

Exegesis of Psalm 14 with Special Reference to the Existence of God

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Psalm 14 is well known to all of us. I imagine that most of us use it in catechism and BIC classes to make the point that God is real. It's almost a knee jerk reaction to any hint of atheism for us to whip out, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" That proof text is well chosen. That tendency to whip it out automatically qualifies it for one of the *sedes doctrinae*, the seats of doctrine, for this particular teaching.

Until our time, most people who were interested in religious discussion assumed that God was real. That is no longer the case. In an editorial about whether or not the military should allow atheist chaplains, Michael McGough of the Los Angeles *Times* wrote, "The truth is that religion isn't interchangeable with belief in God." Congress has been considering legislation to either permit or ban "Humanist" chaplains (to date, the anti-atheists seem to be winning, but the battle isn't over). In a related development, Annie Laurie Gaylor, head of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, headquartered in Madison, Wisconsin, is suing the IRS to get rid of the parsonage allowance for "ministers of the gospel." She claims that it gives religious groups an unfair advantage. The IRS responded by granting her the same exemption – over her strenuous objections! As Bob Smietana of *USA Today* summarizes the government's position:

In a brief, the Justice Department argued leaders of an atheist group may qualify for an exemption. Buddhism or Taoism don't include a belief in God and are considered religions, the government's lawyers argued, so why not atheism? The Internal Revenue Service does require, among other things, that a "minister" be seen as a spiritual leader and provide services for a religious organization. Belief in a deity is not required.

In the deepest of all ironies, Gaylor responded, "We are not ministers. We are having to tell the government the obvious: We are not a church."

The argument is far from over. But it says something about the times in which God has called us to serve when the IRS can apply the term "minister of the gospel" to an atheist "spiritual leader." But in addition to the open atheism in our society, I think we all have more than a suspicion that in liberal circles, agnosticism – if not outright atheism – reigns. Who can read anything by John Shelby Spong without wondering if he believes in the existence of God at all?¹ You may remember the anecdote told by a brother in this conference in connection with a paper he gave a few years ago. He attended a funeral and heard a beautiful gospel message. But when he complimented the preacher privately, the man told him that he didn't believe in any of that stuff. It's just what the people wanted to hear. So maybe it isn't a waste of our time to study the scriptural basis for asserting that God really does exist, especially when God himself inspired such a wonderful text for that purpose.

Psalm 14 is from the first "book" of psalms, psalms 1-41. Professor John Brug notes that "the basic criterion for inclusion in this book is Davidic authorship" (*A Commentary on Psalms*

¹ Spong, a retired Episcopal bishop, is a recognized leader of "progressive Christianity." His "Twelve Theses" start with the statement, "Theism, as a way of defining God, is dead. So most theological God-talk is today meaningless. A new way to speak of God must be found."

1-72, p. 37). He goes on, “The major theme of this section is the suffering and the triumph of the godly, as illustrated by the experiences of David” (p. 38). This psalm very much fits that theme.

Psalm 14 is a close parallel to Psalm 53 (see the appendix). The biggest difference in the first four and half verses and the last verse is the fact that Psalm 14 primarily uses the tetragrammaton, while Psalm 53 only uses *elohim*. This is in keeping with strong preferences in their respective “books” of the psalter. Verses 5b and 6 of Psalm 14 are fairly different from verse 6 of Psalm 53, although both sections do speak of God’s judgment on the unrighteous. The similarity between the psalms has caused a fair number of variant readings in the manuscripts that make up the Masoretic text. The critical apparatus to BHS indicates that most of the variants eliminate the minor differences between Psalm 14 and Psalm 53. Most of the evidence is limited to a few manuscripts in Hebrew and to translations.

Why would God inspire substantially the same psalm twice? That is a difficult question to answer and for the most part, we are probably better off simply saying that he did and he isn’t interested in our critique of his decisions. There are several other “doublets” in the book of psalms and in every case, one of the doublets is in book two. Both psalms are listed as psalms of David, so it is best to assume that the Holy Spirit inspired him to revise the psalm for use in a different setting. But what the difference was between the two settings is no longer known to us (see Brug p. 525).

The organization of the psalms, especially in the first book, is not random. Psalm 14 has many thoughts in common with psalms 10-12, which describe the arrogance of the wicked and the judgment of God. It shares with Psalm 13 both the idea of God looking out from heaven on people and the question format that David uses in this psalm.

The psalm itself begins with a criticism of a fool who denies God’s existence. It then “zooms out” to look at the sinful condition of all of mankind. Then it “zooms in” again on those who devour God’s people. It closes with a prayer by the psalmist for God’s deliverance.

Verse 1:

לְמַנְצֵחַ לְדָוִד אָמַר נְבִל בְּלָבוּ אֵין אֱלֹהִים הַשְׁחִיתוּ הַתְּעִיבוּ עָלַיָּהּ אֵין עֲשֵׂה-טוֹב:

לְמַנְצֵחַ Piel participle, used substantively. In the Piel, it means “To act as an overseer, director” so the NIV translates “for the director of music.” Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB) suggests “musical director” or “choirmaster.” Brug translates the word as “for the choir director” but notes that it literally means “for the leader.” He states that it is generally accepted as a reference to the director of a temple choir and orchestra (p. 140).

לְדָוִד We will accept the *lamedh* of authorship here. Negative critics contest this meaning. They also dispute the idea that the headings are a part of the original text, arguing that they were added by later editors. But note that in the Hebrew Bible, in every instance, the headings are included in verse one, or in fact, are verse one. (Unfortunately, this often throws off our verse count from English to Hebrew.) The critical apparatus notes that a few Hebrew manuscripts add the word מְזִמּוֹר (“a psalm”) and the Septuagint translation seems to support that addition. Psalm 53 does *not* include מְזִמּוֹר but does call the psalm a מְשִׁכִּיל (“a skillful psalm” or perhaps “a psalm for meditation/instruction” – see Brug, p.15).

אָמַר Qal perfect. In this psalm, the perfect tense is used not as a past tense, but rather to state a fact. The “perfective aspect” of Hebrew verbs is a complex subject. We need to avoid the error of seeing the Hebrew perfect as a “tense” in the sense of having time value. Many Hebrew perfects have to be translated with a present or a future tense in English. Likewise, we need to avoid allowing the classical Greek aorist tense to lead us to the simple view that perfect equals completed action and imperfect equals incomplete action. Clearly, the context in Psalm 14 requires us to understand the perfect as something that is always or constantly true (“the fool regularly/always says in his heart”) so it’s not “completed.” Waltke-O’Conner argues for the idea that “*Perfectivity* involves viewing a situation as a whole, viewing it globally” (30.1b).

נָבֵל used as a noun, “fool”

שָׁחַתְתָּ הַשְׁחִיתוּ Hiphil perfect “to spoil, to ruin” in a moral sense, “To pervert, corrupt, to act corruptly.”

תָּעַב הַתְּעִיבוּ Hiphil perfect “to make abominable, to do abominably” denominative verb related to “abomination” [תִּזְעֵבָה].

עֲלִילָה “wantonness” so “evil deeds”

עֲשֵׂה-טוֹב Qal active participle with a direct object. The participle is used substantively.

For the [musical] director. Of David. The fool says in his heart “There is no god.” They act corruptly and they do abominable, evil deeds. There is no one who does good.

נָבֵל is the key vocable to this entire Psalm. What does it mean? We usually associate “foolish” with something stupid or thoughtless and so a “fool” is a person who is prone to those kinds of actions. Does the Hebrew word cover the same semantic range? There are definitely passages that give that impression. Perhaps the most obvious example is in 1 Samuel 25 when Nabal (which is this word!) insults the messengers of David who has six hundred armed men at his command. His own servants point out the folly of his actions to his wife Abigail (vv. 14-17) and warn that because of his actions “disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household.” In verse 25, Abigail says to David, “May my lord pay no attention to that wicked man Nabal [נָבֵל]. He is just like his name—his name is Fool [נָבֵל], and folly [וְנִבְלָה] goes with him.” Another example might be Jeremiah 17:11 which speaks of unjust gains and says, “When his life is half gone, they will desert him, and in the end he will prove to be a fool.” So what seemed so smart will fail him. But both of these references illustrate that there is a deeper, ethical meaning to this word. The foolish act is getting ill-gotten gains. In the case of Nabal, Abigail calls him a wicked man [אִישׁ הַבְּלִיעַל], as do his own servants [בְּזֵבֵלִיעַל].

When I use this passage in catechism class, I tell my students that “foolish” here isn’t stupidity per se (Nabal was apparently a very successful businessman). It really means someone who lacks a moral compass. You can see this meaning in several other Old Testament contexts. In 2 Samuel 13:12-13, David’s son Amnon is about to rape his sister Tamar. She pleads with him, “Don’t, my brother! ... Don’t force me. ... Don’t do this wicked thing [אֶת־הַנְּבִלָה הַזֹּאת].

What about me? Where could I get rid of my disgrace? And what about you? You would be like one of the wicked fools [תְּהִיָּה כְּאַחַד הַנְּבָלִים] in Israel.” Note that the sin of rape is “this wicked (literalistically foolish) thing” that would make Amnon one of the נְבָלִים which the NIV here renders as “wicked fools.”²

Quite a few other examples could be cited. But one that is especially useful for our purpose is Deuteronomy 32:5-6. “They have acted corruptly [שָׁחָתָה] toward him; to their shame they are no longer his children, but a warped and crooked generation. Is this the way you repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people [וְלֹא נְבָל וְאִם נְבָל וְלֹא חָכְמָה]? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?” In this verse, Moses (writing almost 500 years before David) uses one of the same verbs to describe their folly that David uses in Psalm 14:1. Notice Moses draws the conclusion that they are no longer God’s people. This statement demonstrates that the New Testament identification of the true Israel³ is not something that St. Paul invented out of thin air. It was always God’s perspective that faith makes someone part of his people. Closer to our point, it clearly links נְבָל to lacking faith. So this word is the antithesis of the scriptural principle “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10 and Proverbs 9:10).

There are a number of different Hebrew words that our Bibles translate as “fool.” Some of them seem to be very similar to נְבָל while others seem to imply the kind of unintelligent behavior we usually associate with “fool” or “foolish.” It raises the question of whether there is a better word in English for this vocable. Most of the translations seem to prefer “fool” but often add an adjective to introduce the moral or ethical statement. But they sometimes use a more specific word.⁴ I have chosen to leave “fool” in my translation, but to retain my “lacking a moral compass” explanation. I would be interested in comments from the body.

A second word that is important to the understanding of this verse is the extremely common noun לֵב. BDB gives the basic meaning as “inner man, mind, will, heart.” The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWBOT) gives “Heart, understanding, mind.” It sums up the issue very well:

Concrete meanings of *lēb* referred to the internal organ and to analogous physical locations. However, in its abstract meanings, “heart” became the richest biblical term for the totality of man’s inner or immaterial nature. In biblical literature it is the most frequently used term for man’s immaterial personality functions as well as the most inclusive term for them since, in the Bible, virtually every immaterial function of man is attributed to the “heart.”

So does the English word “heart” fit here? Probably it does. But I am a little concerned because of the modern way of speaking of the head and the heart. The Holy Spirit is not saying that the morally foolish man just doesn’t feel that there’s a god. Rather, he’s a “three

² The ESV says “outrageous fools” and the HCSB says “immoral men”

³ Romans 9:6-7a “It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children.”

⁴ The Jewish translation *Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures* renders the vocable in this verse as “the benighted man.”

dimensional unbeliever.” His entire inner being – intellect, emotion and will – are all in agreement that God does not exist. He denies the work of Christ to save us, of the Father to create and preserve us and of the Holy Spirit to create faith in our hearts. He is an atheist.

That brings us to the central discussion of this exegesis: proof of the existence of God. The Hebrew says that the fool says in his inmost being, אֵין אֱלֹהִים there is no God. Hebrew is a supremely concrete language, so when it wants to deny the existence of something, it uses the noun אֵין “nothing” in the construct state, so literalistically “nothing of God” or better “nothing-God.” In English, we have to paraphrase. The NIV (both versions) and the ESV say “There is no God.” The HCSB says, “God does not exist.”

Notice that King David equates that statement with acting corruptly [הַשְׁחִיתוּ], doing abominable deeds, [הִתְעַיְבוּ עֲלֵי לָהּ] and not doing good [אֵין עֲשֵׂה-טוֹב]. So working under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he concludes that the only reason to be an atheist in the modern sense of the word⁵ is rebellion against God. When he again uses the particle אֵין with the participial phrase עֲשֵׂה-טוֹב “one who does good,” he is making a statement about the natural state of man. There is no one who does good – not just that all our actions are evil, but that the way we are born, we deny God’s existence.

Now, maybe that seems like it contradicts the natural knowledge of God. God did indeed write in the heart of every human being an awareness of his existence. But if you look in Psalm 19 and Romans 2:14-15, you’ll see that he writes that knowledge through things that force man to conclude that God is real: the creation (Psalm 19) and our conscience with our knowledge of natural law (Romans 2). Even in Acts 17:24-31, St. Paul argues on the basis of the goodness of God in creation to compel mankind to believe in God. Western philosophy has killed a lot of trees trying to prove that God exists. But the Bible really only offers these two proofs. Aside from them, the Bible simply assumes the reality of God. In Psalm 14, God states that the only reason anyone would or could question that fact is sin.

True atheism is relatively rare. Most surveys indicate that the vast majority of people on earth accept some sort of God. I would argue that all false religions are attempts of man to answer the unassailable evidence that God exists. But we need to recognize that there is also a more subtle kind of atheism. It is a practical denial of a place for God in our lives. This kind of atheism is threatening to become universal in Western thought. God is only there for crises, then you bargain with him and make some promises to him, and when the crisis passes, you have a moment of silence and then move on.

On an even more basic level, isn’t every sin a kind of atheism? Every time we sin, we say that what we want or what we think or what we feel is more important than what God says. We deny him a practical role in our lives. At one point in my service as the chairman of the district help team, I had a conversation with our district president about certain sins that can only destroy someone’s ministry once they become known. He asked, “Why would someone engage in something that they know could take away everything that is important to them – their family, their ministry – everything?” I remember fumbling for an answer and not coming up with

⁵ The ancient sense of the word “atheism” was not a denial that god exists, but a denial of the official *cultus* of Rome and a refusal to placate the gods. This was viewed as dangerous because of the mechanical view of ancient religion. You needed to offer whatever sacrifice would keep the gods from sending disaster. The early Christians, of course, refused to do that.

anything that would satisfy him or me. I've thought about that question a lot since he posed it. In the end, of course, the answer is sin. It's the atheism that proceeds from being נָבֵל – morally bankrupt. The worst kind of fool engages in the worst kinds of sins and destroys his own life, just as Nabal did. We called workers still have the original sin we were born with. We are original נְבִלִים, as the sins of Moses and Abraham and David teach us again and again. It's only God's mercy when our sinful stupidity does not end our lives or destroy our families or ruin our ministries.

Verse 2:

יְהוָה מִשָּׁמַיִם הִשְׁקִיף עַל-בְּנֵי-אָדָם לְרֹאוֹת הַיֵּשׁ מִשְׁכִּיל דָּרֵשׁ אֶת-אֱלֹהִים:

הִשְׁקִיף שָׁקַף Hiphil perfect: “to look out and down” again used to depict a constant, ongoing action.

רָאָה לְרֹאוֹת Qal infinitive construct, giving the purpose of God looking out from heaven.

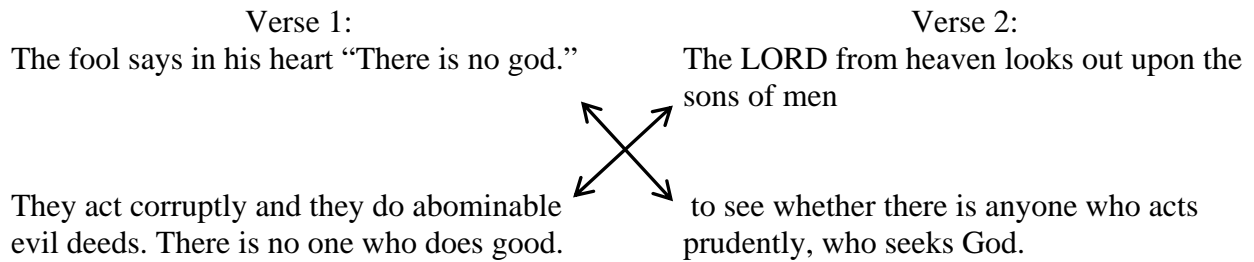
מִשְׁכִּיל שָׁכַל Hiphil participle. “to look on, to give attention to, to consider, to act prudently.”

The participle is used substantively.

דָּרֵשׁ דָּרַשׁ Qal active participle, “to seek, to consult, to inquire of,” used substantively.

The LORD from heaven looks out upon the children of men to see whether there is anyone who acts prudently, who seeks God.

This verse contrasts with the previous verse in the form of a chiasm:



The first half of each verse contrasts with the second half of the other verse. When you line them up as I have above, it makes a cross, hence the name *chiasm*. So the fool is contrasted with God. The expression אֵין אֱלֹהִים “there is no God” is contrasted with יֵשׁ מִשְׁכִּיל “there is one who acts prudently.” יֵשׁ is a perfect contrast with אֵין. Just as אֵין means “nothing” and so “there is not”, יֵשׁ means “existence” or “substance” and so “the existence of God”/“God-existence” means “there is a God.” The second half of verse two contrasts the nature of man, acting corruptly and doing evil, with the nature of God, looking out from heaven.

The LORD מִשָּׁמַיִם הִשְׁקִיף “from the heavens looks out.” The basic meaning of שָׁמַיִם is the sky. Yet, in many contexts it means the abode of God. In the Bible in general, the emphasis of the word “heaven” is different from its emphasis in modern church language. Most of the

time, when we talk about heaven, we're talking where we will go to be with Jesus when we die. (Theologically, this is called the intermediate state.) But because the Bible's eschatological *emphasis* is on the resurrection, the primary emphasis in Scripture on "heaven" is the place where God dwells.

Of course, the two ideas are not in conflict. We do go to be with the Lord when we die. But in this context, the focus is on the eternal, omnipotent God, looking out from his abode in heaven on **בְּנֵי-אָדָם** the sons or the children of man/mankind. This verse is underlining the absolute difference between us and God.

In view of the ongoing discussion of the proper way to translate both **בְּנֵי** and **אָדָם**, it is worth noting here that no one would argue in this context that these words should be limited to males only. **אָדָם** is usually the more general of the Hebrew words for man, but it does sometimes clearly have a male meaning. Likewise, **בְּנֵי** is from **בֵּן** "son." There is no generic Hebrew word for "children." But **בְּנֵי** does clearly serve that function in many cases. So translations like "children of man" "children of mankind" or even "mankind" would not be unfaithful, although they may not be our preference.⁶

It should be noted, however, that this verse does not shed much light on Psalm 8 for the simple reason that **בֶּן-אָדָם** in Psalm 8:4 (8:5 in Hebrew) is singular, not plural. So one could insist on translating that verse "the son of man" and still be more flexible here without any real inconsistency. There is no debate that the reference here is to all mankind.

So God looks out from heaven to see whether there is any human being at all who **מְשַׁכֵּל** "who acts prudently." That is immediately followed by the second participle **דֹּרֵשׁ** "who seeks God." Once again, we see the Old Testament refrain that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. There is an obvious anthropomorphism here. God is all knowing and omnipresent. He doesn't have to "look out" to see us or get information about us. But the poetry is striking. It pictures God searching from heaven to answer a question: is there any human being anywhere who is wise enough to seek him? The answer is tragic.

But before we turn to that answer, we would do well to again recall Paul's words in Acts 17:27, "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us." The Scriptures assume the existence of God, but they also assume that God's proofs in creation and conscience speak to man. In his love, he has given testimony that is designed to awaken in us the understanding that he is real and a desire to know him. In regard to the natural law, Luther said,

If the Natural Law had not been inscribed and placed by God into the heart, one would have to preach a long time before the consciences are touched; to a donkey, horse, ox, cow, one would have to preach 100,000 years before they would accept the Law in spite of the fact that they have ears, eyes, and heart, as man has; they can also hear it, but it does not touch their heart (St. L. III:1053, quoted by Pieper in *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, p. 374).

⁶ The NIV 84 reads "the sons of men" here. The 2011 reads "all mankind." The ESV says "the children of men" (not "the sons of men"). The HCSB renders the expression "the human race." *Tanakh* says "mankind."

Verse 3:

הַכֹּל סָר יַחְדָּו נִאֲלָחוּ אֵין עֲשֵׂה-טוֹב אֵין גַּם-אֶחָד:

הַכֹּל The use of the article with כֹּל is fairly unusual. The parallel in Psalm 53:4 (verse 3 in English) provides the more normal Hebrew construction for “all of them” כֹּל plus the appropriate suffix (כָּלֹ in this case, singular). The textual apparatus indicates that at least two Hebrew manuscripts of the Masoretic tradition follow that reading in Psalm 14. But the BHS text/majority Masoretic tradition is not difficult to render in an *ad sensum* translation of “the whole” or “all of them.”

סָר שׁוּר or שׁוּר Qal perfect “to turn, to turn aside.” The verb is singular because הַכֹּל is used collectively.

יַחְדָּו “together” The accent marker [ֻ] under ך is called *galgal*. It is a conjunctive accent, meaning that it ties the word to the next word, so “they are corrupt together” not “The whole turns aside together.” This is one of the accent markers used in the “Three Books” of poetry – Psalms, Proverbs and most of Job. Other books use the more conventional system we are more accustomed to.

נִאֲלָחוּ אֶלַח Niphal perfect (verb only found in the Niphal) “to be corrupt.” The verb here is plural because that is the sense of the thought. This root only occurs twice in the Old Testament, so its meaning is difficult to establish. Brug notes, “In Arabic the root is used to describe something with an offensive odor, such as sour milk. The conduct of the fool is repulsive to God and man” (p. 211). *Tanakh* renders it “altogether foul.”

עֲשֵׂה Qal active participle.

The whole turns away and together they are corrupt; there is no one who does good, there is not even one.

This is what God finds when he searches for anyone who seeks him and acts with wisdom: הַכֹּל סָר the whole turns away and יַחְדָּו נִאֲלָחוּ they are together corrupt. In this case, English would permit us to use the perfect tense for the perfect form, which is what the NIV 84 and 2011 and the ESV and HCSB all do. I have chosen to retain the present tense for my exegesis to agree with the context. But in a smooth translation, I would probably follow the instincts of the major translations.

The Hebrew word כֹּל refers to all of something. In this case, it’s all the people that God sees from heaven. As a mass of humanity, they have turned away from God. The plural נִאֲלָחוּ calls to mind, at least, the many individuals who make up that mass. The verdict is then drummed in even harder אֵין עֲשֵׂה-טוֹב There is no one who does good, an echo of verse one, amplified with by repeating אֵין to negate גַּם-אֶחָד literally “also one.” So it becomes “not even one.” The verdict is absolute. God sees no one with even a desire to seek him, no one with the wisdom to know him. Rather, by the stubbornness of their own wills, they turn away from the

only true God. There is not a single person who does good. St. Paul quotes this verse with this exact meaning in Romans 3:12.

King David knew the history of Seth, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. But still, the Holy Spirit inspired him to say this because their righteousness came by faith, not by their actual deeds. By nature, we are all totally corrupt. He does not make an exception anywhere is this psalm for believers, even when he speaks of them as God's people.

Verse 4:

הֲלֹא יָדְעוּ כָּל-פְּעֻלָּי אֱוֹן אֲכָלֵי עֲמִי אֲכָלוּ לֶחֶם יְהוָה לֹא קָרְאוּ:

פָּעַל פְּעֻלָּי Qal active participle “to do, make”

אֲכָלֵי אֲכָל אֲכָלֵי Qal active participle, used as an appositive to פְּעֻלָּי

אֲכָלוּ אֲכָל אֲכָלוּ Qal perfect, apparently with a word for “like” understood

קָרְאוּ קָרָא קָרָא Q perfect “to call, to proclaim, to read” with “and” understood

Do they not know, all the doers of evil, the ones who devour my people like they devour bread and they do not proclaim the LORD?

God is outraged by the foolishness of man. The main verb יָדְעוּ is the Qal perfect of one of the most common verbs in the Old Testament, יָדַע “to know”, so you would think it would be relatively easy to translate. Yet, the nuance seems to have eluded the translators. NIV 84 says “Will evildoers never learn” which the 2011 changed to “Do these evildoers know nothing?” The ESV chose “Have they no knowledge?” while the HCSB went with “Will evildoers never understand?” Two chose a future tense in English while two others went with a present. Either is reasonable, since again, God is using the perfect here to ask a question that will endure until the Lord returns. Is there a significant difference in the choice of meanings? All four reflect the fact that God is not talking about a specific piece of knowledge but rather the wisdom of seeking him and doing what is right in his eyes. All four read as an exclamation of disgust.

The subject of the sentence is כָּל-פְּעֻלָּי אֱוֹן all the doers of evil. The noun אֱוֹן occurs 85 times in the Old Testament. In many ways, it functions like the English word “evil” used to. Today, we tend to think of evil primarily in a moral sense, but the evils of life can also refer to all the bad things that we suffer because sin is in the world. Likewise, אֱוֹן often refers to evils that God's people suffer (see, for example, Job 5:6 or Psalm 90:10). In that sense, the word even comes to mean mourning for death in Deuteronomy 26:14 and Hosea 9:4. But it can also reflect moral evil (connected especially with deception in verses like Zechariah 10:2, Proverbs 6:12,18 or with mockery in Proverbs 19:28 and Isaiah 29:20). The word is even used occasionally to mean idols (see Isaiah 41:29 or the mocking name of Bethel “House of God” as Beth Aven “House of Evil”). There are quite a few relatively generic uses of this word for moral evil.

TWBOT observes, “Generally, biblical theologians have given little attention to *’āwen* as a contributor to an understanding of sin. Since the word stresses the planning and expression of deception and points to the painful aftermath of sin, it should be noted more.” What does this verse contribute? The emphasis is on doers, even though the word is often connected with words

and thoughts (see Proverbs 17:4; Isaiah 32:6; Ezekiel 11:2). God is emphasizing the attitude of the heart coming out in the life of the sinner. In this context, God sees no one who does good.

But the doers of evil are called אֲכָלֵי עַמִּי “those who devour my people.”

Suddenly, God makes a shift from talking about all mankind as utterly sinful to those who take their unbelief out on his people. The Hebrew does present a minor difficulty. There is no obvious grammatical connection between אֲכָלֵי עַמִּי and אֲכָלוּ לֶחֶם “they eat bread.” But it’s the nature of poetry to “bend the rules” of grammar. Most translations supply a word for “like” or “as.” The clear idea is that sinners simply devour God’s people. We suffer the evil of evil men taking what God has given us, persecuting us, oppressing us. Sometimes it takes the form of a denial of God’s existence. I remember a faithful, Christian woman whose husband left her for another woman. He then mocked her faith and her tears by asking, “Where is your God now?” In a sinful world, God is hidden. Many people today choose to focus on that evidence rather than on the evidence God has given in creation and in their consciences and conclude he is not there. They choose to follow the lie.

Why? The last phrase gives us some insight: יְהוָה לֹא קָרָא. The verb קָרָא is very common. Its basic meaning is “to call” or “to read.” Most of the translations take it in that sense. So, then, God’s point would be that only those who trust in God actually pray to him in faith. But notice the second meaning given in BDB: “To proclaim.” It is in this sense that Abraham began to call on the name of the LORD in the land of Canaan. He proclaimed his wonders and his promises. I don’t think we can ignore that meaning in this context. Their evil deeds proclaim rebellion against God and not his glory. They do not give glory to his name or repeat his promises, and so they do not trust him and pray to him either. This goes hand in hand with devouring his people.

Verse 5:

שָׁם | פָּחַדוּ פָּחַד כִּי-אֱלֹהִים בְּדוֹר צַדִּיק:

שָׁם “There.” BDB uses this verse as an example of a specialized use of this adverb: “In poetry, pointing to a spot in which a scene is localized vividly in the imagination.” The NIV 84/2011 and the ESV agree and translate “There they are.” Brug argues, “Here it seems to point to a subsequent time, ‘then.’ When God’s judgment arrives, the callous complacency of the fool will change to terror” (p. 212). The HCSB follows suit and translates as “then.” The vertical stroke | that follows the word is called *paseq* (“divider”). In poetry, it is sometimes combined with accent marks, as it is here with *m^ehuppak l^egarmeh* to be a disjunctive ascent. This would seem to reinforce either the NIV/ESV or the HCSB translation choice to translate as an interjection.

פָּחַדוּ פָּחַד Qal perfect “to be in dread, to be in awe.”

פָּחַד noun “dread,” used here as a cognate object, which usually intensifies the dictionary meaning of the verb, hence the translations chose things like “overwhelmed with dread” (NIV 84/2011) or “are in great terror” (ESV and HCSB). Waltke-O’Conner suggests “They dreaded *with dread* (i.e., were overwhelmed with *dread*)” (p. 167). Brug suggests “They tremble a trembling” (p. 212).

בְּדוֹר “period” “generation” “dwelling” BDB places this psalm under the meaning “of the righteous as a class” hence the NIV 84’s “in the company of the righteous.” Brug points out that the original meaning of דוֹר is a “circle.” He then argues that the word means “an assembly of people who belong together because they share some trait, whether good or evil” (p. 212). That understanding certainly opens the translation to a wider variety of choices in the English. “Generation” as a mechanical translation for this word is probably not helpful in many contexts.

There! They will be terrified because God is in the circle of the righteous.

God’s judgment will fall on the enemies of his people. The Hebrew here is dramatic. King David uses שֶׁם almost like הִנֵּה Behold! The enemies of God’s people are God’s enemies and God will strike them with terror on Judgment Day, if not before.

But there is also a gospel aspect to this: vindication. God is with his people, even though no one can see it. We who are devoured like bread, day after day, will be vindicated on Judgment Day. God will demonstrate to the whole world that our faith was correct on the day that every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:11). That is a rich gospel promise to us who live here by faith and not by sight.

This will be the ultimate proof of God’s existence. All those fools who doubted or denied it outright, by word or teaching or sinful life, will learn the truth. No longer will God be hidden by the trappings of this world and the humility of Christ’s first coming. Then the glory will be plain to all. For us, that will be a great blessing. But for those who denied him, having to confess Christ will be part of their eternal punishment. It will give them no joy or peace.

Verse 6:

עֲצַת-עֲנִי תִבְיֹשׁוּ כִי יְהוּה מַחְסֵהוּ:

עֲצַת construct, “counsel” “advice” then taking on the meaning of “purpose” or “plan” which seems to fit here better, since no giver of advice is mentioned in the text.

עֲנִי “the poor, afflicted, humble”

בוֹשׁ תִבְיֹשׁוּ Hiphil imperfect “to put to shame, to cause shame” TWBOT says: “The primary meaning of this root is ‘to fall into disgrace, normally through failure, either of self or of an object of trust.’ ... the force of *bōš* is somewhat in contrast to the primary meaning of the English ‘to be ashamed,’ in that the English stresses the inner attitude, the state of mind, while the Hebrew means ‘to come to shame’ and stresses the sense of public disgrace, a physical state.” The word sometimes carries the idea of the dismay that happens when your plans fail. This meaning seems to fit well with the object עֲצַת and it seems to be the sense that the translations are following, when they render this verb as “frustrate the plans” (NIV 84/2011 and HCSB) or “shame the plans” (ESV – a very awkward construction in English). Brug suggests a conative imperfect, “You try to put to shame” (p. 212), which doesn’t alter the semantic force but does explain the shift to the imperfect here.

כִּי It’s rare for this particle to have the meaning “but” and yet the context seems to require it.

מְחֻסָּה מְחֻסָּה “shelter, refuge”

The purposes of the poor man you [pl.] frustrate but the LORD is his refuge

God now addresses the evildoers directly. He lays out their sin: causing the purposes of the poor to be a source of shame, therefore, to be frustrated. The Hebrew עָנִי is rich in theological significance. It is derived from the verb עָנָה. BDB gives its basic meaning as “to be bowed down” while TWBOT says “to force,” or “to try to force submission,” and “to punish or inflict pain upon.” The verb is used in a number of different ways, but of particular interest to us is when God humbles his people to bring about repentance (see for example, Deuteronomy 8:2-3 or Isaiah 64:12 [Hebrew verse 11]) or when they humble themselves as a sign of contrition, often with fasting (see Leviticus 16:29,31; Psalm 119:107; Isaiah 58:10).

עָנִי is part of a group of words that emphasize humility and meekness. Most translations prefer either “the poor,” “the humble” or “the afflicted” for most instances in which it occurs. There are many contexts in which poverty or physical suffering clearly are the meaning. In Deuteronomy 24:14-15, hired servants are עָנִי. In Exodus 22:25-26, when the cloak of the עָנִי is taken in pledge, it must not be kept overnight, because it is that person’s only outer garment (and blanket). Proverbs 22:22 pictures the עָנִי at the gate, presumably as beggars.⁷ There are many Old Testament passages that tie this word to God’s concern for the poor/afflicted (Psalm 22:24 [Hebrew 25]; Psalm 25:16; 34:6 [Hebrew 7] 2 Samuel 22:28 just to name a few).

Many writers have seen in this word a command for social concern and in many circles that would be the emphasis in the interpretation of this passage. We cannot omit that idea, since God’s people often are poor and oppressed (see James 2:1-13 for a New Testament perspective). But the TWBOT observes that the Mosaic laws about the עָנִי were given at Mt. Sinai before any Israelite owned property or was in a position to oppress the poor among their people. It points out that many contexts use this word in contrast to the attitude of scoffers (see Proverbs 3:34 for one example). In Isaiah 66:2, God speaks of the faith of the עָנִי when he says that he esteems the one who is humble and contrite in spirit. This word is used in several messianic contexts for Christ. Zechariah 9:9 uses it in the prophecy of his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. God often speaks positively of this attitude in his people.

This verse is speaking of how the godless treat those who humbly live their faith. God is deeply concerned about the ordinary Christian who trusts in him in all the perils and upheavals of life. He is their refuge in the storms of life.

I wonder how often we remember to proclaim this to people in our very materialistic age? The God who is real is deeply concerned about his people in all their suffering. He allows things to come to humble them, in order to purify their faith. Yet, he does not enjoy their suffering. He is there to hear, to uplift, to strengthen and to rescue. He sends us to proclaim that truth to his people as they struggle under their crosses. For God, his existence is never a speculative, philosophical proposition. He exists to save, to protect, to lift up and to bring home. His people know he is real through the faith he has placed in their hearts.

⁷ See the Hebrew or the ESV or HCSB. Both versions of the NIV translate עָנִי בְּשַׁעַר as “the needy in court.”

Verse 7:

מִי יִתֵּן מִצִּיּוֹן יְשׁוּעַת יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשׁוּב יְהוָה נְשׁוּבוֹת עַמּוֹ יִגַּל יַעֲקֹב יִשְׂמַח יִשְׂרָאֵל:

מִי יִתֵּן is a Hebrew idiom used to express wishes or desires. “Who will give?” means “Oh, that I had!”

יִתֵּן Qal imperfect “to give, set.” It is used idiomatically here, which always presents some difficulty with translation. All four of the translations being used by NPH render the imperfect “would come” here.

יְשׁוּעַת “salvation” The construct form used with the absolute יִשְׂרָאֵל. In this case, the absolute is objective, “salvation for Israel” rather than “salvation of Israel” (which could be misunderstood to be subjective, the salvation Israel will achieve).

בְּשׁוּב יְהוָה נְשׁוּבוֹת עַמּוֹ This idiom occurs more than thirty times in the Old Testament. The key issue in translating it is the meaning of the noun נְשׁוּבוֹת. If it derives from the word שָׁבָה “to take captive,” then it would mean “to restore the captivity of.” In that case it must have come to mean any deliverance from evil in this life. However, some scholars believe that it comes from שׁוּב, the verb that is used in the idiom. Then it would be a cognate object, literally meaning “to turn a turn,” which would lead much more naturally to the common translation “to restore the fortunes of.” Brug argues that possibly it may come from either root, depending on the context (*Psalms 1-72*, p. 212; *Psalms 73-150*, pp. 399-400).

שׁוּב בְּשׁוּב Qal infinitive construct (usually temporal with this preposition)

יִגַּל Qal imperfect “to rejoice”

יִשְׂמַח Qal imperfect “to rejoice, be glad”

Oh that the salvation of Israel would come from Zion. When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice and Israel will be glad.

God promises to deliver and then King David, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, interjects his own desire that God would send that rescue. Note that he pictures it coming from Mt. Zion. The first reference to Mt. Zion is found in 2 Samuel 5:7 when David captured “the fortress of Zion – which is the City of David” (NIV 2011). The next time that the name Zion is mentioned in the historical books is when King Solomon brings the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant “from the city of David, that is Zion” (1 Kings 8:1 HCSB) to the newly built temple on Mt. Moriah. The name Zion was then extended to this area and eventually to the whole city, because of the presence of the ark. The prophets and psalms evoke Zion as the place where God dwells. God taught his people to think of the Most Holy Place, and specifically of the space above the Atonement Cover, as the place where he dwells. So already in Psalm 9, King David speaks of God being “enthroned in Zion” and calls Jerusalem “the daughter of Zion.”

In our psalm, David longs to see deliverance come from Zion, from the tabernacle, from God who dwells there. That would seem to argue for this psalm being written after the time

when David brought the tabernacle to Jerusalem. But what then was the deliverance he was looking for? After the death of Saul, the Israelites were probably in the worst shape they had been in for a generation. But by the time David was established as king in Jerusalem he clearly had the upper hand in the battle against Israel's enemies. It's difficult to point to a specific historic circumstance that would bring forth this cry. But God saw his people being devoured by the ungodly. That is simply a condition of life in this sinful world. God promised judgment on our enemies and deliverance to his people. Even though he had enormous success in fighting God's enemies, David longed to see rescue come from God.

In verse two of this psalm, God looks out from heaven, the abode of God, but in verse seven, salvation comes from Zion, from the place where God dwells. Is that an accident? I don't think so. King Solomon recognized that even the highest heavens cannot contain God, much less the house he had built (1 Kings 8:27). But he prayed, "May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there,' so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place" (v. 29). So, there is a sense in which Zion almost comes to equal heaven.

It's legitimate for us New Testament Christians to complete the identification of Zion with the highest heavens. How often don't we pastors pray, "Come, Lord Jesus," especially as we watch morality retreat and Christianity come under greater and greater attacks? How often don't we hear our most faithful members sigh for their Savior's return? How often don't we admit that it would better to depart and be with Christ? By faith, we are sighing for salvation to come from Zion, from God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We know that while he does rescue here and it is worth our time to pray for relief and blessing even here, the final and true deliverance comes only when our Lord returns. Even the intermediate state is only a half-step. In heaven, we will have peace and joy, but at the resurrection, all creation will be restored to the perfection of Eden and all the effects of sin will be erased and our bodies will rise and live as God intended them to.

How appropriate then are David's final remarks! Whether **בְּשׁוּב יְהוָה שְׁבוּת עַמּוֹ** means "when the LORD returns the captivity of his people," or "when the LORD turns a turn for his people/restores the fortunes of his people," King David wrote more than four hundred years before the Babylonian Captivity and five hundred years after the Exodus. If he was already king when he wrote this psalm, he had already ended the oppression of the Philistines. So what captivity or hardship does he mean? Perhaps it's best to see **שְׁבוּת** as a poetic expression like "this veil of tears." Certainly, that's how we apply it to the lives of Christians. When God lifts all pain and sorrow off of us, Jacob will be glad and Israel will rejoice.

We don't do any violence to the text when we see the church here. The true Israel of God is all those who share the faith of Abraham, faith in Christ, as Moses himself recognized (see above). When at last we are delivered from all the hardships of sin, we will rejoice forever. And every time God provides deliverance for us here, we have a foretaste of that joy.

How can we use this psalm in our ministries? Certainly, it is a proof text for the existence of God. But that will only convince a believer. In that limited sense, it could be useful for a person who is struggling with the nasty or condescending or otherwise oppressive attitude of an unbeliever. But we want to be careful here that we don't find ourselves using this passage to pat ourselves on the back while we shake our heads at all those terrible sinners out there who don't get it.

Yet, it can comfort the simple Christian who is being treated as foolish and stupid for believing in God and in Christ. It goes hand in hand with St. Paul's observation about that the foolish things of God. The true fool – the person who is totally lacking in a true moral compass – is the person who simply does not see that God is there. The world is full of smart people who don't have the wisdom to use their knowledge for their spiritual good. Many liberal scholars are brilliant people. Some of them know the text of the Bible in the original languages better than we do. Think of the people who identify Greek papyrus fragments. Sometimes, with just one or two words, they can tell you what chapter and verse of the Greek New Testament those works come from. But very few of them trust in Christ to wash away their sins. Think of the rabbi who knows the Old Testament prophecies in Hebrew, but has a veil over his heart and cannot see Christ. All those people are נְבִלִים, fools who lack the wisdom to reach eternal life. There is tremendous comfort for the simple Christian in hearing what God pronounces as wisdom and what God pronounces as folly. For, as St. Paul said, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise" (1 Corinthians 1:27).

This is a very useful passage for proclaiming the law. In these verses, God equates sin with godlessness. He speaks almost in the same breath of the atheist and the persecutor. There really is no difference, no matter what the person's personal views are. All sin is a denial of God. All sin ultimately leads to unbelief. Failure to confess and trust in Christ is no different from denying God's existence altogether, because you have denied the one God who is real.

St. Paul uses this verse when he piles up quotations in Romans 3 to make the point that all people on earth are in need of a Savior. Luther says in the Smalcald Articles, "This hereditary sin is such a deep corruption of nature that no reason can understand it. Rather, it must be believed from the revelation of Scripture" (Part III, Article 1, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*). He goes on to point out that for that reason, the medieval scholastics taught "nothing but error and blindness" about this point. They could not accept the inherited sin or the total depravity of man and so they sought ways to mitigate both parts of this teaching.

Is the world any different today? Modern civilization is built on the idea that people are basically good, they just need to overcome their environment. Even in the WELS, don't we pastors sometimes feel pressure not to overemphasize the harshness of the law? I once got a letter from a woman who had visited my church and asked to receive a copy of the weekly sermon in the mail. She wrote that she had considered joining my congregation but that she had reached the conclusion that she would never join a church that would damn her to hell every week. She was particularly incensed that I would write and preach that small children are sinners who deserve God's wrath.

I don't think that woman was alone in her feelings. Many prospects are indeed offended when they come to church and hear the law in all its severity. But God simply states that all of humanity is utterly sinful and foolish spiritually. They willfully turn away from him. So it shouldn't surprise us that their response to the hammer of the law is denial.

That is something we pastors need to remember. Unbelievers should not appreciate our message. If you're like me, when you get a letter like that, you beat yourself up and ask yourself what you could have done better. But if you preached the law and the gospel, it isn't your fault that unbelievers stopped listening before you got to the gospel. As Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32).

This passage also serves as a warning for God's people to avoid "practical atheism." Very few of our members are going to come into our offices and say, "Pastor, I've decided there

really is no such thing as God. I quit the church.” Even when we make delinquent calls, my experience is that those unfaithful members still try to cloak themselves with the mantle of faith. But they are living as unbelievers. They need to hear that in the end, God will treat them as atheists if they do not repent.

In this sinful world, God hides himself behind nature, behind the word and sacraments, behind government, doctors, jobs and all the everyday things that we believe make a difference in our lives. It is so easy to forget that he is there – even for us believers. The fool allows himself to be sucked into that trap. The fool forgets that God looks out from heaven to see whether there are any who seek God. We need to remind each other of that truth.

We also need to remind each other of God’s promises when he hides behind persecution. We haven’t had to shed blood for the faith. But persecution is real and growing. Our people may well suffer for their faith. How many times in your confirmation class have you taught the 6th Commandment to kids who have siblings or parents who are living together? How many of them have been cautioned by those relatives not to say anything to you? How much spiritual anguish has it caused their tender consciences?

We live in a world that will never stop trying to punish us for our faith. But Christ will return. When salvation comes from Zion, Israel will rejoice and Jacob will be glad. The people of God will celebrate Christ’s deliverance for all eternity. While we live here, we hope in the Lord. We pray for rescue now. We trust that we will win in the end. Our God is real. He took on human flesh and lived and died and rose for us. He watches over us from heaven and hears our prayers. He will return and remake this world and we will live with him in joy and victory forever. Amen.

Appendix
A Comparison of Psalm 14 and Psalm 53

Psalm 14 (BHS/WIVU)

Psalm 53 (BHS/WIVU)

<p>14¹ לַמִּנְצַח לְדָוִד אָמַר נָבֵל בְּלִבּוֹ אֵין אֱלֹהִים הַשְׁחִיתוּ הַתְּעִיבוּ עָלֶיָּהּ אֵין עֲשֵׂה-טוֹב:</p> <p>2 יְהוָה מִשְׁמַיִם הִשְׁקִיף עַל-בְּנֵי-אָדָם לְרֹאוֹת הַיֵּשׁ מִשְׁכֵּיל דָרֵשׁ אֶת- אֱלֹהִים:</p> <p>3 הַכֹּל סָר יַחְדָּו נֶאֱלָחוּ אֵין עֲשֵׂה- טוֹב אֵין גַּם-אֶחָד:</p> <p>4 הֲלֹא יִדְעוּ כָּל-פְּעֻלֵי אָוֶן אֲכָלֵי עֵמִי אֲכָלוּ לֶחֶם יְהוָה לֹא קָרְאוּ:</p> <p>5 שֵׁם פָּחַדוּ פָּחַד כִּי-אֱלֹהִים בְּדֹר צַדִּיק:</p> <p>6 עֲצַת-עֲנִי תְבִישׁוּ כִי יְהוָה מַחְסֵהוּ:</p> <p>7 מִי יִתֵּן מִצִּיּוֹן יְשׁוּעַת יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּשׁוּב יְהוָה שְׁבוֹת עִמּוֹ יִגַּל יַעֲקֹב יִשְׁמַח יִשְׂרָאֵל:</p>	<p>53¹ לַמִּנְצַח עַל-מַחְלַת מִשְׁכֵּיל לְדָוִד:</p> <p>2 אָמַר נָבֵל בְּלִבּוֹ אֵין אֱלֹהִים הַשְׁחִיתוּ וְהַתְּעִיבוּ עוֹל אֵין עֲשֵׂה- טוֹב:</p> <p>3 אֱלֹהִים מִשְׁמַיִם הִשְׁקִיף עַל-בְּנֵי אָדָם לְרֹאוֹת הַיֵּשׁ מִשְׁכֵּיל דָרֵשׁ אֶת-אֱלֹהִים:</p> <p>4 כֹּלֹּ סָגַּ יַחְדָּו נֶאֱלָחוּ אֵין עֲשֵׂה-טוֹב אֵין גַּם-אֶחָד:</p> <p>5 הֲלֹא יִדְעוּ פְעֻלֵי אָוֶן אֲכָלֵי עֵמִי אֲכָלוּ לֶחֶם אֱלֹהִים לֹא קָרְאוּ:</p> <p>6 שֵׁם פָּחַדוּ-פָּחַד לֹא-הָיָה פָּחַד כִּי- אֱלֹהִים פִּזַּר עֲצָמוֹת חֲנֻדָּ הִבְשֵׁתָהּ כִּי-אֱלֹהִים מֵאָסָם:</p> <p>7 מִי יִתֵּן מִצִּיּוֹן יְשׁוּעוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּשׁוּב אֱלֹהִים שְׁבוֹת עִמּוֹ יִגַּל יַעֲקֹב יִשְׁמַח יִשְׂרָאֵל:</p>
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Psalm 14 (NIV84)

Psalm 14

For the director of music. Of David.

¹ The fool says in his heart,
“There is no God.”
They are corrupt, their deeds are vile;
there is no one who does good.
² The LORD looks down from heaven
on the sons of men
to see if there are any who understand,
any who seek God.
³ All have turned aside,
they have together become corrupt;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.
⁴ Will evildoers never learn—
those who devour my people as men eat
bread
and who do not call on the LORD?
⁵ There they are, overwhelmed with dread,
for God is present in the company of the
righteous.
⁶ You evildoers frustrate the plans of the
poor,
but the LORD is their refuge.
⁷ Oh, that salvation for Israel would come
out of Zion!
When the LORD restores the fortunes of his
people,
let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!

Psalm 53 (NIV84)

Psalm 53

For the director of music. According to *mahalath*. A
maskil of David.

¹ The fool says in his heart,
“There is no God.”
They are corrupt, and their ways are vile;
there is no one who does good.
² God looks down from heaven
on the sons of men
to see if there are any who understand,
any who seek God.
³ Everyone has turned away,
they have together become corrupt;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.
⁴ Will the evildoers never learn—
those who devour my people as men eat
bread
and who do not call on God?
⁵ There they were, overwhelmed with
dread,
where there was nothing to dread.
God scattered the bones of those who
attacked you;
you put them to shame, for God despised
them.
⁶ Oh, that salvation for Israel would come
out of Zion!
When God restores the fortunes of his
people,
let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!

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