

Psalm 42:6–8 and the Problem of Emendation

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When he chose to move the first word of Psalm 42:7 to become the last word in 42:6, Mitchell Dahood made an interesting statement. He said: “This looks like proof positive that some biblical texts were written without word dividers and that word division posed a not insignificant problem” (*Psalms I: 1–50*, The Anchor Bible 16 [Doubleday, 1983], p. 258). Dahood was referring to reading *pānāy* for MT *pānāyw* and attaching the final *waw* to the next word as the conjunction. He argued that this reading “is imposed by vs. 12 and Ps xliii 5, *yəšū‘ōt pānay wəlōhāy.*”

The reading advocated by Dahood is widely accepted in the world of biblical translation and interpretation, and is followed by NIV, RSV, NRSV, and many others. The question is not if there was a problem in word division in some biblical manuscripts. The problem is how to explain the curious division in the Masoretic tradition in Codex L, in light of this fact. The *Tanakh* [The Holy Scriptures: *The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (1988)] follows the Hebrew text, as written:

Why so downcast, my soul,
why disquieted within me?
Have hope in God;
I will yet praise Him
for His saving presence.
O my God, my soul is downcast;
therefore I think of You
in this land of Jordan and Hermon,
in Mount Mizar,
where deep calls to deep
in the roar of Your cataracts;
all Your breakers and billows have swept over me.

As the oldest complete manuscript of the Tanakh, Codex L represents the tradition of the Ben Asher family of Masoretes in Tiberias. If the biblical text was preserved as carefully as some claim, how does one explain the textual corruption in question? It's a simple change. That is true. But the principle of *lectio difficilior* suggests that perhaps we should go with the reading that is more difficult to explain in terms of common scribal

errors or deliberate correction, as being the more likely candidate to be in fact the original text. It is easier to explain the change in some manuscripts, so as to conform with what appears later in this same text, than it is to explain the apparent textual corruption in Codex L, unless, of course, it is the original text. The mere fact that a similar expression is picked up at the conclusion of the repeated refrain in 42:12 and again in 43:5, however, says nothing. Poets take delight in playing with words and the change in this instance adds a delightful touch of artful design.

Two new methodological approaches speak to the issue at hand, namely **prosodic and numerical analysis**. A third approach has something to say on the matter as well, though I lack the expertise to bring this particular reading to the table at this point in time—namely, the actual performance of the text as a musical composition. In the fullest sense, music is an art of sound in time, which expresses ideas and emotions in significant forms through the elements of rhythm, melody, harmony, and color. The fact that we are dealing here with a “psalm” tells us that music is appropriate as a focus of our attention as we explore the ideas and emotions conveyed in the Hebrew text. Moreover, we have a great deal of information about the rhythmic structure and the “musical” phrasing of the poem, which is conveyed in the *te‘amim* (the so-called accentual system of Masoretic tradition). We also know that the primary principle of composition is that of word-count in terms of significant symbolic numbers, which convey theological intent. We are thus in a position to say something new on an old problem.

This paper assumes the detailed prosodic numerical analysis of Psalm 42, which is posted on our website (www.bibal.net). That report presents the text within its larger literary context in Psalms 42–43. This brief paper attempts to show that it is best to leave this text intact, with no emendation whatsoever from what is preserved in Codex L (Leningrad)—including the details of the accentual system, as published in BHS. The text makes perfect sense as it stands, and the proposed change destroys the artful intent of the original composition. The detailed prosodic (or psalmodic) analysis on which this paper is based is available at www.bibal.net. The reader is urged to download the appropriate files for Psalm 42 and Psalm 43 under the Psalms Project.

In the first place, we are dealing here with the structural center of Psalm 42, which is the focus of interest of that psalm as a whole. In the *Concentric Compositional Formula* of Psalm 42, we find six words of Ps 42:7–8 highlighting the content of the psalm. We translate these words as follows: “From Mount Mizar, deep calls to deep.” There are 63 words on either side of this 6-word “center within the center,” which functions as a pivot joining the two halves of this numerical composition. When these words are added to each half we have a total of **69** (= **23** x 3) words in each segment. The numbers **23** and **32** are associated with the Hebrew word *kabod* (“glory”), and the intricate arithmological form of this text is an exercise in worship, done to the glory of YHWH.

In terms of accentual stress units, Psalm 42:6–8 scans: (4.5).(5.4). These numbers refer to the distribution of what are normally called disjunctive accents in the system of scribal notation called the *te ‘amim*. For a description of this system, see www.bibal.net. The total word-count of a given psalm is carefully calculated so that everything comes to a focus within the structural center of each psalm. It is here that the author/composer slows down to build the text word by word. The musical phrasing, which tends to reflect the principle of “parallelism,” on various levels, is reflected in discernible patterns in terms of both mora-count and the distribution of accentual stress units. The first measurement focuses on the length of each line in relation to its position within larger groupings of that line. The second measurement focuses on rhythmic features in the musical phrasing of the text. The two measurements inform each other. At the same time, the composition is governed by strict rules in terms of word-count. The situation is somewhat parallel to that of haiku (with the counting of *onji*, the Japanese equivalent of *morae*), and certain forms of structured verse (like the 14-line sonnet composed in iambic pentameter). The system of word-count functions as a control, a base from which to interpret the more ambiguous information about rhythmic features and musical phrasing.

Psalm 42:6–8 opens with what appears to be a tricolon with a pivot, in which the mora-count is 10+9+12. The clause, “and why are you disquieted within me,” completes one idea [in synonymous parallelism] and starts another, which carries the thought further—“hope in God.” At this point, the word-count suggests that the composer is carrying the reader/hearer back to verse 3 (for 42:3-6a has **46** [= **23** x 2] words), which

marks the beginning of the lament: “My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day, ‘Where is your God?’”

We now move to a short balanced bicolon, in which the mora-count is 9+9, which we have translated, “For I will again praise him, for the salvation that comes from *his presence*.” Adding another word here, as suggested by Dahood (and others), destroys the balance in mora-count. It also removes the reminder from the word-count analysis that once again we are continuing the thought introduced in 42:3 [namely, 42:3–6 has **51** (= **17x3**) words] and for the psalm as a whole (including its heading; for 42:1–6 has **51** words before *atnach*). At this point, we find a triple significant number in terms of total word-count in 42:1–6 of **65** = **51** + **14**. The number **65** (= **13x5**) is associated with the “YHWH-echad formula”; for, indeed, it is “*his presence*” that is marked literally within this text, at this particular point, by this calculation. The number **14** is of lesser importance and may be understood as a reference to the numerical value of the name David, who is associated strongly with this so-called “Psalm of the Sons of Korah” from ancient times. As Labuschagne has pointed out (see www.bibal.net), in some Hebrew manuscripts we find the title לְדָוִד, “belonging to David,” as the heading to Psalm 42, while in the LXX the heading is a “Psalm of David.”

The next line reads, “O my God, my soul is downcast” (42:7a). The mora-count of this line is 15, which produces balanced symmetry for 42:6–7a:

$$(10 + 9 + 23) + (9 + 9 + 15) = 42 + 43 \text{ morae}$$

Moving the word in question from the beginning of 42:7 to the end of 42:6 would have no effect on this particular observation, so far as total mora-count is concerned. At this point, once again, the pattern in word-count reaches a significant juncture with a total of **69** (= **23x3**) words.

As we move into the “center within the center” of Psalm 42 in the 42:7b–8a, we are reminded once again of the close ties between the content here and what began in 42:3 (for 42:3–7 has **51** words before *atnach*) and at the beginning of the psalm itself (without its musical prelude; for 42:2–7 has **17** words after *atnach*). The composer has carefully contrived the total word-count after *atnach* to reach the number **17** at the end of verse 7.

At the conclusion of the 6-word “center within the center” in 42:8a, we find **64** (= **32x2**) words before *atnach*, and the number **32** is the second of the two *kabod* numbers. And here the number **17** remains in the other column, for we have not yet reached another *atnach*. In short, this intricate exercise in numerical composition is done to the glory of YHWH.

In terms of the distribution of accentual stress units in 42:6–8, we now find the pattern complete—with a scansion of (4.5).(5.4) at the center of Psalm 42. Though this pattern itself is not disturbed by moving the first word of 42:7 to place it at the end of 42:6, it is no longer possible to correlate the balance in mora-count with the distribution of accentual stress units to support this reading.

In the list of divine name numbers and the *kabod* numbers listed by Labuschagne (see Observation 4 in his posted report), two numbers would be removed by rejecting the emendation in question: **52** (= **26x2**) words in 42:3–6 and **46** (= **23x2**) words before *atnach* in 42:7–11. The loss of the first number is simply replaced by another with **51** (= **17x3**) words in 42:3–6. The loss of the other number Labuschagne cites is replaced by **23** words in 42:7–8. Moreover, the unit of thought in 42:7–8 represents a prosodic unit in the psalm, whereas 42:7–11 does not.

Since the evidence from word-count patterns alone, at least on a superficial level, appears to be equally weighted on either side, we must turn to prosodic analysis and the musical reading of the text to resolve the matter in question. In both of these respects, the evidence favors leaving the text as received in Codex L without emendation.