’ is used in vv. 5 and 11; these stylistic devices impress upon the reader [EW: and more so the hearer!] both the unity and the power of the poem”. Craigie, *Psalms*, 91.

⁴¹ “It may have been the case that as the psalmist progresses in prayer, he eventually reaches a point where faith and confidence outstripped anguish and despair”. deClaisse-Walford *et al.*, *Book of Psalms*, 106, citing Erhard Gerstenberger. “Whatever the way the psalm was used, it invites people using the psalm to expect Yhwh to respond to their prayers”. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 140.

⁴² “The threefold utterance of the divine name alongside the threefold mention of the adversaries reveals that the speaker is in a confrontational situation that is beyond the speaker’s own capacity”. Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 49.

from him in disgrace. Again, back in v. 2 the psalmist appealed to the LORD to “be merciful” (חַנּוּן) towards him – and God “heard” (positively responded to) his “prayer for mercy” (תְּחִנָּה) in v. 9.⁴³ A topic and functionally-based “ring structure” generates a strong cohesive bond within the stanza: A (vv. 8a, 10a-b): imperative plus imprecation regarding the psalmist’s enemies; B (vv. 8b, 9a-b): rationale, based on the LORD’s positive response to his fervent supplication. In the end, the LORD surrounds his trusting supplicant with protection (v. 9), while all his adversaries are forced to flee the scene in shame (v. 10). The climactic character of this final stanza is sonically supported by all of the phonological correspondences manifested within the text, as shown by the highlighting above.

The diachronic, precatory development of Psalm 6 in terms of stanzas is accompanied by an interesting chiasmic correspondence with regard to lexical length, with two shorter poetic units surrounded by matching longer ones: *A*: general appeal (24 lexical units)⁴⁴; *B*: specific appeal (15); *C*: mournful motivation (15); *D*: assertive trusting testimony (24). The psalm’s lexical midpoint then occurs on the border between vv. 5 and 6, with 39 words in each half. This verbal symmetry is simply another aspect of the text’s overall artistic structural design.

⁴³ “The double ‘shaming’ follows on the double ‘listening’. And their great ‘shuddering’ (בָּהֶל) corresponds to the suppliant’s twofold shaking (vv. 2b-3a). The ‘turn’ of v. 10 corresponds to the ‘turn’ of v. 4, and whereas v. 3 asked ‘How long?’ now the suppliant knows the shaming will come about ‘instantly’”. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 141.

⁴⁴ The psalm’s superscription, v. 1 in Hebrew, is not included in this count.

Among the chief functionally-oriented “communicative clues” that translators should endeavor to reproduce idiomatically in their target language text are these: the essential poetic structure of Ps 6 in terms of four stanza divisions; the sorrowful emotive overtones that run throughout the first three stanzas; the unexpected, but strong (imperative) and motivated shift in attitude and outlook that characterizes stanza D; the mini-climaxes in oratorical import which seem to occur at the end of each stanza, i.e., vv. 3b (rhetorical question), 5b (rhetorical question), 7b (the sudden revelation that the psalmist’s suffering is social as well as physical), 10 (the thematic “turning” that occurs when the enemies are “shamed” – wordplay); the pragmatic force (topic/focus) of the periodic, fronted nominal phrases noted in the earlier exegetical analysis (e.g., v. 1a-b); the semantic implication of the occasional Hebrew conjunctive particles (e.g., the parallel *כִּי* “for” clauses in v. 2a – a “reason”, or motivational use here); other, deliberately positioned (fronted/backed) syntactic elements that forge contrastive or complementary linkages on the textual microstructure (e.g., the antithetical implication of the initial pronoun *אֲנִי* in v. 3b in contrast with *נַפְשִׁי* in the preceding line, v. 3a); the phonological and lexical reiteration which create perceptible cohesive connections throughout the psalm and hence the prayer as a whole; a functionally-equivalent target language literary genre (along the lines of a lament with an optimistic topical surprise at the end) that can duplicate the artistry, impact, and appeal of the original Hebrew poetry on the macro-level of discourse.

Reflection: On the Transformative Nature of the Psalms

It is inviting to interpret the dramatic mental transformation that is evident in Ps 6 in the light of N. T. Wright's insightful, worldview-oriented hermeneutical framework for the Psalter:⁴⁵

[T]he regular praying and singing of the Psalms is transformative. It changes the way we understand some of the deepest elements of who we are, or rather, who, where, when, and what we are ... The Psalms thus transform what I have called our "worldview".

And what is so significant about this covenantal worldview? I cannot go into detail, but in summary:⁴⁶

Time is not merely linear or merely cyclic. As time moves forward, the Psalms, by their content but also by their poetry and music, invoke the past and anticipate the future. Similarly with *space*: heaven and earth really are designed to meet together in the Temple, and the Temple, for which the Psalms were written in the first place, is not there for its own sake but because it is the bridgehead into God's whole new world. Similarly with *matter*: God delights in all that he has made, both as it is and as it will be in his new creation.

Relating this briefly then (and just partially) to Ps 6 – in terms of *time*, "how long" will it be in the *future* (v. 3b) before YHWH responds to the psalmist's pleas for

⁴⁵ N. Tom Wright, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 6–7.

⁴⁶ Wright, *Case for the Psalms*, 163–64; italics added.

“deliverance” (v. 4a)? “David” bases his *present* appeal on the LORD’s *hesed* faithfulness (v. 4b), which has proved to be so reliable – in fact, “memorable” (v. 5a) – for his people in the *past*.⁴⁷

With regard to *space*, it is clear from this psalm, as well as all of the others in the Psalter, that the psalmist does not view YHWH as some transcendent being far away and removed from his concerns. Rather, his God is close by – so near in fact that he can perceive his complaint, even as it is being uttered, and respond immediately, as it were (v. 9). The psalmist addresses YHWH directly, as if God were in his immediate presence and they were engaged in active conversation (vv. 1-2).⁴⁸

Finally, with reference to *matter*, an obvious feature of the Psalms is their prominent anthropomorphic character – so much so that YHWH can apparently empathize emotively with the psalmists in their frequent physical references – to one’s general “frailty” (v. 2a) and physically weakened “bones” (v. 2b); also to one’s inner “psychological state” (v. 3a) which expresses itself in “eyes” that have exhausted themselves in expressing “tears” (vv. 6-7b). On the other hand, due to the LORD’s

⁴⁷ “To recognize that the Psalms call us to pray and sing at the intersection of the times – of our time and God’s time, of the *then* and the *now* and the *not yet* – is to understand how these emotions are to be held within the rhythm of a life lived in God’s presence”. Wright, *Case for the Psalms*, 44.

⁴⁸ Later in Israel’s history, after the temple had been destroyed and many people displaced, “[i]nstead of thinking of a place to which YHWH might come and be at rest, they [often] thought of YHWH himself as the ‘place’ where a worshiper might go to be at rest” – for example, Ps 141:8 in which the psalmist “sees personal and private prayer as the functional equivalent of being in the Temple”. Wright, *Case for the Psalms*, 98–99.

immediate proximity to the psalmist and his ability to “hear” and “feel with” him, the appellant has the confident hope – even an overwhelming confidence – that his God not only sees his plight, but will do something about it.

In some definite way then, sooner or later, the psalmist’s mental, spiritual, and even physical state will be changed – that is, “deliverance” will surely be displayed (v. 4a) when divine “mercy” has been manifested (v. 2a).⁴⁹ “The Psalms speak of change, but more importantly they are agents of change: change within the humans who sing them, and change through those humans, as their transformed lives bring God’s kindness and justice into the world”.⁵⁰ Furthermore, all those who pray or sing the Psalms can rest assured that the eternal God is presently with them (*time* – cf. Rev 21:3), near and able to hear them (*space* – cf. Rom 8:26-27), and ultimately, one day, they will be like him (*matter/character* – cf. 1 John 3:2).

Exemplifying a “direct” literary translation

The challenge facing translators is how to reproduce the most significant communicative clues of the original in translation. In the case of the literature of Scripture, the mere rendition of semantic content is not sufficient – or being “faithful”

⁴⁹ “So, as with time and space, we are invited to stand at the intersection of original created matter and the matter of new creation, the original matter that reveals God’s power and glory and the new creation that will be flooded, saturated, with God’s presence”. Wright, *Case for the Psalms*, 136.

⁵⁰ Wright, *Case for the Psalms*, 164.

– to the nature of the biblical source text. This is especially true where poetry is concerned, where beauty and emotive shading must also be considered. It is difficult to duplicate the source language’s artistic and/or rhetorical features on an individual item-for-item basis, though the effort should be made since at times this is possible.

Often, however, communicative equivalence, or translational correspondence, is possible only with reference to larger chunks of text – within a particular stanza or even on the generic level of the psalm as a whole, as matching target language oral-aural devices are utilized where they sound natural in relation to the content and intent being conveyed.⁵¹ The following are three quite different “direct” poetic renderings⁵² of Ps 6 in English,⁵³ which may be compared with each other as well as with the

⁵¹ The issue of “sound” is crucial when evaluating any translation of the Psalter for, ideally, the psalms are meant to be audibly articulated, in particular via some type of vocally heightened oral expression. Any comparative “testing” of versions must take this phonic dimension into consideration.

⁵² Note that in contrast to a more “foreignized”, source language-orientated translation, as promoted in Van der Merwe, “How ‘Direct’ Can a Direct Translation Be?”, I would advocate a target language-orientated version that is more “domesticated” in nature—at least in the broader context of Africa. The latter is a rendition that aims to reproduce, to the degree possible, the semantic and pragmatic intentions of the principal communicative clues of the biblical text in a functionally-equivalent, idiomatic manner in the language of translation.

⁵³ The first translation is by Timothy Wilt, *Praise, Prayer and Protest: The David Collection (Psalms 1-72)*, (self-published, 2002), 7. I have modified the original formatting of the text somewhat. The second version is by Brenda Higgie-Boerger, *Poetic Oracle English Translation (POET) Psalms*, (self-published, 2009), 23; several footnotes indicate specific places where Higgie-Boerger represented the communicative clues of the Hebrew text in her translation. The third rendition is my own, which I composed after studying and “feeling through” this psalm with the psalmist.

original Hebrew text with respect to particular and general effectiveness with reference to a specific target language audience group.

Yahweh,

I know you're furious.

I know that's why I'm dying.

But please, stop punishing me,
or at least not so angrily.

Please, Yahweh, please!

I can't stop shaking.

I can hardly breathe.

For how long Yahweh? Please stop!

If you respect your commitment to me, you'll heal me,
and I'll always remember this and praise you.

Otherwise, I'll die.

My strength ebbs in my anguish.

My eyes are swollen from crying as my enemy hisses at me.

I can hardly see.

At night, my tears drench the pillow and soak the bed.

Workers for evil—enemies,

Get away from me!

Yahweh hears my prayers as well as my sobs.

Yahweh has decided to be kind to me.

It's your turn to be humiliated.

All of you will slink away in shame, shaking in fear!

=====

DO THE DEAD BLESS YOU?

by David, with an eight-stringed lyre
a psalm of repentance⁵⁴

- 1-3 Don't discipline me in your ire,
 For I am heartsick and so tired.
 Please don't condemn in fury.
 Have mercy for I'm very weak.
 It's your renewal, Lord, I seek.
 My body's ill and weary.
- 4 Come and rescue.
 So in love I will be saved, Lord.
- 5 Do dead bless you?
 Can I praise you from the graveyard?⁵⁵
- 6-7 Each night I'm weeping on my bed
 And now I find my sheets are drenched.
 From tears my pillow's sopping.⁵⁶
 My eyes are dim due to my woe.
 They burn with tears about my foe.
 I'm worn out from my sobbing.
- [Come and rescue.
 So in love I will be saved, Lord.
 Do dead bless you?
 Can I praise you from the graveyard?]⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Dr. Boerger adds: "cywydd llosgnog with refrain; Tune: O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright (887.887.48.48. *Wie Schön Luechtet der Morningstern*)"

⁵⁵ The putative "refrain" is marked by a different font and larger type.

⁵⁶ 6:6-7 – These six lines have the same number of 'crying' terms as the parallel verses in Hebrew (Boerger 2009:23)

⁵⁷ 6:4-5 – Though not composed as a refrain in Hebrew, these two verses are the main point of the psalm and could be used as a refrain to each of the six line stanzas. Psalm 30:9 makes the same point (ibid:loc cit).

8-10 My God responds to groans, despair.
 So surely he will grant my prayer.
 Leave me, men of transgression.
 Let them lose face, while I am safe.
 And make them do an about-face.⁵⁸
 Lord, hear my intercession.

=====

6. *Prayer of a scorned sufferer*⁵⁹

Lord, don't punish me in anger, 1-3
 don't chasten me in your wrath.
 Rather, have mercy—I'm so weak;
 heal me, for I'm feeling such pain.
 Indeed, I'm sick in mind and heart—
 how long then before you respond?

Come back to me, Lord, deliver me; 4-5
 Save me since your love never fails.
 If I'm dead, how can I worship you?
 No one remembers you in the grave!

⁵⁸ “Wendland (2002:172) describes a Hebrew word-play between ‘shamed’ *yeboshu* in lines a and b, and ‘they will turn’ *yashubu* in line b, where the change in the order of the last two consonants [b-sh → sh-b] symbolizes the change in circumstances that David wants to see happen to his enemies. In *POET* this effect is reproduced by having “face” appear in lines a and b, while the sounds of ‘safe’ [sef] phonetically become ‘face’ [fes] when reversed, and the desired reversal of circumstances is made explicit lexically with ‘about-face’ in line b (ibid:loc cit).

⁵⁹ In this translation I have tried to match the main macro-clues pertaining to poetic structure, including the build-up to a climax at the end of each stanza. I have also attempted to duplicate the impact and appeal of a selection of literary (artistic-rhetorical) features within the psalm’s micro-structure, including a certain verbal euphony and rhythm to enhance public reading.

I'm truly worn out with weeping; 6-7
I cry to you day and night for aid;
my bed is drenched with my tears.
My eyes are all bleary with grief—
many enemies make it much worse.

Away with you, you wicked fellows! 8-10
God has heard my anguished weeping.
The Lord listens to these cries for help.
He will surely respond to my prayers.
All my foes will be turned right around;
So swiftly they're shamed and shunned!

Conclusion

A literary-structural analysis enables one to probe the poetic form and content of a psalm from a particular viewpoint – one that focuses on the artistic beauty and the emotive impact that is expressed in the original composition. This type of study cannot give us the whole picture, but it does offer an important perspective so often missing in many commentaries as well as contemporary translations that fail to convey the rhetorical power and passion of these ancient prayers of faith. Indeed, the psalms often seek to persuade the pray-er as well as the divine Being to whom they are addressed that such verbal worship activity is worthwhile – that covenantal fellowship is implicitly restored or renewed. This happens as the very words of the psalmist are being uttered (cf. vv. 7-8), whether recited, chanted, or sung in some public setting, or spoken silently to oneself in a moment of personal need.


It is important during any detailed text analysis or the actual act of translating it into another language not to lose sight of the ultimate theological message and purpose of the prayer at hand. Instead, at some point one must pause for a moment or two in order to pull all the textual pieces together again into some meaningful application to one's own life. "The Sons of Korah", an Australian popular singing group, offer an example of what I am referring to in their comments on the significance of Ps 6, which provide a fitting conclusion – a conceptual "synthesis" as it were, of the outcome of my short and selective poetic study:⁶⁰

Psalm 6 is a typical lament psalm. Over half of all the psalms fall into this category and ... they are the most remarkable feature of the biblical faith ... Here there is a candidness that expresses an intimacy with God that is truly moving. In these psalms we see the covenant relationship between the Lord and believers tested, and indeed as it is tested we see it manifested in its most passionate form. Here the psalmist reaches out desperately for God and in this there is a powerful revelation of a person's absolute need for God. These psalms are particularly notable for their interaction between joyful confidence in God and the deathly grief which occasions the psalms themselves. Possibly the most

⁶⁰ "Psalm 6," *Light of Life* (1999). Online: <http://sonsofkorah.com/#music> (Accessed: 24 February 2017). I have lightly edited this quotation contextually for use here. The group's acoustic guitar version of Ps 6 is also available on their website; this musical rendition clearly expresses the dramatic break in tone and emotive shift that occurs in the final stanza of the psalm, vv. 8-10. "[The Psalms] create, as perhaps only music can, the new world, or the new worldview, within which all kinds of new possibilities emerge: not just new thoughts but new actions, new habits of heart, mind, and body". Wright, *Case for the Psalms*, 164.

astounding aspect of many of the laments is their movement out of sorrow into joy. Some of the most jubilant expressions of praise in the book of Psalms are found at the end of lament psalms. This is a feature of this psalm and the journey of the psalm itself to this point is a profound example of the kind of prayer that is most appropriate for the covenant relationship.

In sum, the answer to the psalmist's rather bitter interrogative query (implied) – “Do the dead praise you?” (v. 5) – is quite obvious in its context. It is an implied precatory commonplace – a rhetorical, persuasive device: “Of course not – dead people do not praise God!” Only the living do, namely, those who are living in fellowship with a Lord who is always near enough to hear the prayers of his saints in their time of need (vv. 8b-9). The answer to a prior, more significant real question, the psalmist's plaintive appeal – “How long?” (v. 3a) – turns out to be this: *Much sooner than you could ever imagine*, for by the time this prayer has been uttered, whether aloud or silently to oneself, you will have received your renovating, reassuring response, while all your watching enemies will have gotten their deserved, divinely meted rebuke (v. 10)!



The Lord has heard my
supplication; The Lord
will receive my prayer.

Psalm 6:9 (NKJ)

Ernst R. Wendland
Stellenbosch University, Ancient Studies
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