

The War of Words

Psalm 12

1 מְזִמּוֹר לְדָוִד :	1 A Psalm of David.
2 הוֹשִׁיעָה יְהוָה כִּי־גָמַר חֹסֵיד	A Lament with petition: faithful have vanished
כִּי־פָסוּ אֱמוּנֵים מִבְּנֵי אָדָם :	1 Save, I AM , for the faithful have ceased;
3 שָׂא יִדְבְּרוּ אִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ	for the trustworthy have vanished from the sons of Adam .
שִׁפְתַּי חֲלָקוֹת בְּלֵב וּלְבַב יִדְבְּרוּ :	2 Everyone utters lies to his neighbor;
4 יִכְרַת יְהוָה כָּל־שִׁפְתַי חֲלָקוֹת	with flattering lips and a double heart they speak.
לְשׁוֹן מִדְּבַרְתַּי גְּדֹלוֹת :	B Petition that I AM cut of evil words
5 אֲשֶׁר אָמְרוּ לְלִשְׁנֵנוּ נִגְבִּיר	3 May I AM cut off all flattering lips,
שִׁפְתֵינוּ אֲתָנוּ מִי אֲדוֹן לָנוּ :	the tongue that makes great boasts,
6 מִשֹּׁד עֲנִיִּים	4 those who say, “With our tongue we will prevail,
מֵאֲנַקַּת אֲבִיּוֹנִים	our lips are with us; who is master over us?”
עַתָּה אֶקוּם יְהוָה	X Divine Oracle: I AM’s promise intervene
אֲשִׁית בְּיָשׁוּעַ יְפִיתָ לוֹ :	5 “Because the poor are plundered,
7 אֲמַרְוֹת יְהוָה אֲמַרְוֹת טְהוֹרוֹת	because the needy groan,
כֶּסֶף צָרוּף בְּעֻלְלֵי לְאָרֶץ	now I will arise,” says I AM ;
מִזְקָן שִׁבְעַתַּיִם :	“I will place him in the safety for which he longs.”
8 אֲתַהֲיֶהוּ תִשְׁמְרֵם	B’ The faithfulness of I AM’s words
תִּצְרְפוּ מִן־הַדָּוָר זֶה לְעוֹלָם :	6 The words of I AM are pure words,
9 סָבִיב רְשָׁעִים יִתְהַלְכֻן	like silver refined in a furnace on the ground,
כָּרָם זָלוּת לְבְנֵי אָדָם :	purified seven times.
	7 You, I AM , will keep them;
	you will guard us from this generation forever.
	A’ Lament w/o petition
	8 On every side the wicked prowl,
	as vileness is exalted among the sons of Adam .

Structure and Form: The psalm is constructed of 5 strophes, four of which have two couplets, the fifth and final strophe has only one. The center of the poem is an oracle of God speaking in response to David's prayer (vv.3-4); which to my knowledge is unique in the Psalter.

A Lament over of the disappearance of the godly among the *Sons of Adam* (vv. 1-2)

B Plea for God to intervene cut off those who speak wicked words (vv. 3-4)

X Divine Oracle: God is intervening! (unique in the Psalms of lament) (v. 5)

B' The pure, tested, reliable words (10 in Hebrew) of God (vv. 6-7)

A Life seems to go on as usual among the *Sons of Adam* (v. 8)

The Psalm is all about "**the war of words**" and I discovered from Casper Labuschagne's work¹ that Psalm 12, like Psalm 6, is a numerical masterpiece. He writes:

- The psalm has a regular strophic structure: 2 stanzas of equal length, each consisting of 2 strophes, 4 verse lines and **37** words. The number **37** represents the numerical value of the key word **חַסִּיד** (*hasid*), 'loyal-love, faithful' (v. 2a), undoubtedly a keyword of great significance, because it signifies God's loyalty.
- In terms of the words addressed *to* God, the words spoken *about* him and the words spoken *by* him, the psalm exhibits a symmetrical concentric pattern, with **the divine speech** (the meaningful centre!) in **central position**. This is very reminiscent of Psalm 2.

The 74 words of the poem divide into two equal parts of 4 verse lines and **37** words each.

Stanza I (vv. 1-4), about the utter *untrustworthiness* of human beings, *specifically their words*

Stanza II (vv. 5-8), about the complete *trustworthiness* of God, *specifically his words*, i.e. promises

The purpose of this arrangement of the text is obviously to contrast God's reliability and his truthful words with the unreliability of human beings and their untruthful, boastful talk. The psalmist places them, as it were, on a pair of scales to show that God's trustworthiness by far outweighs the utter untrustworthiness of human beings. The feature of being composed of two arithmetically equal halves is shared by no less than eight other psalms – similar to Psalm 6.

¹ Casper Labuschagne, "Numerical Features of the Psalms and Other Selected Texts, A Logotechnical Quantitative Structural Analysis," <http://www.labuschagne.nl/psalms.htm>

The War of Words Reflections

1. The path is steep and treacherous: We've hardly begun our journey in the Psalms and we hear David's lament that the godly have all but vanished. David feels utterly alone in his faith, values and commitments. Such a psalm so early in our journey should protect us from being overly idealistic and prepare us that we may indeed be part of a small silent minority in our journey to Zion, and there may even be times when we look around, and it seems that the godly have vanished. Such was Jesus' plight in Gethsemane. It is good that we hear his voice early in the journey to protect us from thinking faith will be an easy venture. As Jesus remarked to his disciples, the way of the righteous is wrought with suffering and persecution and few find it; and its counterpart, "woe to you when all men speak well of you." Want to be popular? Try another religion.

Whoever hates disguises himself with his lips
and harbors deceit in his heart;
when he speaks graciously, believe him not,
for there are seven abominations in his heart;
though his hatred be covered with deception,
his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly. (Prov 26:24-26)

Jer. 5:1 Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem,
look and take note!
Search her squares to see
if you can find a man,
one who does justice
and seeks truth,
that I may pardon her.

Jer. 5:2 Though they say, "As the Lord lives,"
yet they swear falsely.

Hos. 4:1 Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel,
for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or steadfast love,
and no knowledge of God in the land;

Mic. 7:2 The godly has perished from the earth,
and there is no one upright among mankind;
they all lie in wait for blood,
and each hunts the other with a net.

2. **Those who dwell in darkness will see (“hear”) a great light:** The fact that God’s voice directly intervenes in the darkest of times, as he did in Psalm 2, gives us hope that God is still very much on the throne and we need not despair.
3. **Faith lives within the continual tension, but sees through the tension:** Once the poet is fortified with God’s pure words, he is able to live by faith in a world where all that is vile continues to dominate the headlines and social media, while the wicked arrogantly strut around seemingly undaunted.
4. **The vision stirs us to be faithful to the end:** Faith imbues us with tenacity and persistence to press forward against insurmountable odds to combat evil and injustice, never satisfied with past achievements, but continually pressing forward to take higher ground. Psalm 12 illustrates how God gives us his promise **in the darkest times** that JUSTICE **will** done (“I will place him in the **safety** for which he longs”). It is that voice that stirs us to remain faithful to our life’s work and mission.