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11-17-2021

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Recommended Citation

Vaillancourt, Ian J., "The King's Care for the Poor in the Book of Psalms" (2021). *2021 Evangelical Theological Society*. 7.

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The King's Care for the Poor in the Book of Psalms

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ETS 2021 Presentation, Fort Worth Texas

“In the ANE the gods Shamash and Enlil were regarded as the gods of justice. They appointed kings to act as their representatives in the administration of justice (ANET, 159; 164). Among [the king's] important responsibilities was to act as guardians of justice especially as it related to the poor, the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the oppressed people.”¹

The Shape of the Psalms

Jamie Grant has argued that the pairing of kingship and torah psalms at the beginning and in two other places in the book communicates the macro-theme of “eschatological hope in a monarch who will be the true ‘keeper’ of the torah of Yahweh.”²

Ian J. Vaillancourt's Proposed Narrative Breakdown for the Book of Psalms:³

Books 1 and 2 (Pss 1–72): The Tears of David, as He Reigns in Tension

Book 3 (Pss 73–89): The Exile and Loss of Kingship

Book 4 (Pss 90–106): YHWH Reigns, Even When David Does Not

Book 5 (Pss 107–150): The Return of a New and Better David

¹ Temba L.J. Mafico, “Ethics: Old Testament,” in *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:651. See also W. Dennis Tucker Jr., “The Reign of Yahweh and the Theology of the Poor in the Final Shape of the Psalter” (PhD Diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, 1997) 117, 120. Tucker then ties this to Israel: “The justice system established under the judges, along with the kingship ideologies of neighboring lands, led Israel to develop her own kingship ideology” Tucker, “The Reign of Yahweh and the Theology of the Poor,” 97.

² Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms*, ed. Adele Berlin, vol. 17 of Society of Biblical Literature Academia Biblica Series (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 9.

³ See Ian J. Vaillancourt, (*Working Title*) *Reading the Psalms: Canonically, Christologically, and Corporately* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, Forthcoming, 2023).

The King in the Psalms

Key Words Relating to the King in the Book of Psalms

Key Word	Gloss	Occurrences in the Book of Psalms
מלך root	Associated with ruling/reigning	<p>89x in 83 verses.</p> <p>Pss 2:2, 6, 10; 5:3 [v. 2 Eng.]; 10:16; 18:51 [v. 50 Eng.]; 20:10 [v. 9 Eng.]; 21:2 [v. 1 Eng.]; 21:8 [v. 7 Eng.]; 22:29 [v. 28 Eng.]; 24:7, 8, 9, 10 [2x]; 29:10; 33:16; 34:1 [s/s Eng.]; 44:5 [v. 4 Eng.]; 45:2 [v. 1 Eng.], 6 [v. 5 Eng.], 7 [v. 6 Eng.], 10 [v. 9 Eng.], 12 [v. 11 Eng.], 14 [v. 13 Eng.], 15 [v. 14 Eng.], 16 [v. 15 Eng.]; 46:7 [v. 6 Eng.]; 47:3 [v. 2 Eng.], 7 [v. 6 Eng.], 8 [v. 7 Eng.], 9 [v. 8 Eng.]; 48:3 [v. 2 Eng.], 5 [v. 4 Eng.]; 52:2 [s/s Eng.]; 61:7 [v. 6 Eng.]; 63:12 [v. 11 Eng.]; 68:13 [v. 12 Eng.], 15 [v. 14 Eng.], 25 [v. 24 Eng.], 30 [v. 29 Eng.], 33 [v. 32 Eng.]; 72:1 [2x], 10 [2x], 11; 74:12; 76:13 [v. 12 Eng.]; 79:6; 84:4 [v. 3 Eng.]; 89:19 [v. 18 Eng.], 28 [v. 27 Eng.]; 93:1; 95:3; 96:10; 97:1; 98:6; 99:1, 4; 102:16 [v. 15 Eng.], 23 [v. 22 Eng.]; 103:19; 105:13, 14, 20, 30; 110:4, 5; 119:46; 135:10, 11 [3x]; 136:17, 18, 19, 20; 138:4; 144:10; 145:1, 11, 12, 13 [2x]; 146:10; 148:11; 149:2, 8</p>
רדה root	Associated with dominion or rule ⁴	<p>4x in 4 verses.</p> <p>Pss 49:15 [v. 14 Eng.]; 68:28 [v. 27 Eng.]; 72:8; 110:2</p>
דָּוִד root	A reference to the historical individual, King David	<p>88x in 88 verses.</p> <p>Pss 3:1⁵; 4:1; 5:1; 6:1, 7:1; 8:1; 9:1; 11:1; 12:1; 13:1; 14:1; 15:1; 16:1; 17:1; 18:1, 51 [v. 50 Eng.]; 19:1; 20:1; 21:1; 22:1; 23:1; 24:1; 25:1; 26:1; 27:1; 28:1; 29:1; 30:1; 31:1; 32:1; 34:1; 35:1; 36:1; 37:1; 38:1; 39:1; 40:1; 41:1; 51:1; 52:1, 2 [s/s Eng.]; 53:1; 54:1, 2 [s/s Eng.]; 55:1; 56:1; 57:1; 58:1; 59:1; 60:1; 61:1; 62:1; 63:1; 64:1; 65:1; 68:1; 69:1; 70:1; 72:20; 78:70; 86:1, 4 [v. 3 Eng.], 21 [v. 20 Eng.], 36</p>

⁴ Although Wilson argues that the רדה root does not have to do with the reign of the king in the book of Psalms, I suggest that its use in Psalms 72:8 and 110:2 especially puts it squarely in this category. See Gerald H. Wilson, "King, Messiah, and The Reign of God: Revisiting the Royal Psalms and the Shape of the Psalter," in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, VTSup 99: FIOTL 4, ed. Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 399. Philip J. Nel adds that "In 1 Kgs 4:24 [5:4] it occurs with מָשַׁל and emphasizes the Israelite king's dominance over other kingdoms and enemies of the state (cf. Ps 72:8; 110:2)" Philip J. Nel, "רָדָה," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (ed. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1052.

⁵ The majority of the references to דָּוִד in the Psalms occur in superscriptions, and these are most often marked as verse 1 in Hebrew, but are not part of the versification in English. For the sake of this study, however, if דָּוִד occurs in a superscription, I did not indicate it with [s/s Eng.].

		[v. 35 Eng.], 50 [v. 49 Eng.]; 101:1; 103:1; 108:1; 109:1; 110:1; 122:1, 5; 124:1; 131:1; 132:1, 10, 11, 17; 133:1; 138:1; 139:1; 140:1; 141:1; 142:1; 143:1; 144:1, 10; 145:1
שְׁלֹמֹה	A reference to the historical individual, King Solomon, Son of David	2x in 2 verses. Pss 72:1; 127:1 (both superscriptions)

The Poor in the Psalms

W. Dennis Tucker's Four Primary Words Relating to the Poor in the Book of Psalms⁶

Primary Word	Tucker's Gloss	Occurrences in the Psalms
עֲנִי	Poor	30x in 28 verses. Pss 9:13 [v. 12 Eng.]; 10:2, 9 [2x], 12; 12:6 [v. 5 Eng.]; 14:6; 18:28 [v. 27 Eng.]; 22:25 [v. 24 Eng.]; 25:16; 34:7 [v. 6 Eng.]; 35:10 [2x]; 37:14; 40:18 [v. 17 Eng.]; 68:11 [v. 10 Eng.]; 69:30 [v. 29 Eng.]; 70:6 [v. 5 Eng.]; 72:2, 4, 12; 74:19, 21; 82:3; 86:1; 88:16 [v. 15 Eng.]; 102:1; 109:16, 22; 140:13 [v. 12 Eng.]
עָנָו	Poor	11x in 10 verses. Pss 9:19 [v. 18 Eng.]; 10:17; 22:27 [v. 26 Eng.]; 25:9 [2x]; 34:3 [v. 2 Eng.]; 37:11; 69:33 [v. 32 Eng.]; 76:10 [v. 9 Eng.]; 147:6; 149:4
אֲבִיּוֹן	Needy	23x in 22 verses. Pss 9:19 [v. 18 Eng.]; 12:6 [v. 5 Eng.]; 35:10; 37:14; 40:18 [v. 17 Eng.]; 49:3 [v. 2 Eng.]; 69:34 [v. 33 Eng.]; 70:6 [v. 5 Eng.]; 72:4, 12, 13 [2x]; 74:21; 82:4; 86:1; 107:41; 109:16, 22, 31; 112:9; 113:7; 132:15; 140:13 [v. 12 Eng.]
דָּל	Poor or Weak	5x in 5 verses. Pss 41:2 [v. 1 Eng.]; 72:13; 82:3, 4; 113:7

⁶ See W. Dennis Tucker, "A Polysemiotic Approach to the Poor in the Psalms," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31.4 (2004): 425–426.

W. Dennis Tucker's Six Secondary Words Relating to the Poor in the Book of Psalms⁷

Secondary Word	Tucker's Gloss	Occurrences in the Psalms
דָּבַח	Oppressed	3x in 3 verses. Pss 9:10 [v. 9 Eng.]; 10:18; 74:21
רָשָׁע	Those in want	2x in 2 verses. Pss 34:11 [v. 10 Eng.]; 82:3
עֲשׂוּקִים	Oppressed	6x in 6 verses. Pss 72:4; 103:6; 105:14; 119:121, 122; 146:7
חֵלְכָה	Helpless	3x in 3 verses. Pss 10:8, 10, 14
יָתוּם	Orphan	8x in 8 verses. Pss 10:14, 18; 68:6 [v. 5 Eng.]; 82:3; 94:6; 109:9, 12; 146:9
אַלְמָנָה	Widow	5x in 5 verses. Pss 68:6 [v. 5 Eng.]; 78:64; 94:6; 109:9; 146:9

The King's Care for the Poor in the Book of Psalms

The Big Picture

1) David as the speaker in the psalm talking about YHWH's care for the poor—whether the reference to the poor within the community, or David himself. e.g. Ps 9:13 [v. 12 Eng.], 19 [v. 18 Eng.]:

For he who avenges blood is mindful of them; he does not forget the cry of the afflicted (עָנִי)... For the needy (אֶבְיֹן) shall not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor (עָנִי) shall not perish forever.⁸

2) Psalms that portray YHWH as king, directly caring for the poor, and without mention of a human agent. e.g. Ps 149:2, 4:

Let Israel be glad in his Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King! ... For YHWH takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble (עָנִי) with salvation.⁹

3) King David asking YHWH to care for him in his poverty. e.g. Ps 25:16, 18:

Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted (עָנִי)... Consider my

⁷ See Tucker, "Polysemiotic," 427.

⁸ Other psalms that exhibit the same teaching include Pss 12:5 [v. 4 Eng.]; 14:6; 18:27 [v. 26 Eng.]; 22:24 [v. 23 Eng.], 26 [v. 25 Eng.]; 25:9; 34:6 [v. 5 Eng.], 10 [v. 9 Eng.]; 35:10; 37:11, 14–15; 40:17 [v. 16 Eng.]; 68:5 [v. 4 Eng.], 10 [v. 9 Eng.]; 69:32–33 [vv. 31–32 Eng.]; 103:6.

⁹ Other psalms that exhibit the same teaching include Pss 10:12; 74:12, 19, 21; 149:2, 4.

affliction (יָצַר) and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.¹⁰

Two Focal Psalms

Psalm 41: A Beatitude About the One Who Considers the Poor

1. [s/s Eng.] *For the choir director. A psalm of David.*
2. [v. 1 Eng.] *Blessed is the one who considers the poor; in the day of evil may YHWH deliver¹¹ him.*
3. [v. 2 Eng.] *May YHWH guard him¹² and cause him to live. May he be called blessed in the land. And do not give him over to his enemies.*
4. [v. 3 Eng.] *YHWH supports him¹³ on the couch of illness; all his bed you have turned in his sickness.*
5. [v. 4 Eng.] *I said, “YHWH, be gracious to me; heal my soul because I have sinned against you.”*
6. [v. 5 Eng.] *My enemies speak evil about me, “when will he die, and his name perish?”*
7. [v. 6 Eng.] *And if he comes to see, his heart speaks false (things); he gathers iniquity to himself; he goes outside, he speaks.*
8. [v. 7 Eng.] *All who hate me whisper together against me; against me they plan evil.*
9. [v. 8 Eng.] *A wicked thing is poured out on him; and (the one) who lies down will not again arise.*
10. [v. 9 Eng.] *Also a man of my shalom, in whom I trusted, who ate my food; he will cause a heel to be lifted up against me.*
11. [v. 10 Eng.] *And you, YHWH, be gracious to me, and cause me to rise; that I may pay them back.*
12. [v. 11 Eng.] *By this I know that you delight in me: that my enemy does not shout (in triumph) over me.*
13. [v. 12 Eng.] *And I, in my integrity, you support me; and you cause me to stand before you forever.*
14. [v. 13 Eng.] *Blessed be YHWH, God of Israel, from forever to forever.*

¹⁰ Other psalms that exhibit the same teaching include Pss 69:29 [v. 28 Eng.]; 70:5 [v. 4 Eng.]; 86:1.

¹¹ Although the majority of English translations render the verb as a simple *yiqtol* here, I am following Alter and the NET Bible by translating the brief string as jussive. The NET Bible points out that מְלָטְהוּ “has the form of the pronominal suffix typical of the jussive not the imperfect (מְלָטְהוּ).” W. Hall Harris ed, *The NET Bible Notes* (Garland TX: Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C., 2005), Ps 41, n. 5. See also See Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2007), 145. The question of whether this is a string of jussive or *yiqtol* verbs does have bearing on the interpretation of the psalm: is this a list of promises (*yiqtol*s) or wishes (jussives)?

¹² In line with the NET Bible, “The prefixed verbal forms are taken as jussives in the translation because of the form of the pronominal suffix (-*ehu* rather than -*ennu*) and because the jussive is clearly used in the final line of the verse” Harris ed, *The NET Bible Notes*, Ps 41, n. 7.

¹³ Although the *yiqtol* verb could be translated as a jussive here, I have rendered it as a simple imperfect because of the perfect verb in the second half of the verse. See also Harris ed, *The NET Bible Notes*, Ps 41, n. 11

Psalm 72: A Prayer for the King

1. *Of Solomon. O God, give your justice to the king, and your righteousness to the son of the king.*
2. *May he judge your people with righteousness and your poor with justice!*
3. *May the mountains bear shalom for the people, and the hills righteousness.*
4. *May he judge the poor of the people; may he cause deliverance for the sons of the needy, and crush the ones who oppress.*
5. *May they fear you as long as the sun, and as long as the moon for generation after generation.*
6. *May he come down like the rain over the mowing, like the showers dripping the land!*
7. *May righteousness bud in his days, and an abundance of shalom until the moon is no more!*
8. *May he rule¹⁴ from sea to sea, and from river unto the ends of the earth!*
9. *May the desert-dwellers bow down before him, and let his enemies lick the dust.*
10. *May the kings of Tarshish and the coastlands return an offering; let the kings of Sheba and Seba offer a gift.*
11. *May all kings bow down deeply to him; let all nations serve him.*
12. *Indeed,¹⁵ he delivers the needy who cry for help, and the poor who has no one who helps him.*
13. *He pities over the poor and needy, and he delivers the lives of the needy ones.*
14. *From the midst and from oppression he redeems their life, and their blood is precious in his sight.*
15. *And may he live and may he give to him from the gold of Sheba; and may prayer (be) for him continually, and may he bless him all the day.*
16. *And may there be abundance of grain in the land, on the top of the mountains; and let its fruit wave like Lebanon; and let it flourish from the city like the grass of the land.*
17. *And may his name be forever, and may his name produce offspring before the sun; and may they be blessed in him, may all the nations call him blessed.*
18. *Blessed is YHWH God, God of Israel; who alone does wonders.*
19. *And blessed is his glorious name forever, and may all the earth be filled with his glory. Amen and amen.*
20. *The prayers are complete of David son of Jesse.*

¹⁴ The *wayyiqtol* verb is clearly a jussive in this place, because the III-7 has dropped off and the accent has shifted to the first syllable. This lends support for a jussive rendering for the earlier string of *yiqtol* verbs leading up to this verse. See Duane A. Garrett and Jason S. DeRouchie, *A Modern Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 221. See also, independently, Harris ed, *The NET Bible Notes*, Ps 72, n. 21. Although the NET Bible translates this verb as a jussive, it renders all previous such verbs as *yiqtols*.

¹⁵ “Yes,” or “indeed” as a translation for ַי in this place is supported, for example, in Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* (ed. Baltzer; trans. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 207, 216.