

CLARIFYING MORE
BAFFLING
BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER TEN

“PSALM 109
A WOMAN’S LAMENT”

Thomas F. McDaniel, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus
Palmer Theological Seminary
Wynnewood, Pennsylvania

©

2008

All Rights Reserved

X

PSALM 109 A WOMAN'S LAMENT

Psalm 109:4b, 28, 31

The proper interpretation of Psalm 109 as a whole is dependent upon the correct understanding of the **וְאֲנִי תְפִלָּה** in v. 4. As pointed in the MT, these two words are the *conjunction* + *pronoun subject* and a *noun predicate*, meaning “I (am) a prayer.” Because this literal meaning is senseless, it has been paraphrased as

- ἐγὼ δὲ προσευχόμενος “but I continue to pray” (Septuagint),
- *ego autem orabam* “but I pray” (Vulgate),
- **וְאֲנִי תְפִלָּה לְעַמּוּלָם** “but I have prayed for them” (Peshitta),
- “but I give myself unto prayer” (KJV),
- “but I am a man of prayer” (NIV, NIB),
- “even while I make prayer for them” (NRS),
- “and all I can do is pray!” (NJB),
- “even me. My prayer . . .” (Dahood (1970: 97).

But the **תְּפִלָּה** in this verse is *not* the same as the **תְּפִלָּה** found in 109:7, which is the noun “prayer” from the stem **תְּפַלַּל** (BDB 813; Jastrow 1182–1183). The initial **ת** of the **תְּפִלָּה** in 109:4 is not a noun prefix but the first letter of the stem **תְּפַלַּל** “to be unseemly, to be indecent.” Thus, this **תְּפִלָּה** “prayer” should be pointed as (1) **תְּפִלָּה** “impropriety, indecency,” the abstract of which is **תְּפִלּוּת** “obscenity, triviality,

frivolity” (Castell 1669: 3932; BDB 1074; Jastrow 1903: 1686–1687), or as (2) תִּפְלָה, a feminine singular participle (GKC 84a^s), meaning “an indecent/obscene (woman).”

The noun תִּפְלָה appears in Jer 23:13 וּבְנֵי־אֵי שִׁמְרוֹן וְרֵאִיתִי תִפְלָה, which the Septuagint appropriately translated as καὶ ἐν τοῖς προφήταις Σαμαρείας εἶδον ἀνομήματα, “and in the prophets of Samaria I have seen lawless deeds.” This Hebrew תִּפְלָה is the cognate of the Syriac ܬܦܠܐ (*tēpal*) “defiled, corrupt” (Payne Smith 1957: 180);¹ and the by-form טִפְלוּ appears in Job 13:4, וְאוֹלָם אַתֶּם טִפְלֵי־שִׁקֶּר, “But all of you are forgers of lies,”² and in Psa 119:69, טִפְלוּ עָלַי, “the godless besmear me with lies” (RSV).³

When the problematic וְאֲנִי תִפְלָה “and I prayer” is read as וְאֲנִי תִפְלָה “and I (am) an obscene (woman),” the various pieces of the psalm fall into order. The female psalmist laments the deceitful mouths, lying tongues, words of hate, and verbal attacks which besmirch her. This besmirchment was summed up in the phrase וְאֲנִי תִפְלָה, “that I (am) indecent.” The mention of the psalmist’s love being rejected by (male) liars and attackers, who return hate for love, provides a hint of a failed family or romantic relationship which resulted in the men of the male’s family (which accounts for the plural masculine verbs) verbally attacking a dismissed concubine or a divorced secondary or tertiary wife. As a result of being jilted and threatened with trumped up charges that could bring death, the lady invokes a string of curses against her former lover, master, or husband (which accounts for the singular “him” and “his” in the twenty-some curses invoked in verses 6–19). The masculine plurals which reemerge in

109:20 again focus on the (male) family members of the man who jilted or divorced her.

As permitted in Deut 24:1, a man could give a woman a bill of divorce (סִפּוּר כְּרִיתָת) if he was not satisfied with her or found something obscene (עֲרֹוֹת דְּבָר) about her. A charge of obscenity was something other than adultery, for the latter crime carried an immediate death penalty (Lev 20:10), and there would have been no time to compose a lament or write out curses. Although עֲרֹוֹת דְּבָר and זְנוּה “lewdness” (Lev 18:17) are not found in this psalm, the same issue appears with the use of תִּפְלָה “obscene, lewd (woman)” — which is the label the psalmist feels she now bears thanks to the false testimony of a hateful man and his conspiratorial fellows.

The ancient Israelite divorce hinted at in this psalm was certainly not amicable. As noted, retaliation for the false charges brought against her, the woman invokes at least twenty curses against the nameless male. From the curses invoked the reader learns that the man being cursed was married and had children. (This did not preclude his having other women in his life according to his pleasure—as long as they were single.) He had property, but at the same time had unpaid debts. He is alleged to have been stingy and given to cursing a great deal. The woman invoking God’s blessing upon herself—all the while invoking curses of death against her former male mate and his people—claimed to be poor, needy, depressed, and dishonored by the false charges of her being an indecent obscene woman. While begging to be saved the psalmist expressed her confidence in God’s defending the poor and needy, stating in the Septuagint of 108:31, ὅτι παρέστη ἐκ δεξιῶν πένητος τοῦ σῶσαι ἐκ τῶν καταδιωκόντων τὴν ψυχὴν μου, “For He stood at the right hand of the poor, to save *me* from them who pursue my soul.”

Two problems with this interpretation of the Psalm 109 which need to be addressed are (1) the reference in v. 28 to the psalmist as **וְעַבְדְּךָ** “your servant” (a masculine noun) translated as ὁ δὲ δοῦλός σου, and (2) the MT **נַפְשׁוֹ** “his soul” in v. 31 (a masculine suffix). These would indeed make the psalmist a man if they were in the original psalm. In the Septuagint (108:31) the MT **נַפְשׁוֹ** was translated as τῆν ψυχῆν μου, which reflects the gender neutral **נַפְשִׁי** “my soul,” which may well be the original reading.⁴

Moreover, v. 28 has three problems of its own: (1) the MT **וַיִּבְשׁוּ קָמוֹ וַיִּבְשׁוּ** “they arose and were put to shame” is not reflected in the Peshitta; (2) the Septuagint read οἱ ἐπανιστανόμενοι μοι, reflecting a Vorlage with **עָלִי קָמוֹ וַיִּבְשׁוּ** for the MT **וַיִּבְשׁוּ קָמוֹ**; and (3) as is evident by looking at the text in *BHS*, the poetic line is overly long. In the Septuagint *Vorlage* of nine words, v. 28 would scan as a 2 + 2 + 3 + 2 line; and the eight words in the MT could be scanned as a 3 + 4 line or a 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 line. Most other lines have five to seven words and scan as 2 + 2 or 3 + 2 or 3 + 3.

Thus, based upon the extended line length and the fact that the singular **יִשְׂמַח** interrupts the series of five plural imprecatives in vv. 27–29, the MT **וְעַבְדְּךָ יִשְׂמַח** “and may your servant rejoice” in v. 28 can be isolated as a later addition to the original 2 + 2 + 2 colon. The phrase may well be a misplaced insertion from the margin, which should have been inserted in the text after Psa 108:6 (MT), so as to read there, “That thy beloved may be delivered, give help by thy right hand, and answer me! *And let thy servant rejoice!*”

The minor adjustments to the MT of Psalm 109 proposed here are, in inverse order, (1) to move **וְעַבְדְּךָ יִשְׂמַח** to

follow Psa 108:6, (2) to follow the Septuagint's τὴν ψυχὴν μου and read the gender neutral נַפְשִׁי "my soul" for the MT נַפְשׁוֹ "his soul"; and (3) to repoint תַּפִּלָּה "prayer" as the feminine participle תַּפִּלָּה "(a woman) being indecent." These modest changes compare favorably with the rather radical interpretation of Briggs (1907: 364–365), who considered Psalm 109 to be a composite—with vv. 2a, 3b–5a, 19–20, 25, 28–29 being glosses and vv. 6–15 being an independent imprecatory psalm which was later inserted into the text at the end of the first strophe (composed of vv. 1b, 2b, 3a, 5b, 16–18, and 21–27).

The interpretation presented above that Psalm 109 was composed by a woman stands also in sharp contrast to that of Weiser (1962: 690) who stated

This psalm is an individual lament, prayed by a man who, if we understand the psalm aright, is accused of being guilty of the death of a poor man (v. 16), presumably by means of magically effective curses (vv. 17ff.).

The curses (which, in my opinion, were invoked by a cast-away concubine or a divorced wife against her former mate, his fellows, and his family) were, according to Weiser, invoked against the psalmist himself by his adversaries—thus, the psalmist *recited* them by way of review but did not *invoke* them. Weiser argued unconvincingly, "The change from the plural in vv. 1–5 and 20 ff. to the singular in vv. 6–19 is satisfactorily accounted for only if vv. 6–19 are interpreted as a quotation of the imprecations directed against the psalmist." But as Anderson (1972: 758) noted in his criticism of similar statements made by Kraus (1960: 747), "in view of the current belief in the inherent power of the spoken word, it is questionable whether one would venture to repeat such curses originally directed against oneself."

Psalm 109:23

The interpretation presented above also stands in sharp contrast to that of Dahood (1970: 99) who identified the psalmist as an aged man and stated

A perplexing Hebrew text makes it difficult to identify with certainty the dramatis personae and the sequence of action in this lament of an individual. . . . In vss. 6–19. the psalmist directs a series of dreadful imprecations against the venal judge (see vs. 31) who, instead of throwing out the case as preposterous, agrees to hear the case.

Dahood rendered 109:23, **כִּצֵּל-כְּנִשְׁתּוֹ נִהְלַכְתִּי נִנְעַרְתִּי**, כַּאֲרֵבָה, as “Like a shadow indeed have I tapered, and am passing away. I have lost my youth, truly I have aged,” which, for contrast, should be compared with the NKJ, “I am gone like a shadow which lengthens; I am shaken off like a locust.” The Arabic cognate of **הָלַךְ** (stem II) can mean either (1) “he perished, came to nought, passed away, died” or (2) “he became in a bad, or corrupt state, marred, or spoiled, or went away,” with form 10 of **هَلَكَ** (*halaka*) indicating “he became distressed, trouble, or fatigued” (Lane 1893: 3044). It is obvious that the psalmist was still alive while reciting the lament and its curses; therefore, the MT **נִהְלַכְתִּי** (a *Niph^cal* perfect) cannot mean “I died”—nor should it be paraphrased as an imperfect meaning “I am passing away.” It can mean, however, “I became fatigued, worn out,” i.e., “like a fading shadow I became worn out,” which does justice to the perfect tense of the **נִהְלַכְתִּי** and the context wherein the psalmist had become weary of the false allegations and lies.

Dahood's proposal to read the MT **כָּאֲרֵבָה נִנְעַרְתִּי** "as I have lost my youth, truly I have aged," is possible but not at all probable. The psalm is a lament, and although in contemporary western culture becoming old is something to lament, in Eastern and Near Eastern cultures advanced age engendered esteem and respect, and age was evidence of God's blessing, as stated in Prov 3:2, "For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they [the laws] add to thee," and Exod 20:12, "that thy days may be long upon the land which the Yahweh thy God giveth thee." Therefore, it remains preferable to keep the **אֲרֵבָה** as "locust," although the **נִנְעַרְתִּי** may be derived from **נָעַר**, stem I, the cognate of the Arabic **نعر** (*na'ara*) "he uttered a noise, he called out, he cried out" (Lane 1983: 2815; BDB 654; Jastrow 921–922). The noise made by locusts was proverbial; and in a lament it should not be surprising to have a reference to the outcry or constant crying of the one raising the lament.⁵

Psalm 109:4a, 6, 20, and 29

Psa 109:4a reads **תַּחַת־אֲהַבְתִּי יִשְׁטַנּוּנִי**, and a literal translation would be "instead of my love they *sataned* me." It has been customary in English to transliterate the noun **שָׁטָן** as *Satan*, even when it comes with the definite article **הַ**, precluding the noun from being a name (as has happened to the noun in Job 1:6–2:7). But the *verb* **שָׁטַן** (found in Psa 38:21; 71:13; 109:4, 20, 29; and Zech 3:1) was never borrowed into English as the loanword "to satan." The verb **שָׁטַן** in Psa 109 was translated into English by the verbs

- to be an adversary (KJV, WEB),
- to accuse (NIV, NIB, NAU, RSV, NRS, NKJ, RWB, NLT [in vv. 20, 29]),
- to detract (DRA, following the Vulgate's *detrahebant*),
- to oppose (YLT in v. 4, but accusers in vv, 20, 29),
- to denounce (NJB in v. 4, but accusers in vv, 20, 29),
- to try to destroy (NLT in v. 4, but accusers in vv. 20, 29),
- to calumniate (for the Septuagint's ἐνδιδιβάλλω).

By contrast, the *noun* שָׂטָן in Psa 109:6, became *Satan* in the KJV, WEB, and RWB; but in the NIV, NIB, NAU, RSV, NRS, NKJ, RWB, NLT שָׂטָן was translated as “an accuser.” The Septuagint translated it as διάβολος, and the Vulgate has *diabulus*, which became “the devil” in the DRA.

Briggs (1907: 366) translated Psa 109:4 as “For my love they are mine adversaries while I am in prayer,” and the MT of 109:6, הַפְּקֹד עָלָיו רָשָׁע וְשָׂטָן יַעֲמֹד עַל־יְמִינֹו, as “Appoint a wicked one over him, and let an adversary stand at his right hand.” By contrast, Dahood (1970: 97) translated the two verses as (1) “in return for my love, they slander me, even me. My prayer they . . .” and (2) “Appoint the Evil One against him, and let Satan stand at his right hand.” But Dahood interpreted the plural participles שׂוֹטְנֵי/שָׂטְנֵי in vv. 20 and 29 as being ordinary human “slanderers.” For Dahood the *Satan* in Psalm 109 was the same supra-human celestial prosecutor who appears in I Chron 21:1, Zech 3:1–2, and Job 1–2. He concluded,

These descriptions warrant, then, the interpretation of the Evil One and Satan as one personage who will serve as

the prosecutor at the trial of the psalmist's adversary before the divine judge after death.

Missing from Dahood's interpretation is any reference to the verb שָׁטַן in Num 22:22, 32, where the angel of Yahweh went forth "to *satan*" (לְשָׁטָן) Balaam who was on his way to meet Balak, the king of Moab. This was a celestial *satan* who encountered Balaam long before he died, *not* the celestial *Satan* who, according to later intertestamental traditions, prosecutes after death. Moreover, Balaam's *satan* was doing God's will; he was not an *evil one*. The automatic equation of a *satan* with the *Evil One* obscures the role of a *satan* as a prosecuting attorney—human or celestial—seeking to establish truth and justice for the good of all. Consequently, Dahood's statement, "If this analysis proves correct, the widely held view that the designation of Satan as the Evil One is a development of the intertestamental period will need to be reexamined," can readily be dismissed. Nothing in Psalm 109 suggests, let alone requires, a *Satan* who judges after death.

Psalm 109:31

כִּי־יַעֲמֵד לְיָמִין אֲבִיוֹן לְהוֹשִׁיעַ מִשְׁפָּטַי נַפְשׁוֹ

For he stands at the right hand of the needy,
to save from the ones judging his soul.

ὅτι παρέστη ἐκ δεξιῶν πένητος
τοῦ ὠδῶσαι ἐκ τῶν καταδιωκόντων τῆν ψυχῆν μου

For he stood⁶ at the right hand of the poor,
to save from the ones pursuing my soul.

Briggs (1907: 373), after noting the variant reading in the versions of משפטי for the MT משפטי , proposed emend-

ing the מִשְׁפָּטֵי to מִשְׁטָנִי “adversaries.” However, there is no way that the Septuagint’s καταδιώκω “to pursue closely” can be a translation of either שָׁפַט “to judge” or שָׁטַן “to *satan*.”⁷ Anderson (1972: 767) suggested that the Septuagint translated רָדְפִים נַפְשֵׁי, but it is hard to see how the MT מִשְׁפָּטֵי could be misread as רָדְפִים. Dahood (1970: 110) speculated that the MT מִשְׁפָּטֵי should be repointed as מִשְׁפָּטִי with the י suffix being used for the third person. He translated “to save his life from his judge.” But his argument is less than convincing. The Septuagint, properly understood, provides the best clue for the correct interpretation of 109:31, and it should be followed—in preference to the MT—without reservation.

The MT מִשְׁפָּטֵי “from the ones judging” was read by the Septuagint translators as the *Šaph^cēl* participle of the stem שָׁפַט, the cognate of Arabic فيظ (*fîḏ*) and فيض (*fîḏ*) “to die,” as in the expressions فاظت نفسه (*fâḏat nafsuhu*) and فاظت نفسه (*fâḏat nafsuhu*), meaning “his soul departed.”⁸ The מִשְׁפָּטֵי when pointed as מִשְׁפָּטִי and coupled with נַפְשֵׁי becomes a perfect match with the Arabic cognate in form IV, أفاظت نفسه (*ʿafāḏtu nafsahu*) “I made his soul to depart” (Lane 1877: 2472–2474). The initial מִ of the repointed מִשְׁפָּטִי should probably be pointed as מִ, with the מִ doing double duty as (1) the prefix of the causative participle, and (2) the prefixed preposition מִן/מִ “from.”⁹

CONCLUSION

Psalms 109 provides another example of the fact that in Biblical Hebrew things equal to the same thing may not be equal

to each other. The case in point is the תפלה in 109:4 is not the same as the תפלה in 109:7. The latter is תפלה “prayer,” but the former is תפלה “an indecent/obscene (woman).” It is this feminine participle which identifies the psalmist as a woman. The psalmist’s reference to rejected love corroborates this identification. This psalmist has been besmirched by accusers who have labeled her as an indecent, obscene lady, an accusation which could prove to be deadly.”

The woman presents God with a number of request for herself: “Be not silent!” (v. 1), “Deal on my behalf ” (v. 21), “Help me, Save me!” (v. 26), and then ends her psalm with a doxology (vv. 30–31). Seven of the thirty-one verses (vv. 3–5 and 22–25) are biographical, and leading this list is the fact that men have returned hate for her love. Because fourteen of the thirty-one verses are curses invoked against one man, it can be assumed that he was her former mate when she was a concubine or one of his wives. In short, she wanted him dead; but not just him—her imprecations were against his ancestors and his posterity as well. In vv. 20, 28, and 29 the curses are directed at other male accusers, apparently her former mate’s fellow conspirators.

The psalmist confessed to being unloved, poor, needy, depressed, weak, gaunt, and, above all, innocent of the charge of being an indecent lady. Though the psalmist never said so, it is obvious that she was also a learned poet and outspokenly independent. Proof of her innocence and that God answered her prayer—if not her imprecations—comes from the fact that her lament was included in the canonical psalter.

Although the Septuagint translators missed the true meaning of the תפלה in 109:4, they were right on target with their

understanding of the rare idiom **משפטי נשפי** in 109:31. But appreciation for their correct translation of this expression would not have been possible without the contributions of Arabic lexicographers who kept alive the knowledge of the Semitic lexeme **פִּיט**, as well as the Hebrew grammarians who kept alive the knowledge of the ancient *Šaph^cēl* form.

NOTES

1. On the interchange of **ת** and **ט**, note the by-forms **טָעָה** and **תָּעָה** “to go astray,” **טָטַף** and **תָּתַף** “to seize,” and **קָטַל** and **קָתַל** “to kill.”
2. Here the Septuagint reads, ὑμεῖς δὲ ἐστε ἰατροὶ ἄδικοι, “but you are bad physicians,” apparently reading the **טפל** as **תעלי**, which appears in Jer 30:13 **לֹא יִרְפָּא אִין לְךָ תְּעָלָה** (= ἰατρούθης “treated / healed”) and 46:11 **אִין לְךָ תְּעָלָה אִין לְךָ** (= ὠφέλεια) “there is no healing for you.”
3. The Septuagint ἐπλαθύνθη “it has been multiplied” seems to be a paraphrase, for this is the only text in which πλαθύνειν (which translated fourteen different Hebrew words in one hundred fifty different verses) was used to translate **טפל**.
4. For the confusion of the **ב** and the **בֵּ**, see Delitzsch, 1920: 103–105, § 103^{a-c}. See pp. 154–155 for a discussion of the Septuagint’s having the preferred reading and interpretation of Psa 109:31.
5. If the nuances of Hebrew **נָעַר** match those of the Arabic **نَعْر** (*na^cara*), even the psalmist’s cries could be held against her, for the noun **נְעָרָה** (*nā^cirat*) applied to a woman signified “a clamorous and foul, or immodest woman” (Lane 1893: 2815).

6. There was apparently a haplography of the ך in the *Vorlage* of the Septuagint, which must have read כִּי עָמוֹד for the MT כִּי-עָמוֹד.

7. Καταδιώκω appears only here as an odd translation of שָׁפַט. Liddell and Scott (19: 889) noted its use in Mark 1:36. Anderson (1972: 767) opted for the RSV which reads, “For he stands at the right hand of the needy, to save him from those who condemn him to death.”

8. The *Šaph^cēl* form is rare in Hebrew but occurs frequently in Syriac (see *GKC* §55¹) and is the regular causative form in Ugaritic (Gordon, 1965: 83, §9.38, 9.48 and the chart on p. 155). Ordinarily, the Arabic ط (z) became a צ in Hebrew and a ט in Aramaic and Syriac, whereas the ض (d) became a ד in Hebrew and an ט in Aramaic and Syriac. The *Šaph^cēl* form itself, when coupled with the cognate ط (z) becoming a ט, suggests that the psalmist spoke a northern dialect of Hebrew which retained some influence of surrounding dialects.

9. Compare the initial מ of מִרְעָה in I Chron 4:10, found in the Leningrad and Aleppo codices. The *dagesh* doubles the מ, as if מִרְעָה were to be read as מִמְרְעָה, with one מ for the preposition “from” and the second מ being *the first letter of the stem*. See above, pp. 95–97, for a full discussion on this MT מִרְעָה.