

## Prayer and Assurance in the Name of God (54:1-9)

### Bibliography

- Becker, J. *Israel deutet seine Psalmen*. 64-65. Beyerlin, W. *Die Rettung der Bedrängten*. 23-24. Hubbard, R. L., Jr. *Dynamics and Legal Language in Conflict Psalms*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1984. 105-19. Johnson, A. R. *CPIP*. 359-64.

### Translation

- 1-2 For the leader;<sup>a</sup> with instrumental music;<sup>b</sup> a Davidic *maskil*;<sup>c</sup> when the Ziphites went and said to Saul, "Is not<sup>d</sup> David hiding among us?"
- 3(1) O God,<sup>a</sup> save me by your name, (3+3)  
and defend me by your might,
- 4(2) O God, hear my prayer; (3+3)  
give ear to the words of my mouth,
- 5(3) For strangers<sup>a</sup> have risen against me (3+3+3)  
and the ruthless seek my life;<sup>b</sup>  
those who have no regard for God.<sup>c</sup> SELAH.
- 6(4) Give attention,<sup>a</sup> O God, my helper! (3+3)  
O Lord,<sup>b</sup> sustainer of my life.<sup>c</sup>
- 7(5) Let the evil recoil<sup>a</sup> onto my slanderers;<sup>b</sup> (3+3)  
in your true faithfulness<sup>c</sup> silence them.
- 8(6) Freely<sup>a</sup> would I sacrifice to you; (3+4)  
thankfully praise your name, O Yahweh,<sup>b</sup> for it is good.
- 9(7) It<sup>a</sup> delivers me from all distress, (3+3)  
and my eye looks (in triumph)<sup>b</sup> over my foes!

### Notes

1-2.a. See n. 51:1-2.a.

1-2.b. Found with Pss 4, 6, 54, 61 (with עַל־), 67, and 76. Mowinckel (*PIW*, II, 210) notes that בְּנִינְיָהּ always appears after לַמְנַצֵּחַ ("for the leader"), and thus is apparently an instruction for the leader in the recitation of the psalm. The term is usually understood to refer to the music of stringed instruments (see 1 Sam 16:16-18; 18:10; 19:9; 2 Kgs 3:15; Isa 38:20; Ezek 33:32; Ps 68:26; Lam 3:14; 5:14).

1-2.c. See n. 52:1-2.

1-2.d. Dahood is probably correct to argue that the הִלֵּךְ here is equal to הִנֵּה, "behold, look"; also BDB, 520a, etc. However, the meaning would be substantially the same.

3.a. *Elohim* in Pss 42-83 stands for *Yahweh* in most cases.

5.a. Often read זִרְיָם, "insolent men," after 86:14, some Hebrew mss, and Targum. Dahood notes the parallelism of זִרְיָם and עֲרִיצִים ("ruthless/terrible persons") in Isa 25:2, 3, 5; 29:5, according to LXX and 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>. See *Form/Structure/Setting*.

5.b. Lit. "my *nepshesh*," traditionally translated as "my soul." The word נַפְשׁ pertains to that which

breathes and is alive. Its range of meaning is illustrated by the series of words used by BDB to express its basic meaning: "soul, living being, life, self, person, desire, appetite, emotion and passion." Fairly frequently the word means "I" or "me," and it could be translated "me" in 54:5, though "my life" seems better. Unfortunately the fine term "soul" has been severely damaged in theological traditions and has to be used with caution. The "soul" has often been thought to be part of the human person which is immortal and separate from the body and the self. Properly speaking, the "soul" of man is "the concrete human self in all of its relations" (D. Moody, *The Word of Truth* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 487, also 170-87).

5.c. Lit. "they have not set God before them." Dahood notes this rather strange expression and proposes that לִנְגִידִי be read as לִנְגִידֵי "my Leader" (with enclitic *mem*) used of God. His conjecture makes it necessary to translate לֹא שָׂמוּ as "they are not aware," and does not commend itself. Cf. 16:8; 119:30.

6.a. The הִנֵּה is used here to introduce a request (see A. R. Johnson, *CPIP*, 360) with the force of the expression: "Look, so-and-so, do this for me." Johnson translates as "prithce."

6.b. The translation "my Lord" is adopted here, but the meaning "the Lord (of all)" may be correct (see O. Eissfeldt, *TDOT*, I, 59-72).

6.c. It is usual to consider the pl. בְּכַמְכִי ("among/with the supporters of . . .") as intensive expressing the superlative ("the sustainer par excellence") or the class of supporters to which God belongs in the sense of a basic characteristic (not simply as one among others). The הֵן is usually considered as *beth essentialis* (GKC, 119i). It may, however, be emphatic and used simply to strengthen the superlative quality of the plural (Dahood, Johnson, *CPIP*, 360, n. 3).

7.a. Reading with *hethiv* and Targum as שׁוּבֵי or שׁוּבֵי. *Qere*, LXX, and  $\sigma$  read as *hiphil* imperfect שׁוּבֵי. Syriac and Jerome reflect imperative הֲשִׁיבֵהּ "Turn back the evil on my foes." On the other hand, if God is understood as subject, the *qere* is better.

7.b. See n. 56:3.a.

7.c. For אֱמוּנָה, "truth," see 25:5; 51:6. Gunkel proposes בְּחַמְתֶּךָ "in your wrath," but this is unnecessary. Dahood reads "in his fidelity," but the changes proposed are too extensive.

8.a. The בְּנִדְבָהּ is read here as an adverbial accusative, signifying the voluntariness of the action. The alternative is to read, "with a freewill offering . . ." (RSV). The verb is in a nodal imperfect, expressing strong willingness.

8.b. The name "Yahweh" lengthens the line and is sometimes treated as an intrusion which should be omitted for metrical reasons (so Kraus). However, metrical considerations should not be allowed to dominate meaning—regardless of how the word got into the psalm. Whether from the original poet or a later redactor or scribe, the presence of the name Yahweh serves to emphasize the Name theology in the psalm. It makes unmistakable the identity of the God addressed in vv 3 and 4.

9.a. The subject of the verb may be either Yahweh or his name (cf. v 6).

9.b. Lit. "and my eye looked at my enemies," but the nuance is that of rejoicing or gloating over the defeat of foes (see Johnson, *CPIP*, 190, n. 5). I take the כִּי in 9a as emphatic, which also applies to 9b.

### Form/Structure/Setting

Ps 54 belongs to the general category of the individual laments, though vv 8-9 could suggest a thanksgiving of a persecuted person who praises the name of God and is prepared to offer sacrifice. However, it seems best to treat v 9 as expressing a change of mood like that found in several psalms of lament (see Pss 3:7; 6:9; 10:16-18; 13:5-6; 22:22-23; 28:6-7; 56:11-14; see C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 79-81). Whether these transitions were the result of some cultic act external to the worshiper, such as a word from a priest, or whether the psalms were designed to bring the one praying them to a point of faith and confidence is uncertain (see Craigie's discussion of Ps 6:9-11). Westermann (80-81) points out that the "heard petition" is a major component of the psalms of individual lament. Such laments move into thanksgiving (Westermann's "declarative praise")

and no longer represent mere petition. It is also possible to understand v 9 as expressing certainty of victory in the future, in which case the worshiper anticipates deliverance. V 8 strengthens the petition in vv 6-7 and is really not a thanksgiving for help already received. Mowinckel (*PTW*, I, 219-20) places this psalm in a group which he calls "protective psalms," because they express prayer to Yahweh for protection against imminent danger. Mowinckel argues that such psalms have more confidence and assurance of getting help than do the psalms of lamentation. Kraus places Ps 54 in the broad category of "prayer songs," under the Hebrew תפלה (I, 49-54; *Psalms 1-59*, 47-56), but with petition and complaint predominating.

The situation reflected in the psalm is that of a worshiper who is under strong attack from ruthless opponents (v 5). The "strangers" of v 5 suggests the possibility of a prayer of a king for deliverance from foreign foes (e.g., Dahood). This could be the case and the psalm be treated as a king's prayer (see Johnson, *CPIP*, 359-364). However, it is not certain that "strangers" refers to foreign enemies (see below). Kraus is among those who think the psalm is appropriate for a persecuted worshiper, probably a poor person who has fled to the temple area for refuge and awaits God's judgment with confidence (also Beyerlin, *Die Rettung der Bedrängten*, 23; Hubbard, *Dynamics*, 107-8). Hubbard stresses the legal language in the psalm, used, however, in the context of a dynamic process dependent on Yahweh. Mowinckel (I, 217) suggests that the "I" in such psalms as this is an individual speaking for the congregation. J. Becker (*Israels deutet seine Psalmen*, 34-65) argues that Ps 54 belongs to a group of psalms that were originally individual laments but were reworked and given a new interpretation in the post-exilic period as psalms of the community. The "I" of the individual lament has become "Israel." He contends that the following psalms show signs of such reinterpretation: 9, 10, 22, 40, 45, 54, 56, 59, 66, 68, 69, 85, 93, 102, 107, 108, and 118 (see also his *Wege der Psalmen exegese* [Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1975]). In the case of Ps 54, Becker argues that the major clue is the *zarim* (זרים, "strangers/foreigners") of v 5, which he thinks would be more appropriate as *zedim* (זדים, "insolent/arrogant persons") with the verb "rise up against me" (see note 5.a.). According to Becker, the change was deliberate, and not a matter of textual corruption. He considers especially instructive the use of first person in Isa 25:1-5 and Ps 44:5, 7 (Becker, 23). An alternative explanation for the change to a first person speaker is that the compositions in question assume an alternation of speakers (see Craigie, *Form/Structure/Setting* on Ps 44). However, this would negate the possibility of a change of meaning in the present form from an earlier form. A major flaw in Becker's thesis is the probability that the "I" in the laments always represented the community or group to one degree or another. It is unlikely that the speakers in very many psalms voice purely personal concerns.

Any attempt to date a psalm like this is probably a futile effort. Some commentators argue for rather late post-exilic dating (e.g. Oesterley, Buttenwieser). With more reason, Kraus suggests that the "theology of the name" in the psalm points to a post-Deuteronomic dating. A more precise suggestion is probably not wise.

The structure of the psalm is not complicated. A superscription with a historical note is found in vv 1-2. Vv 3-4 contain a prayer for help. V 5 is a description of the speaker's troubles. A prayer for the judgment of the suppliant's foes appears

in vv 6-7. A vow to offer sacrifice (v 8) and a statement of assurance (v 9) conclude the poem.

### Comment

*Superscription* (54:1-2). The historical note in v 2 relates the psalm to an incident in the career of David, apparently to 1 Sam 23:19. The association of the psalm with this incident probably arose from a wordplay between v 3 ("and ruthless ones seek my life") and 1 Sam 23:15 ("And David was afraid because Saul had come out to seek his life"). The Ziphites lived in a hill town southeast of Hebron (see also 1 Sam 26:1).

*Prayer for help* (54:3-4). The prayer uses the vocative form in addressing God, which is characteristic of the laments. The distinctive element here is the prayer for deliverance by the name of Yahweh. The prayer presupposes a theology of the Name, which is an expression of the presence of God (for discussion see G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, tr. D. M. G. Stalker [New York: Harper, 1962], I, 179-87; T. N. D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies*, trans. F. H. Cryer, ConB, Old Testament Series 18 [Lund: Gleerup, 1982], 38-79). The Name carried something of the essential nature and power of God. To invoke his name was to invoke his presence. The Name theology is especially evident in the Deuteronomic writings. The Israelites were to worship at the place chosen by Yahweh where he would "put his name" (see Deut 12:5, 11, 21, passim; also Exod 20:24). The use of the Name to protect both the transcendence and presence of Yahweh is especially present in the Solomonic address to the people and prayer at the dedication of the temple (1 Kgs 8:1-66). Yahweh is repeatedly affirmed to be in heaven, but his powerful presence is invoked because his name is in the temple (see R. E. Clements, *God and Temple* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965], 90-99; for an overview of "name" in the Psalter, see H.-J. Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, trans. K. Crim [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979/86], 17-31).

The verb "save" (שׁוּב) carries the idea of "help/deliver/rescue," probably going back to a root idea of "to be wide/broad," and thus in the causative form it conveys the idea of "to make room" or "to free from constricting circumstances." Either God or man can be the subject of the verb (e.g., in 2 Kgs 16:7 Ahaz asks the king of Assyria to "save" him). The divine ability to save, of course, greatly exceeds that of human power. Weiser (415) remarks that "the worshiper confides in the superior power of God at a time when he [*sic*] has nothing to expect from the power of man." The suppliant wants God to hear the prayer and respond to it. The exact nature of the divine response desired is not specified, but in the context it seems likely that victory over the threats of enemies is the main point (v 9).

The second line of v 3 uses the verb יָגֹד ("defend/judge"), which carries ideas associated with legal settings. However, it also occurs in contexts dealing with victory in battle (see Gen 49:16-17; Ps 110:6). Claus Westermann (*Elements of Old Testament Theology*, tr. D. W. Stott [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978/82], 36-40) has surveyed the meaning of God's saving action in the OT and comes to the conclusion that "God's saving has comprehensive significance" (40) and stresses that,

while there are major differentiations between God's saving in the OT and his saving in the NT, "God is the savior both in the Old and in the New Testament" (40). The comprehensive and indispensable saving works of God are of central significance in both Testaments.

*Description of trouble* (54:5). The "strangers" of the MT may denote foreigners and suggest the interpretation of the psalm as a prayer by a king. But Becker's argument (see above) that the psalm is the prayer of an Israelite in the post-exilic period speaking as the embodiment of Israel about the "strangers" or foreign people who threaten the nation should not be overlooked. If the word is used metaphorically, the reference is to those members of the suppliant's own community who are not true members of the Yahweh-community (Weiser). They are ruthless persons: "who have no regard for Yahweh." If this is the case, they have made themselves outsiders by their behavior. V 5c is a key statement in the psalm: "those who have no regard for God." Yahweh does not have his proper place with these people. They arrogantly seek to ignore the will of the God who matters.

*Prayer for judgment* (54:6-7). V 6 is used to enhance the forcefulness of the request in v 7. Since Yahweh is the suppliant's helper and sustainer, let him allow the evil designed for the suppliant to recoil on the enemies. In so doing, Yahweh will demonstrate his faithfulness (or "truth") to those who depend upon him. Kraus notes that v 7 touches on the problematic subject of the act-consequence relationship, i.e., the extent to which an act, good or evil, activates power inherent in the deed itself which sooner or later returns the appropriate consequence onto the doer (for discussion see G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972], 128-37; *Old Testament Theology*, tr. D. M. G. Stalker [New York: Harper, 1962], 384-86; Pss 57:7; 141:10.) The discussion in this area owes much to the provocative article of K. Koch, "Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma in Alten Testament?"; ET in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, ed. J. L. Crenshaw [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983], 57-87. The *kethiv* reading adopted in the *Translation* (see note 7.a.) reflects more of a built-in-consequence approach than does the reading in the margin, which is a causative and assumes that God is the subject of the verb: "Turn back the evil on my foes." However, the second colon makes it clear that the action requested is not exclusively inherent in the evil itself; the speaker does not ask for the automatic function of a system. God is asked to silence the foes; both the permissive will and the active will of God are involved.

*Vow and statement of assurance* (54:8-9). The suppliant anticipates the time when a sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise to the Name of Yahweh will be willingly made. The reference to a sacrifice freely or willingly made turns away from any sense of a legal requirement or of any kind of magical use of sacrifice (see Exod 46:12; Ezra 3:5; 2 Chr 31:14). The verb (יָדָה) conveys the idea of expressing the praise of Yahweh's name in the form of thanksgiving. The speaker looks forward to a joyful thanksgiving sacrifice and for an occasion to affirm the goodness of Yahweh's name (for the thank-offering ceremony see Pss 22:25-26; 40:6-10; 50:14; 61:9; 116:12-19). The psalm concludes with a strong statement of deliverance and victory (v 9), which to some degree, at least, is already happening. The speaker anticipates as already having occurred a triumphal looking at the discomfiture of the enemies (cf. Pss 58:11; 59:11; 92:12).

### Explanation

The major stress in the psalm is clearly on the powerful and effective Name of Yahweh. Yahweh may seem absent from the world, but those who invoke his Name with faith and courage will discover the reality of his awesome presence. Those who forget his Name and seek to disregard his will may experience the terrible recoil of their own wickedness, a recoil which is sustained by divine power. The message of the psalm is clear enough: the Name of Yahweh will not fail the suppliant in a time of crisis. The enemies will not prevail. Yahweh will make a necessary connection between act and consequence, and the power of ruthless foes will be turned back against themselves.

Weiser (416-17) finds the psalm severely marred by the worshiper's unwillingness to give himself up to God and to be willing to accept and patiently endure suffering. He complains about "human self-will and man's low instincts of vindictiveness and gloating" in the psalm and concludes that the prayer is "unable to exercise a liberating influence; for it does not lead on to the uttermost depths of ultimate truth." Weiser is correct to say that the prayer is subject to the judgment of Christ, as indeed the entire OT is, but he surely asks too much from these brief verses out of the traditions of ancient Israel. It is enough to let them bear their message of the powerful name of Yahweh and their defiance of those human beings who disregard God and seem so often to do so well. In a world which sometimes seems to be one big lie, this psalm declares that the "truth" (v 7) of God will triumph (v 9). We know that there is more to be said beyond this psalm, but let it say what it has to say without too quickly bringing it under the perspective of the Cross. There is a time for judgment, and there is a time for forgiveness.

## The Complaint of a Citizen of a Vile City Betrayed by a Friend (55:1-24)

### Bibliography

Dahood, M. "A Sea of Troubles: Notes on Psalms 55:3-4 and 140:10-11." *CBQ* 41 (1979) 604-7. ———. "Philological Observations on Five Bib Texts." *Bib* 63 (1982) 390-94.

### Translation

<sup>1</sup> For the leader;<sup>a</sup> with instrumental music;<sup>b</sup> a Davidic *maskil*.<sup>c</sup>

<sup>2</sup>(1) Give ear, O God, to my prayer,  
and do not ignore<sup>a</sup> my plea for favor.