

## Analysis and Synthesis of Ps 57

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### Summary

Effective Bible study requires both Analysis (“taking apart,” understanding the structure of a passage) and Synthesis (“putting together,” understanding how the parts relate as a whole). This note is an example of how these two processes work together.

- Analysis provides the context in which we must understand each component. Without careful analysis, we cannot be sure that we are understanding the pieces as the author intended.
- Synthesis keeps us from missing the forest for the trees. It helps us meditate on how the pieces, understood in the light of the relations discovered in analysis, lead to a single cohesive meaning for the passage.

Both Analysis and Synthesis are the result of intense personal engagement of the reader with the text. Analysis tends to be more objective, since it is grounded directly on linguistic features of the text that should be evident to any reader. Synthesis is much more subjective, and different readers might summarize the details differently, but if those details are based on solid analysis, we can compare differing syntheses intelligently.

### Analysis of Correspondences

This matrix summarizes the pattern of correspondences between the two halves of the psalm. The overall pattern is AB-C-BA-C.

<p><b>A:</b> Psalmist speaks to God:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Petition in 1-3a,</li> <li>• Praise in 7-10.</li> </ul> <p>In each case, the prayer is motivated by knowledge of God’s Mercy and Truth</p>	<p><b>A1:</b> 1 Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee: yea, in the shadow of thy wings <b>will I make my refuge</b>, until <i>these</i> calamities be overpast. 2 <b>I will cry unto God most high</b>; unto God that performeth <i>all things</i> for me. 3 <b>He shall send</b> from <b>heaven</b>, and save me from the reproach of him that would swallow me up. <b>Selah.</b> <b>God shall send</b> forth his <b>mercy</b> and his <b>truth</b>.</p>	<p><b>A2:</b> 7 My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed: <b>I will sing and give praise.</b> 8 Awake up, my glory; awake, psaltery and harp: I <i>myself</i> will awake early. 9 <b>I will praise thee</b>, O Lord, among the <b>peoples</b><sup>1</sup>: <b>I will sing unto thee</b> among the <b>nations</b>. 10 For thy <b>mercy</b> is great unto the <b>heavens</b>, and thy <b>truth</b> unto the clouds.</p>
<p><b>B:</b> Description of the Opposition:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• internal in 4,</li> <li>• external in 6</li> </ul>	<p><b>B1:</b> 4 My soul <i>is</i> among lions: <i>and</i> I lie <i>even</i> among them that are set on fire, <i>even</i> the sons of men, whose teeth <i>are</i> spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword.</p>	<p><b>B2:</b> 6 They have prepared a net for my steps; my soul is bowed down: they have digged a pit before me, into the midst whereof they are fallen <i>themselves</i>. <b>Selah.</b></p>
<p><b>C:</b> Refrain</p>	<p><b>5</b> Be thou exalted, O God, above the <b>heavens</b>; <b>let thy glory be above all the earth.</b></p>	<p><b>11</b> Be thou exalted, O God, above the <b>heavens</b>: <b>let thy glory be above all the earth.</b></p>

- The refrain (C) marks the main division into two halves, and expresses the Psalmist’s overall

<sup>1</sup> Plural, “peoples,” not singular as in AV. The reference, as with “nations,” is to non-Jews.

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concern in the Psalm: that God would be exalted.

- Each half treats two themes, divided by “Selah.” (The repetition of the verb שלח “he shall send” on either side of the Selah in v. 3 suggests that 3b is finishing off the thought of 3a, effectively wrapping the first Selah, rather than starting a new section.)
- The AB sections are arranged chiastically among themselves.

In the A sections, the Psalmist resolves to speak to God. Both prayers are motivated by his confidence in God’s heavenly mercy and truth.

- In vv. 1-4, he resolves to pray for God’s deliverance in a time of trouble. The inscription of the Psalm (“Michtam of David, when he fled from Saul in the cave”) suggests that the Psalm describes the events of 1 Sam 22:1.
- In vv. 7-10, he resolves to praise God for deliverance. Note the alternation of resolve (“my heart is fixed,” “I will awake early”) and execution (“I will sing,” “I will praise”).

In both cases, God’s Mercy and Truth is heavenly in nature. In v. 3, it is sent from heaven, while in v. 10, it extends to the heavens. This emphasis prepares us for the refrain that God is to be exalted “above the heavens.” In addition, in v. 9 David offers praise not only before Israel but also “among the nations” and “among the peoples,” that is, throughout “all the earth,” as the refrain emphasizes.

The themes of the two prayers suggest that vv. 7-10 is later in time than vv. 1-4, giving thanks for the deliverance that was previously requested.

In the B sections, he describes the opposition that he faces. When we studied this Psalm as a church, Dave Nelson suggested two different forms of opposition may be in view. Verse 4 may refer, not to Saul, but to the people who were with David in the cave.

- 1 Sam 22:2, his followers were malcontents, who followed him not because they supported him as God's anointed, but because they were at odds with the current administration. In 1 Sam 22:6, Saul was as much concerned with David's men as with David.
- 1 Sam 24:4, they urged David to strike out at the Lord's anointed, a position that he rejected.
- He may have in mind in particular the vicious character of Joab. Compare his comments on Joab and his brother Abishai (“ye sons of Zeruiah”) in 2 Sam 16:9-10; 19:21-22. Abishai was not yet on his side in the cave,

So David faces two threats: Saul without, and the anarchists who have joined themselves to him. Again, it seems that the second half envisions a later time than the first, when his enemies have already fallen into the pit that they intended for David.

Again, there are indications that the second half describes a later point in time than the first half. v. 6 reports that his adversaries have already fallen into the pit that they dug for David.

## Synthesis

Our objective in synthesis is to come up with a single sentence that captures the overall meaning of the passage. It helps to work section by section, starting with the smaller sections and fusing them into

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higher levels.<sup>2</sup> At each step I've tried to highlight the features of the text that David emphasized, using the devices discovered in analysis.

A1, vv. 1-3: David recalls his prayer to God for deliverance, which was motivated by his knowledge of God's heavenly Mercy and Truth.

B1, v. 4: David describes the opposition he faced from the viciousness of his own men while he was fleeing from Saul.

We can put this together something like this:

vv. 1-4, David recalls his prayer to God for deliverance, motivated by his knowledge of God's Mercy and Truth, when he faced the viciousness of his own men during his flight from Saul.

Now consider the second side:

B2, v. 6, David describes the opposition he faced from Saul, and Saul's defeat.

A2, vv. 7-10, David resolves to offer worldwide praise to God for this manifestation of his heavenly Mercy and Truth.

Again, putting it all together,

vv. 6-10, David resolves to praise God for manifesting his Mercy and Truth in defending him from Saul's opposition.

Now we can synthesize both AB sections, something along these lines:

vv. 1-4, 6-10. God's Mercy and Truth motivated David to cry out to God when he faced internal external opposition in his flight from Saul, and now lead him to give worldwide thanks to God for his deliverance.

The C sections are like an envelope in which David wraps all of this. So far, both his petition and his prayer are focused on specific earthly events, but in both halves he acknowledges the heavenly nature of God's Mercy and Truth, and the references to "peoples" and "nations" in v. 9 show that he intends his praise to be echoed not only by Israel, but also by the gentiles. Just as A2B2 appear to be a later reflection upon the petition of A1B1, so C appears to be an even later reflection upon the whole transaction of petition and praise. As the Lord deals with us, he invites our worship in three stages:

1. First we bring all of our needs to him.
2. Then we recognize when he has answered our prayers.
3. Finally we reflect on how his willingness to hear and answer prayer manifests his greater glory.

So the overall summary of the Psalm might be something like this:

David declares that God should be glorified throughout all creation because of his heavenly Mercy and Truth, which motivated David's petition for help in oppression and led to the deliverance for which David offered worldwide thanks.

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<sup>2</sup> I was taught this method by my professor Bruce Waltke.