

## WHAT DOES THE PSALMIST ASK FOR IN PSALMS 39:5 AND 90:12?

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The consensus of commentators is that the sufferers in Psalms 39 and 90 are asking for a deeper sense of the transience of life, especially of their own life, in order to face their present tribulation with equanimity and faithfulness. There are substantial reasons, however, to question the consensus. This article proposes an alternate interpretation of Pss 39:5 and 90:12 and points out the implications for the poetic logic of the psalms.

### I. Psalm 39:5

Commenting on Ps 39:5–6a, K. Seybold explains: “The ill pray-er has his end in view and laments that his life has come to an end so soon. He prays about the remaining number (‘measure’) of days and notes that his life has been short: only ‘handbreadths’ of days were begrudged to him. He feels he is too young to die.”<sup>1</sup> Other commentators differ in nuance but agree that the prayer is for awareness of the brevity of life, in particular of the psalmist’s own life.<sup>2</sup> The interpretation is reflected in the major translations.

<sup>1</sup> K. Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT 1/15; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1996) 163. My translation.

<sup>2</sup> F. Delitzsch: “[The psalmist] prays God to set the transitoriness of earthly life before his eyes (cf. xc. 12); for if life is only a few spans long, then even his suffering and the prosperity of the ungodly will last only a short time” (C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Psalms* [Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, reprint of 1871 edition] vol. 5, part 2, p. 29). H. Gunkel emends v. 5a to אִרְרִיעַךְ, “I will let you know my end,” and suggests that the psalmist argues, “Don’t you know the measure of my days, that my life span is truly nothing before you who live forever?” (*Die Psalmen* [6th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968] 164). C. A. Briggs takes קֵץ as “the end of my life, how short a time will elapse before the end” and יִמֵּךְ as “the measure of time comprehended in the days of life” (*The Book of Psalms* [ICC; New York: Scribner’s, 1914] 1.346). According to H.-J. Kraus, “The petitioner prays to Yahweh for enlightenment concerning the fate of death that engulfs him, concerning the transitoriness of his life” (*Psalms 1–59: A Commentary* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988] 418).

<sup>5</sup>LORD let me know my end,  
and what is the measure of my days;  
let me know how fleeting my life is. [NRSV; similarly JPSV]

<sup>5</sup>LORD, let me know my end, the number of my days,  
that I may know how frail I am. [NAB]

This interpretation—that the request is to know the number of days left to the psalmist—is found already in the LXX (Psalm 38): γνῶρισόν μοι κύριε τὸ πέρασ μου καὶ τὸν ἀριθμὸν τῶν ἡμερῶν μου τίς ἐστὶν ἵνα γνῶ τί ὑστερῶ ἐγώ.

<sup>5</sup>Let me know, LORD, my end  
and the number of my days, what it is,  
that I may know what I am lacking [of my allotted number].

The Peshitta and the renderings of Jerome follow the interpretation of the LXX.

Though widely held, the interpretation runs into considerable semantic and lexical problems, which seem to have escaped the notice of commentators. For one thing, it is strange that the psalmist, who eloquently expresses the transience and fragility of life in vv. 6–7 and 12c, asks in v. 5 for awareness of the very same thing. It is also not clear why knowing one's life span makes it easier to bear suffering.

The vocabulary in v. 5 does not support the common explanation. Hebrew קץ in v. 5a refers to a definite term or boundary, not general shortness of time. The unique phrase מדה ימים, “measure of days,” is illuminated by the semantically similar מספר ימים,<sup>3</sup> “the number of days,” which means a set period of time in Exod 23:26; Qoh 2:3; 5:17; 6:12. The idiom ספר ימים, “to count the days,” occurs in Lev 15:13, 28; 23:16; Ezek 44:26 in the sense of counting off or noting a predetermined time period. The phrase מדה ימים thus is simply a set period of time, not an undetermined period. The rendering of the adjective חדרל in v. 5 as “fleeting”<sup>4</sup> is ad hoc, for it is otherwise unattested in this meaning. The other occurrences of the adjective חדרל are in Ezek 3:27 (a negation of the previous verb) and Isa 53:3 (lit., “ceasing from human beings” = “less than human” or “ceasing from human companionship”). To judge from the cognate verb חדרל, “to cease to do; to stop,” the adjective means “ceasing; end.” The meaning of the adjective is thus “how I am ceasing [from my tribulation],” which makes a suitable parallel to the preceding two cola. The traditional translation of the third colon, “let me know how frail/fleeting I am,” is not a logical transition to

<sup>3</sup> The verbs מדה and ספר (in the qal conjugation) are used as synonyms in 1 Kgs 3:8; 8:5; 2 Chr 5:6. See Y. Avishur, *Stylistic Studies of Word Pairs in Biblical and Ancient Literatures* (AOAT 210; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984) 391–92.

<sup>4</sup> Delitzsch reasons that חדרל means that which leaves off and ceases, consequently finite or transitory or frail (*Psalms*). But to cease is not the same as to be fleeting or frail.

vv. 6–7, where the psalmist is already conscious of the transience of his life, “Behold, you have made my days a handbreadth!”

These semantic and lexical problems are resolved if one interprets v. 5 as a request to know the term of the psalmist’s *affliction* rather than the term of the psalmist’s *life*.<sup>5</sup> The psalmist expresses the very human desire to know how long the divine wrath will last. J. J. M. Roberts has abundantly demonstrated that the “idea that there were predetermined limits to the periods of divine wrath which the gods might reveal through omens or oracles was widespread in the ancient Near East.”<sup>6</sup> He showed convincingly that Ps 74:9 (“No one among us knows how long?”) actually refers to an expected oracular or prophetic pronouncement on the duration of the affliction. Biblical examples of set times of affliction are the seventy years of Babylonian rule predicted by Jeremiah (25:11, 12; 29:10) and the prophet Gad’s allowing David to choose as punishment three years of famine or three months of fleeing enemies or three days of pestilence (2 Sam 24:13).

Akkadian literature is especially rich in examples. One well-known example is Marduk’s famous decision to leave Babylon for seventy years<sup>7</sup> and the omen text on the Elamite captivity of Bel:

... the Umman-manda will arise and rule the land. The gods will depart from the daises, and Bel will go to Elam. It is said that after thirty years vengeance will be exercised, and the gods will return to their place.<sup>8</sup>

In another text Nabonidus declares:

For twenty-one years [Marduk] established his seat in Ashur, but when the days were fulfilled and the set time (*adannu*) arrived, his anger abated, and

<sup>5</sup> Two Jewish interpreters seem on first reading to have anticipated our conclusions, but it is not certain that they actually did. Rashi refers the verse to Israel rather than to an individual and translates v. 5, “TELL us, O LORD, our TERM [i.e.] how long we shall be in trouble so that we may know when we shall be finished with it.” It is interesting to note, however, that the editor, M. I. Gruber, does not believe Rashi meant a divinely ordained period for an individual, in *Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms 1–89 (Books I–III) with English Translation, Introduction, and Notes* (South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 161; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998) 187, 190. The sixteenth-century Jewish exegete Ovadia Sforno glossed v. 5 קצֵי יְיָ חַדְעֵי with לְצַרְחֵי with הַקֵּץ שְׁשִׁים לְצַרְחֵי, “the end that you will appoint for my suffering” in *Tehilim: . . . im perush . . . Ovadyah Sforno* (Jerusalem: n.p., 1973). It is possible, however, that Sforno means only that life span and suffering are one and the same; “my suffering” could be just another way of referring to one’s wretched life.

<sup>6</sup> J. J. M. Roberts, “Of Signs, Prophets, and Time Limits: A Note on Psalm 74:9,” *CBQ* 39 (1977) 474–81, quotation from p. 478. All the references to Mesopotamian texts in nn. 7 to 11 are from this article.

<sup>7</sup> R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Assarhaddons Königs von Assyrien (AfO Beiheft 9)*; Graz: E. Weidner, 1956) 14–15, episodes 6–10.

<sup>8</sup> C. Smith, *Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia* (London: British Museum, 1861–64) III, 61, no. 2:21’–22’.

the heart of the king of the gods, the lord of lords, remembered Esagil and Babylon, the seat of his lordship.<sup>9</sup>

The phrase “the days were fulfilled” in the above text presupposes a predetermined number of days. When they were “fulfilled” and “the set time” arrived, the time of divine anger was over.

Two Mesopotamian texts are especially relevant to Psalm 39, for they show individuals seeking information about the duration of personal illness. In *Ludhul*, the sufferer complains, “Nor has the diviner put a time limit (*adanna*) on my illness.”<sup>10</sup> In a text from Ras Shamra, a sufferer complains: “The experts have carefully pondered my tablets, but they have not set a limit (*ada[n]*) to my illness.”<sup>11</sup> M. Barré has found that most of the omens in the Akkadian medical omen series end with a prognosis stating the patient’s prospects for recovery. Many indicate how long it will be before the patient gets well, for example, “within seven days,” “within ten days,” “quickly, soon,” and “within three days.”<sup>12</sup> One gets a sense from these texts and their urgent pleas how strong was the desire to know when the suffering would end.

In view of the well-attested desire to know the duration of divine chastisements, it is reasonable to conclude that Ps 39:5 is also an anguished request to know how long the psalmist’s suffering will last. Our translation reflects this interpretation.

<sup>5</sup>Let me know my term [= the term of my affliction],  
 what the measure of my days is [= the predetermined length of my  
 affliction].  
 May I know how I will cease [from my affliction].

This interpretation of v. 5 fits the narrative logic of the psalm. Verses 2–4 are a typical lament scene in which the sufferer is beset by a wicked person who maliciously interprets his words (as in Ps 41:5–10). The only defense is silence before the enemy (Ps 39:3, 10) and sincere prayer to God (vv. 5–14). Verse 5 asks God when the set time of affliction will end. As in Psalm 41, the psalmist recognizes that while human enemies carry out the punishment (Ps 39:2–4; cf. Ps 41:5–10), God is its ultimate source (Ps 39:10b–12; cf. 41:5b) and thus knows how long it will last. There is no need to ask God for a deeper sense of human misery and vanity, for these the psalmist knows all too well (vv. 6–7). What the psalmist does *not* know is the length of the divinely determined period of pun-

<sup>9</sup> H. Winckler, “Einige Bemerkungen zur Nabunid-Stele,” *MVAG* 1/1 (1986) 73–83 (copy), I 23–24.

<sup>10</sup> W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 44–45:111.

<sup>11</sup> *Ugaritica* V (ed. J. Nougayrol et al.; Mission de Ras Shamra 16; Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1968) 267:7–8. See also B. R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1993) 326–27.

<sup>12</sup> M. Barré, “New Light on the Interpretation of Hosea VI 2,” *VT* 28 (1978) 139.

ishment. The logic of the verses can be seen through paraphrase of vv. 5–7: let me know exactly when my suffering will end (v. 5), for human life is so short that you, O God, cannot allow it to pass away in pain (v. 6); human resources are vain and of no avail (v. 7). Verse 8 marks a new stage (יערה) in which the psalmist prays to be delivered from the consequences of the sin.

Evidently, later tradents did not understand the difference between the depiction of human transience and fragility to win divine favor (vv. 6–7) and the request to know “the time and the season” in God’s hands. The first topos is widespread throughout the ancient Near East, part of the strategy of suppliants to win divine or human favor.<sup>13</sup> The second topos is less well known and hence can be easily overlooked or confused, as here (and in Psalm 90), with the first topos. A major difference between the two is that in the first the sufferers *tell God* of their misery, whereas in the second, they *ask God to tell them* the time period.

## II. Psalm 90:11–12

Psalm 90:11–12 is generally interpreted like Ps 39:5—as a prayer for a sense of the transience of human life so that the afflicted person will have the wisdom to endure the divine wrath. Verse 11 is usually taken as a rhetorical question expressing the inability of human beings to appreciate how devastating divine wrath can be; v. 12 is regarded as a plea for acceptance of one’s mortality and fragility. H.-M. Wahl, in the most thorough recent study of v. 12, paraphrases the verse: “Teach us to realize that humanity is subject to mortality, to finitude!” He describes the poetic logic: “The realization—awareness of finitude—makes it possible to share in divine wisdom, which brings those who are touched by it from dissolution to life. This understanding of life through death-as-referring-to-God can be seen as a *hermeneutic of death*; one comes across it only in Ps 90:12.”<sup>14</sup> J. L. Mays uses less philosophical language but goes in a similar direction: “The question [in v. 11] is rhetorical; it has a critical and instructional function. . . . The psalmist has the congregation pray for the wis-

<sup>13</sup> Gilgamesh urges a reluctant Enkidu to join his campaign against the monster Humbaba: “As for man, his days are numbered (*a-me-lut-ti ma-nu-ú* [UD-*me-ša*]), / whatever he accomplishes is but wind” (transcription from S. Parpola, *The Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* [State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts 1; Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 1997] 77 [= SAA *Gilg.* II 203–4]). By the phrase “his days are numbered” Gilgamesh means that everyone’s life span is determined and Enkidu cannot extend his by refraining from battle. In the Yale Tablet of the Old Babylonian version, Gilgamesh says: “Who can go up to heaven, my friend? / Only the gods dwell (?) with Shamash forever. / Mankind can number his days (*a-wi-lu-tum-ma ma-nu-ú u4-mu-ša*). / Whatever he may achieve, it is only wind” (S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991] 144). This usage may have caused the misinterpretation of our psalms.

<sup>14</sup> H.-M. Wahl, “Psalm 90,12: Text, Tradition und Interpretation,” ZAW 106 (1994) 116–23, quotations from pp. 122 and 123 (Wahl’s italics; my translation).

dom of heart/mind that comes from considering the finitude of human existence, its frustration and brevity.”<sup>15</sup>

The major translations reflect this interpretation. The NRSV is typical of many others.

<sup>11</sup>Who considers<sup>16</sup> the power of your anger?

Your wrath is great as the fear that is due you.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup>So teach us to count our days

that we may gain a wise heart.

The usual explanation leaves several questions unanswered. If the question “Who knows?” (כִּי יוֹדֵעַ) in v. 11 means “nobody knows” as it seems to,<sup>18</sup> why would the psalmist, who has just described in vv. 7–10 the devastating divine wrath, assert that no one knows its force? Why should v. 12 ask that the community be taught “to count our days” in the sense of becoming aware of the transience of life when vv. 1–5 have already spoken at length on the topic?<sup>19</sup> And why should knowing one has a short life span bring solace to a sufferer?

<sup>15</sup> J. L. Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation: Louisville: John Knox, 1994) 293. According to H.-J. Kraus, “. . . the psalmist in agitation asks who could possibly be able to perceive the whole sweep of the effects of the wrath of God. At this point, the trend of the statements in vv. 3ff. is revealed. With the perceptions of חֲכָמָה the singer wants to lead the lamenting community to a more profound view of its misery. He imports the general reflections of wisdom teaching into his prayer song in order to illustrate the weight of divine wrath. The psalmist therefore takes the view that one can appear before God only with a wise heart” (*Psalms 60–150* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989] 217). Seybold takes the theme of vv. 10–12 to be the determined nature of human life. Verse 12 asks for the intelligence to count the days and to adopt an attitude of *carpe diem* toward the time still remaining to us (*Die Psalmen*, 359).

<sup>16</sup> The NRSV rendering, “Who considers?” (lit. “Who knows?”), attempts to finesse the problem that the psalmist already knows the divine wrath in vv. 7–10. “Who considers?” suggests that no one properly *comprehends* the divine suffering. Such a translation, however, ignores the plain meaning of the idiom “Who knows?” See n. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Verse 11b is corrupt. Symmachus supports the MT. LXX τίς γινώσκει τὸ κράτος τῆς ὀργῆς σου καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ φόβου σου τὸν θυμὸν σου reflects וְיִדְרֹאֲךָ וְיִרְאֶה אֶת כֹּחַ הַגְּבוּרָה בְּפָנֶיךָ, “Who sees the oppression (of your wrath)?” makes a satisfactory parallel but is far from certain. See Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, 401, for variations of this emendation.

<sup>18</sup> The expression bears this meaning in 2 Sam 12:22; Prov 24:22; Qoh 3:21; 6:12; Joel 2:14; Jonah 3:9. For discussion of the phrase, see J. L. Crenshaw, “The Expression כִּי יוֹדֵעַ in the Hebrew Bible,” *VT* 36 (1986) 274–88, reprinted in his *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995) 179–91, though I differ in seeing “Who knows?” here as expressing the community’s ignorance of the duration of divine wrath.

<sup>19</sup> So also A. B. Ehrlich: “It is utterly inconceivable how one can bring oneself to follow the traditional explanation here. ‘Who knows the strength of your anger?’ could never be asked by the poet who according to v. 7 and 9 has known so well the powerful anger of his God” (*Die Psalmen* [Berlin: M. Papillar, 1905] 219). Ehrlich’s own solution—“who knows how to deal with your anger?—suffers from the same defects as NRSV “Who considers the power of your anger?”

As with Psalm 39, the best solution to these problems is to suppose that the poet is asking to know the term not of human life but of the divine anger causing the community's tribulations. This interpretation finds support from the vocabulary of vv. 11–13: עו אַפֶּךָ, “the force of your anger”; לַמְנוּחַ יָמֵינוּ, “to number our days”; and כֵּן, “correctly, accurately.” In v. 11a, עו cannot mean simply “force,” for the community already knows from experience the force of divine anger (vv. 7–10). עו therefore must refer to an aspect of divine anger that has not yet been experienced by the community. The aspect can only be the *duration*, the *full* extent of the anger. Only so can the question be a genuine question: “Who knows the *full* extent of your anger?”

The phrase “to count our days aright” (לַמְנוּחַ יָמֵינוּ כֵּן) does not mean “let us know the brevity of human life.” The meaning of מְנָה יָמִים is best seen in the semantically related verb סָפַר,<sup>20</sup> which is frequently used of numbering or counting days, months, and years, as in Lev 23:16: “From the day after the Sabbath you shall count fifty days” (הַסֹּפְרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם). The other occurrences of the idiom in Leviticus are similar (15:13, 28; 23:8, 15). Hebrew כֵּן can be either of two words, “thus, so” (so NRSV and REB) or “right, accurate; right, righteous” (so NAB and JPSV). The second meaning is apt here; the usage is similar “to speak accurately” (כֵּן) in Jdg 12:6 and “to know accurately” (כֵּן) in 1 Sam 23:17. Ps 90:12 thus refers to an accurate knowledge of the time period of the divine wrath behind the distress.

The idiom “to count the days” (סָפַר יָמִים) deserves some attention. The idiom “to count days/months” is found in Ugaritic and Akkadian. The relevant Ugaritic example is found in the Aqhat Epic: *yṯb.dnil.[ls]pr.yrḫh yrḫ.[ ]tṯt.rḫ[ʿ]* (KTU 1.17.2.43), “Daniel sits to count her months, a month, . . . a third, a four[th]. . . .” King Daniel is simply counting or noting a predetermined period of time, the months of his wife's pregnancy. The meaning is that he will simply check the years and months as they pass.<sup>21</sup> The corresponding verb in Akkadian is *manû*, “to count,” which is the same etymological root as in Ps 90:12. It occurs in *Atrahasis* (I 279) in the same idiom that appears in the Ugaritic text just cited, namely, “to count months” (in the sense of waiting for a certain number of months to come to an end): <sup>278</sup>[*wa-aš-ba*]-*at dnin-tu* <sup>279</sup>[*i-ma*]-*an-nu ar-bi*, “And Nintu [sat] counting the months.”<sup>22</sup> The goddess is ticking off the months of human pregnancy. In both the Akkadian and Ugaritic examples the

<sup>20</sup> See n. 3.

<sup>21</sup> A second Ugaritic example is interesting but not directly parallel: *ašprk.ʿm.bʿl šnt.ʿm bʿl.tspr.yrḫm* (KTU 1.17.6.29), “I will cause you to count years with Baal, you will count months with the son of El.” The goddess Anat promises the youth Aqhat that he will spend his life with the gods, that is, “count years” and “count months” with them.

<sup>22</sup> A second Akkadian example from *Atrahasis* is noteworthy but not directly parallel: (I 34 and 36) [*šantim im*]-*nu-ù ša šu-up-ši-ik-ki*, “[they] counted [the years] of the toil.” The junior gods are recalling the number of the years of their past servitude.

meaning is to count off or take note of a set period of time. The extrabiblical evidence thus suggests that “to number our days” in Ps 90:12 means simply to know accurately a predetermined time period rather than to be aware of mortality.

In the light of the foregoing evidence, the most suitable rendering of Ps 90:11–12 (paraphrasing somewhat for the sake of clarity) is:

<sup>11</sup>Who knows the full force of your anger,  
the . . . of your wrath?

<sup>12</sup>Let (us) know how to compute accurately our days (of affliction);  
let us bring wisdom (into) our minds.<sup>23</sup>

“Wisdom” in v. 12b is not “philosophical” or “theological” insight as Wahl and several commentators imply, but, as elsewhere in the Bible, practical knowledge that enables one to act appropriately. If the community knows the term of the divinely sent wrath, they can respond appropriately. Verse 13 continues the prayer to know the time: “Turn, Yahweh, how long [will the tribulation go on?].” Verse 15 also suggests that the point at issue is the duration of community tribulation: “Make us rejoice *as many days* as you have afflicted us, / (*as many*) *years* as we have seen trouble”; it prays God to grant as many days of joy as there were days of trouble.

As in Psalm 39, two themes appear to have been confused in the interpretive tradition, the theme of human transience and fragility designed to win God’s mercy and the theme of requesting the time that only God knows. Psalm 39 combines the two to make a single argument: let me know how long this affliction will last (v. 5), for you know that human life is too short to be entirely spent in suffering (vv. 6–7). Psalm 90 also combines the two themes. Verses 3–6 remind God of the transience of human life. Verses 7–10 bring in the distinct but related theme—the devastation wrought on human beings by divine wrath. Verses 11–12 continue vv. 7–10. Verse 11 admits that no one knows when this period of wrath will end. Verse 12 seeks to know its term from God.

In summary, Pss 39:5 and 90:11–12 have been wrongly interpreted as requests to know the end of life and thus to realize one’s finitude and dependence on God. Rather, they are requests to know the end of the period of wrath in order that an individual (Psalm 39) or a community (Psalm 90) might submit in faith to the divine chastisement while preserving a lively hope in God.

<sup>23</sup> “Wisdom” (חכמה) can sometimes be in parallel to “knowledge” (דעת), e.g., Prov 2:6, 10; 14:6; 30:3. In these cases, wisdom is what one knows, what one has in one’s mind. Parallelism suggests that sense here—that is, let us have that knowledge in our minds.



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