

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

“SEND FORTH THY LIGHT AND THY TRUTH”:

A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF PSALMS 42—43

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO DR. JOHN D. CURRID IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF REQUIREMENTS FOR JUDGES THROUGH POETS (OOT514)

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## OUTLINE

- I. The literary context of Psalms 42 and 43 provides a bearing for interpretation.
  - A. Psalms 42 and 43 open Book 2 of the Psalter.
  - B. Psalms 42 and 43 are in the form of a lament.
  - C. Psalms 42 and 43 are inscribed, "...of the sons of Korah."
  - D. What is a Maskil?
  - E. How does the inscription help us see that Psalms 42 and 43 were originally one Psalm?
- II. The strophic structure of Psalms 42 and 43 organizes the Psalm into three strophes divided by a refrain.
  - A. Various parallel structures organize the lines within each strophe.
  - B. 42:1 [2] is an example of complete synonymous parallelism.
  - C. 42:2 [3] is an example of incomplete synonymous parallelism.
  - D. 42:5-6a [6-7a] may contain a parallel in the first two cola.
- III. The figures of speech heighten the communicative force of individual phrases.
  - A. What are some examples of simile?
  - B. What are some examples of metaphor?
  - C. Does the Psalmist use synecdoche?
  - D. Are there any anthropomorphisms in these Psalms?
- IV. A concise interpretation should follow the Psalm's movement from plea to praise with appreciation for the eschatological hope of God's light and truth.
  - A. The opening tension is resolved by God sending his "light" and "truth."
  - B. The following Psalms in Book 2 provide a proximate fulfillment of God's sending light and truth.
  - C. The Gospel—God sending Jesus Christ as the Light of the Word and as the Truth-

Word from heaven—is the ultimate fulfillment of God’s sending light and truth.

## INTRODUCTION

Although divided by a chapter division in our English translations, Psalms 42 and 43 should be read as single song, a powerful lament by which Israel's covenant LORD is called upon to send forth his light and truth (43:3). Before digging into the details of Psalms 42 and 43, however, we first need to step back and look broadly at the Psalter's literary context. Like studying the trail map in order to orient ourselves before a day's trek, so pausing to take in the literary context within which these two Psalms are situated will facilitate a fruitful exegesis which views the details in the light of the landscape of the Psalter whole. What do we find, then, when we open the Psalter to Psalm 42? We find the title, "Book 2."

## LITERARY CONTEXT

Patterned after the five books of the Torah, the Psalter is arranged into five books.<sup>1</sup> The fivefold arrangement serves the overarching purpose of the Psalter—to give "instruction" [תּוֹרָה]<sup>2</sup>—by providing a sequential thematic development which begins in humiliation/lamentation and proceeds to exaltation/praise.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, looking at Psalms 42 and 43 from the perspective of the entire Psalter allows us to situate our reading of these Book 2 texts within the humiliation portion of the Psalter's overarching humiliation-to-exaltation pattern.<sup>4</sup>

Moving on from the Psalter as a whole to glance more closely at the five books within the Psalter, the next contextual clue we find is that Psalm 42 is the first Psalm in Book 2 of the Psalter. This observation is helpful because each of the books carries a certain thematic

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1 Futato, 62-63.

2 Futato, 63, citing C. John Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 469.

3 "Claus Westermann was the first scholar to draw attention to this movement in the macro-structure of the book of Psalms, a movement from lamentation to praise, from suffering to glory" (Futato, 80).

4 However, lest we claim too much (as if the Psalter has a clear cut macro-structure at every point throughout), we should note that "...the book of Psalms as whole has no obvious overarching structure..." (Tremper Longman, III, "Psalms," at 249 in Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman, III, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1993).

emphasis. For example, Books 1–3 focus on the “rise and demise of the Davidic monarchy,” while Books 4–5 “provide insight into how to respond to the apparent failure of the promises made to David and his descendants.”<sup>5</sup> Knowing a bit about the themes of the books, then, we can now make more specific observations about Book 2, namely, that its conclusion (Psalm 72) reveals a “transition from David to Solomon,” making Solomon “the new ‘David,’” so to speak.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, we can set our reading of Psalms 42 and 43 in the following contexts: (a) Book 1 has just concluded in a glimmer of hope for the fulfillment of the Davidic promises in spite of foreboding impositions;<sup>7</sup> (b) Book 2 now picks up and develops this same theme before concluding with a transition to Solomon as “the new ‘David’” in whom the Davidic promises will be fulfilled.

Two further literary features provide bearing for our reading of Psalms 42 and 43, namely, the texts’ genre and the inscription. First, that these Psalms are in the genre of a lament<sup>8</sup> is evident from the opening address (“O God,” 42:1 ESV<sup>9</sup>); the complaints (i.e., 42:2-3, 9-10<sup>10</sup>); the requests (i.e., 43:1, 3<sup>11</sup>); and the concluding shift from plea to praise, which culminates in a promise (“Then I will go...,” 43:4 ESV).

Second, Psalm 42 begins with an inscription: לְמִנְצֵחַ מִשְׁכִּיל לְבְנֵי-קֹרַח : What is a Maskil?<sup>12</sup> Who are the sons of Korah?<sup>13</sup> And, does this inscription provide any guidance in our

5 Futato, 81.

6 Futato, 82-83.

7 “In spite of struggles along the way, the final psalm in Book 1—Psalm 41—indicates that the promises to David are in the process of being fulfilled” (Futato, 81).

8 This genre analysis is based on Futato’s explication of the lament category (Futato, 150-158), wherein the distinguishing overall feature is a “movement from plea to praise” (151). Within this overall movement, “[l]aments typically answer three questions in the plea section: ‘Who?’ ‘Why?’ and ‘What?’”

9 This is the “Who?” of Futato’s lament category analysis, 151-152.

10 This is the “Why?” of Futato’s lament category analysis, 152-154.

11 This is the “What?” of Futato’s lament category analysis, 155-158.

12 Beyond noting that a Maskil “designates a type of psalm” we cannot go; for, “its meaning is uncertain” (Geoffrey William Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume Three: K-P*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1979) at “Maskil,” 276).

13 Groups such as the “sons of Korah” are “aggregates of persons interested in sacred song and music—a guild, society, succession, or group—arising out of the movement that originated in David’s time” (Bromiley, at “Korahites; Sons of Korah,”

interpretation of Psalms 42 and 43? Keeping our goal in view—interpreting these two Psalms within their own literary context—it will be helpful to note that the “sons of Korah” are mentioned in the inscriptions of two groups of Psalms, the first group within Book 2 and the second in Book 3.<sup>14</sup> Broadly speaking, then, knowing that the first seven Psalms of Book 2 share a common inscription allows us to read these Psalms together as sort of literary group; or, the common inscription at least allows us to expect common themes and shared language among this opening set of Psalms in Book 2. Our interpretative expectations, therefore, will be greatly influenced by knowing that Psalms 42 and 43 are (a) expressed in a lament form and (b) set within a collection of sorts, a series of seven Psalms at the opening of Book 2.

Now that we have surveyed the literary lay of the Psalter’s land and gained our broad bearings on how to read Psalm 42 and 43 within the Psalter’s overall themes, we turn next view the two Psalms themselves. We will look at these Psalms’ strophic structure, parallelism, and figures of speech, seeking at each point to gain sure footing for our concluding concise interpretation.

### STROPHIC STRUCTURE

The most obvious structural feature of Psalm 42 and 43 is the common refrain found in verses 42:5 [6]; 42:11 [12]; and 43:5. The refrain is not found anywhere else in Scripture, and the fact noted earlier that Psalm 43 is the only Psalm in the first eight Psalms of Book 2 which lacks the “of the sons of Korah” inscription suggests that these two Psalms are better read as one, unified original.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the lament pattern of plea to praise would be interrupted if the

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14 The two groups include (a) Psalm 42:1; 44:1; 45:1; 46:1; 47:1; 48:1; 49:1; and (b) Psalm 84:1; 85:1; 87:1; 88:1. Note how Psalm 43 is the only Psalm in the first 8 Psalm of Book 2 that does not have an inscription. I think this is further evidence that Psalm 43 really belongs together with 42.

15 Of course, the chapter divisions in the Bible are not inspired and authoritative, but were added later. Dr. Currid in his class lectures suggests that the chapter division between these two Psalms is unfortunate. Calvin, in the introduction to his commentary on Psalm 43, argues that these two Psalms were originally one (John Calvin, James MacLean, George MacCrie, and James Anderson. *Commentary on the Book of Psalms: Volume Second*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003, at 144). Matthew Henry agrees: “This psalm, it is likely, was penned upon the same occasion with the former, and, having no title, may be looked upon as an appendix to it...” (*Commentary on the Whole Bible: Volume III (Job to Song of Solomon)*

two Psalms are not read together; for, the praise does not answer the pleas until 43:4. Reading the two Psalms as one, then, yields a single Psalm with three stanzas each ending with a common refrain.<sup>16</sup>

### PARALLELISM

The author's use of parallelism becomes apparent as we take a closer look at the cola of the three strophes. While we won't be able to work through every line of both Psalms, we can focus on a few displays of parallelism. For example, the cola comprising the first line, 42:1 [2], are arranged in a complete synonymous parallelism since they are parallel in **subject**, **verb**, and **object**.<sup>17</sup> Further, this line uses a parallel "A B C || A' B' C'" pattern:<sup>18</sup>

כָּאֵל תַּעֲרַג עַל־אֲפִיקֵי־מַיִם  
בֵּן נַפְשֵׁי תַעֲרַג אֶל־יְהוָה:

The following line, 42:2 [3], can be read as a tricola which incorporates (a) an incomplete synonymous parallelism<sup>19</sup> and a chiasmic structural pattern in the first two cola and (b) a shift from indicative to interrogative as the line climaxes in the third colon:

צְמֹאֵה נַפְשִׁי לֵאלֹהִים  
לֵאלֹהֵי חַי [נַפְשִׁי צְמֹאֵה]  
מִתִּי אָבוֹא וְאֶרְאֶה פָּנֵי אֱלֹהִים:

The next line, 42:3 [4], shows signs of a parallel structure (i.e., both cola have six words; both cola begin with a verb followed by a preposition with a possessive singular suffix); however,

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.xliv.html> accessed 3 November 2008).

16 "Because of their shared vocabulary, themes, and refrain, Psalms 42-43 are a unit" (J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," at 852, in Robert Doran, Adele Berlin, Carol A. Newsom, and J. Clinton, Jr. McCann. *The New Interpreter's Bible. The First Book of Maccabees, the Second Book of Maccabees, Introduction to Hebrew Poetry, the Book of Job, the Book of Psalms, Volume IV* (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon, 1996)). McCann further observes, "The poem may be divided into three sections, each concluding with the refrain. . . . The first two sections are primarily complaint. The final section is primarily petition, giving the whole the character of a prayer for help" (*ibid.*).

17 Dr. Currid referred to this type of parallelism in his class notes.

18 See Futato, 51, for a simple explication of an "A B C || A' B' C'" parallel pattern.

19 This term, which means that the verb is assumed in the second colon, is also from Dr. Currid's lecture. In the example citation, the text [in brackets] is the assumed verb.

the units of each cola seem to resist arrangement into a parallel structure: A B C D E || C' A' B' E' D'.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, it may be better to read these cola as a linear structure,<sup>21</sup> rather than a parallel structure:

הִיָּתָה־לִּי דְמַעְתִּי לֶחֶם יוֹמָם וָלַיְלָה  
בְּאֵמַר אֵלַי כָּל־הַיּוֹם אַיְהָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

The next line, 42:4 [5], also appears to be a linear, rather than a parallel, structure. So, we'll skip this line and move on to 42:5-6a [6-7a], which is the concluding refrain for the first strophe. If the interrogative, *מה*, is assumed at the beginning of the second colon, then it is possible to read the refrain as a quatrain. In this arrangement the first two cola are incomplete synonymous parallelism, and the remaining two cola are sequential. Furthermore, if the refrain is indeed a quatrain, then the shift in grammatical moods is significant: the first two cola are interrogative, perhaps emphasizing the painfulness of the longing; the third colon is an imperative; and the fourth is in the indicative mood and provides supporting arguments for why the preceding imperative ought to be obeyed:<sup>22</sup>

מַה־תִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לִּי נַפְשִׁי  
וּתְהַמְּוֶה לִּי  
הוֹתִילִי לְאֱלֹהִים  
כִּי־עוֹד אוֹרְנוּ וְשׁוֹעוֹת פְּנֵינוּ: אֱלֹהֵי

These selections from the first strophe of the Psalm show just some of the ways the author incorporates parallel structures to arrange the lines of the song. My exegesis of these structures is admittedly preliminary due to my limited knowledge of biblical Hebrew. So, further exegetical study in the poetic structures of these Psalms needs to be done to verify my arrangements and to look into further parallel structures within the two remaining strophes.

20 My evaluation of the units is as follows:  
have been | to me | my tears | bread | day and night ||  
they | say | to me | all day | where is your god

21 Futato defines a linear pattern as one in which “the units follow each other in a nonrepeating order” (Futato, 49-50).

22 Furthermore, the cola can be arranged by tense: the first three are in the present tense, and the fourth looks to the future.

Nonetheless, having at least sampled some of the dynamics of parallelism found within these two Psalms, our focus will now turn from parallelism toward figures of speech. We will attempt to identify figures of speech and to interpret their basic meaning.

### FIGURES OF SPEECH

From similes (42:1) and anthropomorphisms (42:7) to metonymy (42:10) and synecdoche (43:3), Psalms 42 and 43 are full of colorful figures of speech.<sup>23</sup> A sampling of these literary devices will demonstrate how the author colorfully uses such figures of speech to express his thoughts in a creative and poignant manner.

Perhaps the most famous example is the simile in the opening line. In Psalm 42:1 [2] the author employs the image of a deer longing for a refreshing stream to compare his own longing for God. (The parallel structure of the cola, noted earlier, also serves the metaphor and heightens the comparison.) The same comparison can be stated in prose: my soul longs for God *like* the deer longs for water. However, the metaphor is stronger, more colorful, and draws the reader into the author's yearning.

Another simile may exist in Psalm 42. Some English translations<sup>24</sup> employ a simile in 42:10 [11], for example: "As with a deadly wound in my bones, [so] my adversaries taunt me..." (ESV; emphasis added). Yet the Hebrew [בְּרִצָּחַ בְּעֲצָמוֹתַי] allows a hyperbolic, synecdochic rendering, such as: "Their taunts break my bones..." (NLT). Whether it is rendered as a simile or synecdoche, the figure of speech communicates the egregious pain in a much stronger manner than plain prose.

In addition to similes, metaphors are scattered throughout these Psalms. For example, in 42:9 [10] the author equates God to a rock: [אֹמַרְהוּ לְאֵל סִלְעִי] "I say to God, *my rock* [סִלְעִי]..."

<sup>23</sup> I am assuming the definitions of these technical terms from Dr. Currid's class lectures.

<sup>24</sup> ESV, KJV, NASV, and RSV

(ESV; emphasis added). This metaphor is parallel with another metaphor in the third strophe (43:2 [3]), which equates God with a refuge: “For you are the God *in whom I take refuge* [מְעוּזִי]...” (ESV; emphasis added).<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, in the refrains (42:5 [6]; 42:11 [12]; 43:5 [6]) the author metaphorically equates God [אֱלֹהִים] with his salvation [יְשׁוּעַת פְּנִי] and covenant relationship [יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי]: “...for I shall again praise *him* [referring to אֱלֹהִים], *my salvation* and *my God*” (42:11 ESV; emphasis added).

In addition to similes and metaphors, Psalms 42 and 43 employ an array of anthropomorphisms: souls that pant and thirst (42:1, 2); souls being poured out like liquid substances (42:4); oceans waters calling out with their voices (42:7); light and truth leading one into God’s temple (43:3). Such personifications give life and character to these incorporeal and/or inanimate objects.

Having gained an overview of the literary context for these two Psalms, observed the strophic structure provided by the refrains, sampled the parallelism of the poetic lines, and noted some of the figures of speech, we are now prepared to interpret Psalms 42 and 43. Simply put, what is the main message of this single song? And how does this message apply to the church today?

#### CONCISE INTERPRETATION

Read as one Psalm, Psalms 42 and 43 express a passionate longing to return to God’s presence in His temple and a powerful plea for God to lead the forlorn worshiper to the altar with God’s own light and truth.<sup>26</sup> The song opens with a statement of

25 The parallel is obvious from the introductory metaphors and the following two questions: (a) 42:9 (ESV) reads, “I say to God, my rock: ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?’” (b) And 43:2 (ESV) reads, “For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you rejected me? Why do I go about mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?”

26 Calvin summarizes Psalm 43 as follows: “David, who probably was the author of it, being chased and driven out of his country

longing, and then the introduction concludes with a pregnant question: “When shall I come and appear before God (42:2b ESV)?” This anxiety-filled question remains unanswered until 43:3-4; for, only after God takes the initiative, sending His light and truth to lead the persecuted worshiper back to God’s presence (43:3), will the anxiety-filled worshiper then cast off his gloom and burst into joy: “*Then* I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God” (43:4 ESV; emphasis added). As is expected from the song’s genre (lament), the movement is from plea to praise.

In between the pregnant question and the answer, the author recalls the painful sufferings concomitant with absence from God’s presence. These sufferings come from within, without, and above: From within, he is tormented by remembering his own past experiences of God’s presence with God’s people (42:4) and by his soul’s depression (42:5, 11; 43:5); From without, the enemies of God taunt him with continual derisions (42:3, 9, 10; 43: 1-2); And from above, it appears that even God has forgotten him (42:9, 43:2) and that God has overwhelmed him with chaotic floods (42:7). The progress from plea to praise, therefore, is neither quick nor easy.

We should note that the movement to praise is expectant and forward-looking. In spite of the present gloom, the Psalmist looks to God’s sending light and truth and hopefully says, “*Then* I will go to the altar of God....” In other words, the author’s hope is rooted in God’s eschatological sending of his light and truth. Thus, the author praises

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by the unjust violence and tyranny of his enemies, calls upon God for vengeance, and encourages himself to hope for restoration” (Calvin, 144). This summary coincides with his summary of Psalm 42: “In the first place . . . what most of all grieved him [David] was, that he was deprived of the opportunity of access to the sanctuary; for he preferred the service of God to every earthly advantage. In the second place, he shows that being tempted with despair, he had in this respect a very difficult contest to sustain. In order to strengthen his hope, he also introduces prayer and meditation on the grace of God. Last of all, he again makes mention of the inward conflict which he had with the sorrow which he experience” (*Ibid.*, 127).

not because he has already been led back to God's temple, but he praises with a sure hope that he will be led there.<sup>27</sup> This eschatological perspective,<sup>28</sup> then, opens up our vista of interpreting this Psalm both (a) in the Psalter's proximate context and (b) in the Gospel's ultimate context.

First, the proximate perspective. The "light" and "truth" motifs are found in the next Psalms within the "of the sons of Korah" collection. For example, in Psalm 44:4-8 the Psalmist grounds his present and future trust in God for deliverance upon a recollection of past salvation via the *light* of God's face (44:3). In a word, God *has* sent forth his light already, and that is the Psalmist's present and future hope. Likewise, in Psalm 45:4, the Psalmist extols the majesty of the Warrior-God-King who rides out to battle for the sake of *truth*. Therefore, within this collection of "sons of Korah Psalms" in Book 2 of the Psalter, we begin to see the proximate fulfillment of the plea for God to send his light and truth.

Second, the ultimate perspective. Reading the text today forces the church to ask, How has God sent "truth" and "light" to lead his people back into God's fellowship-temple-presence? The answer reveals the heart of the Gospel: Jesus Christ, God's own Son, *is* the Light of the World (Jn. 8:12; 9:5). Jesus Christ *is* God's Truth-Word (Jn. 1:1; 14:6; Heb. 1:1-2). God *has* sent His Light and Truth—in Christ! God, in Christ, *has* led

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27 Keil and Delitzsch's comment on 43:4, 5 represents what I mean here by "eschatological perspective": "The poet, in anticipation, revels in the thought of that which he has prayed for, and calls upon his timorous soul to hope confidently for it" (Keil, Carl Friedrich, and Franz Delitzsch. *Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume 5, Psalms*. Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1996. ). Compare McCann's reflections on these Psalms: "To hope in God means that we live eschatologically, that we know and articulate hope and despair simultaneously..." (McCann, 854).

28 Henry appreciates the eschatological perspective; for, in his comments on 43:3 he appreciates the distinction between what has already been fulfilled and what remains yet to be fulfilled: "Some of the Jewish writers by the *light* and *truth* here understand Messiah the Prince and Elias his forerunner: these have come, in answer to the prayers of the Old Testament; but we are still to pray for God's light and truth, the Spirit of light and truth, who supplies the want of Christ's bodily presence, to lead us into the mystery of godliness and to guide us in the way to heaven. When God sends his light and truth into our hearts, these will guide us to the upper world in all our devotions as well as in all our aims and expectations; and, if we conscientiously follow that light and that truth, they will certainly bring us to the holy hill above" (Henry, *Op. cit.*).

His church into his heavenly temple-presence (Heb. 12:22; Eph. 2:6; 1 Jn. 1:3). And the church *has begun* already to join with angels in singing eternal praises!

What the psalmist looked forward to, therefore, has become a reality for us in Jesus Christ. But we still share an eschatological perspective: we still hope for the future glory of God. While God has sent his Light and Truth to lead his church into his temple-presence, there is more to come. God is *still* sending forth His Light and Truth to all the nations in the Gospel. And at the consummation of all things, God will make His heavenly temple one with earth (Rev. 21), at which time there will be no more darkness because God's Light will shine in its full glory (Rev. 22:5).

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