

AMBIGUITY AND POETRY: PSALM 62 AS WITNESS

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ABSTRACT: Ambiguity is intrinsic and intended within biblical poetry. Psalm 62 demonstrates ways in which biblical poetry conveys this ambiguity. The form of poetry itself—its paratactic and terse shape—is the soil in which inference, reasoning, and imagination grow. There is, furthermore, an overlap between ambiguous language in general and ambiguity in poetry due to its form and intent. This essay directs modern notions of delimitation toward the realities of biblical poetry and encourages proper awareness and appreciation of ambiguity within Holy Scripture by considering its role within Psalm 62. Here the reader is challenged not only by the content of the psalm but by its form, repetition, and nuance so as to humble intellectual hubris, invite careful attention to detail, and prompt prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit's work of illumination and inspiration of Holy Scripture.

KEYWORDS: Psalms, Psalter, poetry, ambiguity, imagination, Psalm 62, Augustine

Introduction

Ambiguity is both loved and loathed. Eleanor Cook describes this paradox in her lovely introduction to poetic ambiguity: 'A stranger meeting ambiguity for the first time might well be taken aback by her mixed reputation' (Cook 2008/2009: 231). Storytellers can take delight in it, but conversations can be frustrated from it. When engaging Scripture, ambiguity is never far from reach. This is certainly the case for Psalms as ambiguity is native to the land of poetry. Poetry's ambiguity can be both intentional on the part of the poet and at the same time enhance the experience and appreciation of the poem by the reader (Margulis, Levine, Simchy-Gross, et al. 2017: 1-16) Eleanor Cook finds that ambiguity 'seems to be not so much an unknown land

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mass as a mythological creature, a Proteus, who changes shape whenever you wish to capture him' (Cook 2008/2009: 231). The eminent Roman Jakobson stated that ambiguity is 'an intrinsic, inalienable character of any self-focussed message, briefly, a corollary feature of poetry' (Jakobson 1987: 85, cited in Cook 2008/2009: 231). Cook considers the 'most interesting and useful cases in poetry are particular ones where ambiguity gives rise to wider effects' (Cook 2008/2009: 233), while Jakobson also wisely writes that 'the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry' (Jakobson 1987: 85).

From metaphor to meaning, from the flow of lines to the structure of the poem as a whole, poetry welcomes the indefinite. Modern biblical studies can struggle at this point. The aim in current research is often dissection and explanation. Precision and accuracy are highly prized—and rightly so. An appreciation for clarity and the hope of dodging ambiguity are winsomely noted by David Firth in the preface the Good News Bible, though not dissimilar from other modern translations in this regard (Firth 2008: 151-53). Such scientific attempts, however, are met with resistance in the poetry of the Hebrew Bible, for density is both intentional on the part of the psalmists *and* inherent to the form (see Miller 2000: 233-49). The poets, for instance, deliberately leverage language for polysemy (Raabe 1991: 213-27). What's more, the form itself—its paratactic and terse shape—is the soil in which inference, reasoning, and imagination grow (see Jones 2022; Jones 2023; Jones 2023).

This paper explores how biblical poetry is ambiguous and why it matters. In concert with select previous studies, I show how ambiguity is intrinsic *and* intended within biblical poetry and illustrate such by reading Psalm 62. To be sure, language itself is ambiguous. My interest in this essay is the overlap of ambiguous language in general and ambiguity in poetry due to form and intent. My contribution rests in directing modern notions of delimitation to the realities of biblical poetry, while encouraging proper awareness and appreciation of ambiguity within Holy Scripture (some branches of biblical studies, relishing in Enlightenment ideals, seek to explain any and everything within and behind the text, while others savor ambivalence of all kinds, not wishing to prioritize one reading over another).

I begin first by plotting out how biblical scholars have at times welcomed ambiguity in their research, particularly in the study of Psalms. A number of these scholars are indebted to the taxonomy of ambiguity from literary critic William Empson in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930). While there is much to commend among previous biblical scholarship, particularly in their use of Empson's classifications, lacking still are clarity and substance in the relation of ambiguity *to* Scripture. That is to say, a literary taxonomy applied to Scripture needs theological refinement. Therefore, I return to what seems a forgotten resource in modern biblical scholarship, a work

at once grammatical and theological that addresses in detail the topic of ambiguity, namely, Saint Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*. In engaging this work, we have aim for the heart of interpretation and in turn the heart of the interpreter as Augustine reminds us of both the clarity and *caritas* of reading Scripture.

Ambiguity in Biblical Studies

In surveying scholarship over the last few decades, scholars often focus on *intentional* or *deliberate* ambiguity. These observations crop up across the canon, but regularly are found in prophetic and narrative books (Johnson 2011; Cook 2017; McCracken 2015; Collins 1993; Hayes 2016; Pettit 2015). What's more, wisdom texts prove difficult to disambiguate, and this is certainly the case for the whole of Ecclesiastes and especially the recurring use of *hebel* (Goh 2020: 198-216, especially fn2, 198).

David Firth attends specifically to the topic of ambiguity for interpreting the Bible. Using Empson's taxonomy, he illustrates various categories of ambiguity throughout Scripture with particular attention to the book of Samuel. Outside of narrative, Firth draws examples from poetic and wisdom literature to discuss the relevant categories of ambiguity (specifically, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes—he finds two categories from Empson that not relevant to his study of Holy Scripture). These categories center on multiple meanings of words that are resolved, combined, or kept open. In all, Firth brings attention to how ambiguity 'is a mechanism for enriching the ways in which the text communicates and readers are able to experience it' (Firth 2008: 161). Furthermore, he contends that 'its presence can be a sign of skillful writer who invites readers to enjoy' the biblical text, but to experience this, we have 'to ask what an ambiguity is doing, what its rhetorical force is' (Firth 2008: 183).

Firth's is an accessible and helpful resource for studying ambiguous biblical texts. His employment of Empson's categories is good as far as it goes, but priority given to intentional or authorial ambiguity leaves quite a bit on the table. Indeed, consideration of semantics and metaphors is necessary, but not exhaustive. Thus, I do not agree that 'only that which can in some sense be traced back to the intention of the author is of interest here,' as Firth claims this 'is the only one of intrinsic value' (Firth 2008: 155). The form of writing itself, in my case, poetry, has much to offer, though it cannot be packed tightly into a narrow view of intentional ambiguity. I will say more on this in due course, but a few comments on studies of ambiguity specifically in Psalms.

Psalms and Ambiguity

Hardly anyone would be surprised that psalms poetry can be ambiguous. At issue is the quantity and quality of the ambiguity. A text, for example, could be opaque due to improper knowledge on the part of interpreters, text-critical issues, semantic or met-

aphorical ambiguities, the relationship of parallel lines, and more (see Pyper 2001). In addition, scholars have noted the difficulty of determining the speaker within a psalm, as it is well-known that the voice may shift abruptly and without any notice. This posits an extra difficulty for interpreters of written texts, especially anonymous and ancient texts. In the case of written text an interpreter cannot appeal to the supplementary ‘illocutionary acts’ (i.e., the non-linguistic communication devices). Augustine realizes that when authorial intention is not explicitly stated and when contextual clues, such as phrasing, intonation, and gesticulation happen to be unavailable, an interpreter cannot have any extra help from such ‘illocutionary acts’ (on the shift in voice in Psalms, see Hildebrandt 2020; Jacobson 2004). It is also common knowledge that a particular form (*Gattung*) of a psalm can be allusive (Nasuti 2004: 95-124; cf. the excellent treatment of genre with attention to the role of ambiguity in Sommer 2022: 150-180).

One of the most extensive treatments of Psalms and ambiguity comes from Paul Raabe. He argues that these poems are full of intentional ambiguity, but biblical scholars may be prone to overlook that reality due to a fixation on scholarly precision, particularly with regard to translation (Raabe 1991: 213). While careful not to miscommunicate any inherent negative or deceitful connotations, Raabe finds ambiguity a proper term that brings with it a sense of ‘multivalence and the puzzling nature of the text’ (Raabe 1991: 213). Notably, Raabe does not deal with non-deliberate ambiguity or with metaphors—both topics that I consider as a matter of course (not a critique of Raabe, merely noting his expressed scope of study). Key areas of his study are *lexical ambiguity* (with the possibility of wordplay), *phonetic ambiguity* (referencing similar sounding words or phrases), *grammatical ambiguity* (reference of pronominal suffix, unspecified subject), and *word order*, all of which can occur in a line or run through an entire poem (e.g., Psalm 7). Above all, Raabe underscores that ambiguity is ‘evidence of the psalmists’ mastery of the language’ (Raabe 1991: 227). He goes on to note that ‘even more important, such multivalence functions to engage the hearers/readers, to cause them to interact with the psalm, and to lead them to recognize the truth of the various possible interpretations. The psalmists achieved this by expressing a “surplus of meaning” in a terse style’ (Raabe 1991: 227) (Raabe here gives a nod to Ricoeur 1976).

Patrick Miller follows up Raabe’s study by widening the scope of ambiguity. (cf. Kselman 2005: 184-89).¹ Miller begins first by stating, ‘What is very clear from syntax, ellipsis, terseness, parallelism, and figures of thought is that ambiguity and polysemy play a large part in poetry, a feature of biblical poetry that *needs much more*

¹ It is helpful to note that for Augustine, “[f]airly often his exegesis of the psalms reminds us of the interpretation of poetry as practiced by pagan grammarians, since as the Bible’s poetry the psalms seemed to demand a similar approach” (Fiedrowicz 2000: 20).

exploration' (Miller 2000: 245). Thus, while Miller finds general agreement with Raabe's 'deliberate' ambiguity, he considers that the 'very character [of poetry] creates the possibility of multisignification, alternative ways of understanding' (Miller 2000: 246). In other words, ambiguity is native to poetry not simply because poets deliberately choose ambiguous words, but that the poetic 'lines, by virtue of their contiguity are perceived as connected, while the exact relationship between them is left unspecified' (Berlin 2008: 6). Excellent essays by John Goldingay, Carolyn Sharp, James Kennedy, and Katherine Southwood on individual psalms serve as cases in point (Goldingay 2006; Sharp 2017; Kennedy 2009; Southwood 2019).

This quick glance at research on the Old Testament and Psalms specifically highlights a certain tolerance and indeed appreciation for ambiguity. This paper stands in that tradition. In what follows I bring in wisdom from Augustine on key categories for ambiguity and their relation to the character of both the interpretation and the interpreter of the Bible.

Ambiguity in Augustine

Augustine, well acquainted with the grammatical tradition, finds awareness and study of ambiguity important in interpreting Holy Scripture. Of course, the psalms are never far from Augustine's mind, no matter what text or topic is under consideration. Rowan Williams, for example, writes 'It would not be an exaggeration to say that the narrative autobiographical voice of the *Confessions* is systematically blended with the voice of the psalmist' (Williams 2004: 17). In his mature work, *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine comments on how word-signs relate specifically to the task of biblical interpretation. Toom thus considers it plausible that 'Augustine was the first to apply the idea of words being sign extensively to the task of interpreting Scripture' (Toom 2016: 92; cf. Gramigna 2020). Two key areas of ambiguity are *voluntas* and *scriptum*. The former has to do with *authorial intention*, whereas the latter speaks of the *lexical or syntactical features of language*. Simply put, *voluntas* in relation to ambiguity could be an author's play on words, whereas *scriptum* might be the vagaries of language.

Ambiguity was widely recognized in the ancient rhetorical tradition, but often salient was 'how to argue about documents, not how to deal with them so as to arrive at a correct or true interpretation' (Press 1980: 120, cited in Eden 1990: 46). This was not the case with Augustine, for whom ambiguity and interpretation are not disparate concerns. Kathy Eden shows that Augustine applies a curiously 'Christian transformation of this [rhetorical] tradition' (Eden 1990: 47).

In diagnosing some of the contributions from Augustine's markedly Christian views on interpretation, we turn to the dichotomy of *voluntas* and *scriptum* within Augustine's writing. Eden states that these two concepts and their contrast 'form . . .

the basis of Augustinian hermeneutics, *although it is largely transformed*’ (Eden 1990: 47, italics mine). Within *De doctrina christiana*, to be sure, Augustine concentrates on *voluntas*, and his ‘[f]ocus on intentionality . . . [is] crucial’ (Toom 2016: 419-20). Augustine’s attention on *voluntas* is distinct from his earlier focus on *scriptum* in *De dialectica* (Toom 2016: 419). For Augustine it is the ‘given signs’ that stay at the forefront of the mind because of their intentionality with regard to language and style (Toom 2016: 96). In the world of signs within Scripture, Augustine’s balance of *voluntas* and *scriptum* ‘is important, especially when an interpreter, trying to follow the authorial intention, is tempted to disregard the *scriptum*’ (Toom 2016: 493). Nonetheless, there is warning for the interpreter who ‘elevates *scriptum* above *voluntas*’ (Eden 1990: 50). This is because *voluntas* ‘pervades all facets of interpretation’ in *De doctrina christiana*. *Voluntas* for Augustine speaks of both the reader (particularly in having charity) and the author of the biblical text (Eden 1990: 54).

In witnessing *voluntas* and *scriptum* within Holy Scripture, Augustine frames the issue theologically. This is exceptionally important for the study of poetry in the Bible. Augustine surmises, ‘[I]n order for us to make progress in our understanding we need the mental exercise of wrestling with the text as well as the intellectual satisfaction of discovering what it means’ (Augustine *De doctrina christiana*, 4.6.9, italics mine). Furthermore, it is only

after acquiring some familiarity with the actual style of the divine scriptures, should one proceed to try to open up and unravel their obscurities, in such a way that instances from the plainer passages are used to cast light on the more obscure utterances, and the testimony of some undoubted judgments is used to remove uncertainties from those that are more doubtful (Augustine *De doctrina christiana*, 2.9.14).

This is to say, ambiguity is good for the reader.

Ambiguity, to be sure, is one reason why ‘texts are not understood’ (Augustine *De doctrina christiana*, 2.9.14). As noted above, ambiguity can be due to reader’s lack of ability to read well in either the style or content. The reader is in any case challenged by the ‘communicative gap . . . between language and the reality it denominates’ (Toom 2003: 219). One of Augustine’s solutions here is ‘knowledge of languages’ (Augustine *De doctrina christiana*, 2.9.14). Yet the biblical languages as well as their translations—as we all know—can be ambiguous (Toom 2016: 100). Biblical scholars pick up on this, too. Patrick Miller, for instance, observes textual and translational ambiguity of Psalm 15 and asks, ‘Which arrangement of the text is correct? The point of this article is that such a question is unnecessary, if not misdirected.’ Miller wisely

observes, ‘There is a genuine ambiguity in the poetry, and the different ways of perceiving the poetry give different nuances or force to it’ (Miller 2000: 418-419).

Above all, ambiguity surfaces with metaphorical language Eden goes to some length to show that Augustine does not in *De doctrina christiana* conflate figurative with allegorical. It is ‘the chief cause of obscurity, and results, according to the ancient rhetorical manuals, from the inherent capacity of words to signify in more than one way . . .’ (Eden 1990: 62; Toom 2016: 102). This, of course, brings us to Psalms, as metaphor is the backbone of poetry. Susan Gillingham carefully observes how psalms of lament and psalms of praise come wrapped in figurative language, or as she puts it, ‘ambiguity of meaning’—and this is altogether different from prose (Gillingham 1994: 22-23). Augustine ably reminds us that ‘ambiguities arising from metaphorical language, about which we have to talk from now on, call for no ordinary care and attention’ (Augustine *De doctrina christiana*, 3.5.9). The obvious difficulty, which Augustine highlights, is misreading the sign: if it is metaphorical, then one should not read it as literal (Augustine *De doctrina christiana*, 3.3.7). In laying out rules for interpreting whether an expression is figurative or not, Augustine states that ‘anything in the divine writings that cannot be referred either to good, honest morals or to the truth of the faith, you must know is said figuratively’ (Augustine *De doctrina christiana*, 3.10.14). He goes on further to talk about the Old Testament and its interpretation that ‘even when understood literally and not figuratively, can be transferred also to these times and put into practice in life today’ (Augustine *De doctrina christiana*, 3.18.26). This ‘very distinction between literal and figurative signs is another major feature of Augustine’s hermeneutical theory’ (Toom 2016: 103). The distinction between the two, of course, involves semantics—an aspect of *scriptum* (Eden 1990: 55-56).

Augustine outlines how to interpret difficult texts. The rule of faith certainly looms large. Should there still be some imprecision, the literary context remains paramount (Augustine *De doctrina christiana*, 2.12.18; 2.13.20-14.21; 3.2.2-3.6; 3.4.8; 3.25.37). Even so, there may be some indistinctness that the reader may clarify, whether in meaning, syntax, or translation, that ‘may result in various (true readings)’.” This, as Tarmo Toom observes, makes evident that ‘for Augustine, texts are polysemous’ (Toom 2007: 428).

Before moving on, I want to wade deeper in the waters of Augustine’s hermeneutic for our study. Like many modern scholars cited above, Augustine concentrates on intentional ambiguity, or *voluntas*. However, he does not let go of *scriptum*. Concerning biblical poetry, I think it is important to note how critical the form, or *scriptum*, is. Take the excellent discussion of parallelism by Adele Berlin. One of the central functions of parallelism (particularly of the semantic kind) is ‘ambiguation’

and ‘dis-ambiguation’ (Berlin 2008: 96). That is, the first line is most frequently ambiguous semantically, and the second line *disambiguates* the first. However, the second line ‘may introduce an element of ambiguity into the first’ (Berlin 2008: 97).

This, of course, is well known to readers of Hebrew poetry. My point here is that often a move of disambiguation with the stacking together of poetic lines has a wide spectrum of significance in interpreting a poem. A couplet may, for example, draw extended commentary from many scholars and as such receive the official notice as being *ambiguous*. What should not be lost, however, is that this movement of ambiguity to disambiguation is happening in nearly every line, even if the reader is not consciously aware of it. As Berlin puts it: ‘Parallelism is forever poised between redundancy and polysemy’ (Berlin 2008: 99).

Similarly, in discussing genre within the book of Proverbs, for example, Suzanna Millar uses the broad and non-technical label ‘openness’ (Millar 2020: 5-6). In speaking of the proverb specifically, she writes that ‘[b]y choosing this genre, part of the author’s intention seems to be paradoxically, to legitimize interpretations other than those first intended’ (Millar 2020: 7). This, to be clear, ‘should not contravene the base assumptions of the author’s world’ (Millar 2020: 7). She wisely states that the ‘openness of biblical proverbs is, paradoxically, often due to their constriction in form’ (Millar 2020: 45). While I’m not equivocating Psalms and Proverbs, I do think the overlap is quite apparent. Specifically, the syntactical relationship of a couplet ‘may not be entirely clear,’ and as such, Millar takes that to mean that the ‘reader must decipher it for himself’ (Millar 2020: 56).

In all, we see with Augustine and others that ambiguity inhabits the biblical text. This should not be discouraging or minimized, but valued as one holds onto the *telos* of reading Scripture, namely, reading in order ‘to know God.’ Where difficulties lie in the biblical witness, Augustine encourages one to ‘pray for understanding’ (Augustine *De doctrina christiana*, 3.37.56). What’s more, Augustine elaborates the art of interpretation by calling the reader ‘to turn the passage over this way and that until we arrive at its true meaning, especially when our use of these rules is reinforced by being exercised devoutly and reverently’ (Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, 3.24.34). In reading Scripture, particularly its figurative language, Augustine centers the activity in the reality that the Holy Bible ‘commands nothing but charity, or love, and censures nothing but cupidity, or greed, and that is the way it gives shape and form to human morals’ (Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, 3.15). Augustine thus lays bare the challenge of Scripture and draws out at least part of the purpose in confronting the biblical text:

But those who read them [scriptures] in a light-minded spirit are liable to be misled by innumerable obscurities and ambiguities, and to mistake the meaning entirely, while

in some places they cannot even guess at a wrong meaning, so dense and dark is the fog that some passages are wrapped in. This is all due, I have no doubt at all, to divine providence, in order to *break in pride with hard labor*, and to *save the intelligence from boredom*, since it readily forms a low opinion of things that are too easy to work out (Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, 2.6.7, italics mine; cf. on reading Scripture, boredom, and a theology of attention, Jones 2024).

Hard work and delight in interpretation are, therefore, all part of the process—by design. In considering the Song of Songs, especially 4:2, Augustine writes, ‘What is not in dispute, all the same, is both that one gets to know things more enjoyably through such comparisons, and also that discovering things is much more gratifying if there has been some difficulty in the search for them’ (Augustine *De doctrina christiana*, 2.6.8).

Through Augustine’s mature reflections on reading Scripture, we walk away with awareness that ambiguity resides in the *voluntas* and *scriptum* of God’s Word. Ambiguity may have to do with the reader’s lack knowledge or the intentional polysemous language of the author. Nonetheless, as it comes to poetry, the concise shape of paratactic lines is by necessity ambiguous. And as such, we should not quickly breeze by the stack of lines to then ruminate on a metaphor. Both the form and deliberate use of polysemous words and images warrant our attention. ‘Clearly, *scriptum* and *voluntas* are both important interpretative factors and neither one of them can be dismissed even slightly’ (Toom 2007: 423).

Certainly, not all ambiguity will be resolved. Nevertheless, any exegetical clarity should rest in the disposition of love and charity. Augustine does not present *De doctrina christiana* as ‘exhaustive or unimpeachable analysis of all signs,’ but instead care on lexical and intended meanings of ‘God’s Word . . . written in human words’ (Toom 2006: 258). In what follows I take the wisdom from Augustine to the Hebrew text of Psalm 62. As I do, I keep in mind the careful and important observations of poetry by Robert Lowth, and this is well beyond the three-fold taxonomy so exhaustingly referenced in textbooks.

Psalm 62 as Witness

This psalm opens with ambiguity. Scholars struggle to place the poem in a particular genre. The structure of the psalm also resists clarity. Beyond these features, the very first word welcomes multiple readings. The particle *’ak* has an affirmative reading, ‘surely’ (cf. Ps. 23), as well as the semantics of exclusion, ‘only.’ The decision between the two is not a light one, as several verses throughout the poem begin with this particle (vv. 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 10 [Hebrew versification]) (the first line, punctuated with *aleph*, begins with *’ak* ends with God [*’elohim*], making symmetry blatant). One reading

is assertive and affirming, the other exclusionary. Perhaps the usage isn't consistent throughout? Even if the particle has a consistent function, its syntactical potency is thinned out significantly in translations: 'ak leads out each verse in Hebrew, but is variously translated and then placed every which way within the lines (so ESV).

At first blush, our task is thus working out the *scriptum*, but given the intensity of the repetition of the particle 'ak, we're likely struggling with the *voluntas* of the text, too. With a quick scan of the poetry we are already considering how the poem fits together semantically and structurally due to one small, albeit important, particle that opens the poem. We see, therefore, the significance of *scriptum* early on in interpreting the poem, and importantly, neither the Hebrew text nor translation offers tidy solutions.

The next line states that the psalmist's life (*nepeš*) is in silence (*dûmîyah*). Questions now crop up. Why is his life silent? Is silence a good thing? Is *silence* even a proper rendering of the Hebrew? Sonja Noll, who has the most recent and exhaustive study of so-called silence lexemes in the Hebrew Bible, struggles to categorize this particular lexeme (*dwm*) along with other seemingly similar ones (especially *dmm*). The senses range from stopping (ceasing), stopping (in terms of life, i.e., death), and occasionally with specific reference to verbal silence. Nonetheless, about a quarter of the instances she finds to be ambiguous regarding the precise meaning (Noll 2019; Noll 2020). Due to lexical ambiguity (especially homonyms) and semantic ambiguity, scholars struggle to locate precisely the meaning within each context, though v. 2 may well be here a sense of stillness. Yet Göran Eidevall is right to say that 'one should keep in mind that there is no sharp line between stillness and silence' (Eidevall 2012: 170; cf. Reymond 2009).

Furthermore, considering that this poem is in Holy Scripture, what is the reader meant to learn from the psalmist's silence? Though the *scriptum* is opaque, the next line moves to what seems a separate topic: *from him is my salvation* (v. 2). The relationship of these two lines is not obvious. The syntactical uncertainty (*scriptum*) needs resolution. Most of these questions that I find the Hebrew text prompting are not noted by Augustine, who comments of this verse (*Shall not my soul surrender itself to God?*) by way of the Latin text (*nonne Deo subiecta erit anima mea ab ipso enim salutare meum*) (Augustine 2001: 202-3). What is more, I suggest that the poetic lines themselves (*scriptum*) are propelling us forward in search of clarity, leaving behind a trail of ambiguity not yet resolved.

The next verse (v. 3) layers further description on the psalmist's God. It reads 'ak-hû 'šûrî (*only he is my rock*). I take the particle as *only* here as a way of constraining the psalmist's singular trust in an environment with endless options of deities. As such, the movement to metaphor is all the more powerful. The image, *rock*, is

easy enough to interpret, but it is ambiguous nonetheless (see, e.g., Domeris 2020; Knowles 1989; Terrien 1998). The image appears adjacent to *our salvation* (Psalm 95:1), *my refuge* (Psalm 94:22), the one who *creates* (Deuteronomy 32:18), and the one who is *eternal* (Isaiah 26:4). That is to say, the edge of the figurative language needs close consideration.

As the verse proceeds to show safety and protection for the psalmist, our gap in knowledge is filled. But we're still left wondering what this has to do with the silence in v. 2. Thus Erich Zenger comments on the metaphor that 'God is "the (high and lofty) rock" to which the petitioner can flee, so that the enemies cannot reach him' (Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 114). The metaphor would likely not do much for current scholars seeking out deliberate ambiguity, but I suggest the image of *rock* piques interest and prompts further consideration of the *voluntas*, specifically what *rock* has to do with *silence*. Perhaps the psalmist is rehearsing truths as he waits for God to act once again on his behalf? Whatever the case, we should recall that this protective imagery of God doesn't negate the real and present pain. As Erich Zenger notes, 'God neither dismisses the enemies nor chases the germ of violence from the human heart. The conundrum of evil and the suffering that comes from it are part of the reality of life' (Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 114).

The end of v. 3 has some subtle ambiguity. As is common in the psalms, the speaker states *I will not be shaken*, but here the line concludes with *greatly* (*rabbah*). Thus, in translation, we are left asking, does the psalmist mean here *I will not be greatly shaken* (. . . *though I might be shaken a bit*)? In commenting on the Hebrew text, the NET Bible considers it

[U]nusual for this adverb to follow a negated verb. Some see this as qualifying the assertion to some degree, but this would domesticate the affirmation too much (see v. 6b, where the adverb is omitted). If the adverb has a qualifying function, it would suggest that the psalmist might be upended, though not severely. This is inconsistent with the confident mood of the psalm. The adverb probably has an emphatic force here, 'I will not be greatly upended' meaning 'I will not be annihilated' (NET 2019).

This search for symmetry puts far too much weight on finding no 'qualifying function' within a so-called 'confident mood.' Moreover, if the force of the adverb is such that it means 'will not be annihilated,' then the absence of the adverb later would need to communicate a softening somehow. In short, here is a well-intended attempt to smooth out any ambiguity within the poetry that ultimately goes against the grain of the text. It is a question of *scriptum*, but as we will see, it has to do with *voluntas* as well (cf. v. 7).

Verse 4 asks a question that seems directed at his enemies (*how long?*). The verse is full of grammatical and semantic ambiguity, mostly in the realm of textual criticism. This is most evident in *t'roššēhû* 'you murder' (v. 4). Zenger, for example, thinks the MT 'can be retained,' even though there is doubt in the precise *binyan* (Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 110). On the imagery of the psalmist as a *falling wall*, Geoffrey Grogan observes that this could 'represent either his enemies' estimate of him or his estimate of himself without God, more likely the former' (Grogan 2008: 118). Thus, while the metaphor itself isn't difficult, the heuristic heft is open to interpretation. Larger interpretative matters of *voluntas* appear, however, with a *falling wall* referring to the psalmist, and *rock* referencing God. The poet seems to be pressing the reader / listener to consider the juxtaposition of realities.

While text critical issues appear in v. 5 as well, the connection to the poem's opening remarks on silence becomes clearer. The enemies of the psalmist use their mouths to *bless* (*y'bārēkû*); the psalmist is quiet. On the inside, however, the enemies rage with *curses* (*y'qallû*). We're left wondering what might be happening *within* the psalmist.

Verse 6 recalls the opening of the poem. It begins with 'ak and ends with a directional preposition and *Elohim*. One difference, albeit small, is that v. 6 has the preposition *lamed*, whereas v. 2 has 'l; both read *to God* in translation. Of course, this could well be a distinction without a difference, or in other words, a different arrangement of *scriptum* with no import of *voluntas*. On the other hand, the difference could prompt the reader / listener to observe other differences that might follow—and we do not have to wait long.

The next line, using the same lexeme *silent*, appears now as an imperative (as opposed to a noun, v. 2). Thus, the line reads *be silent, O my life (nepeš)!* Konrad Schaefer rightly asks 'What kind of silence is referred to in the refrain?' (Schaefer 2001: 151). Some manuscripts read v. 6 as a noun in order to harmonize it with v. 2, thereby excising any possible relation of the imperative to *voluntas*. While this is certainly possible, such a move is gratuitous. More bluntly, I find it a wholly unimaginative reading of the poem. I suspect that the harmonization could very well be an example of scholarly precision (even in ancient form) in attempt to homogenize where the poetic text is meant to be somewhat ambiguous. Nonetheless, the imperative makes good contextual sense as tension is rising with every line. The psalmist has just shown his exhaustion with the enemies *blessing with their mouth* and *cursing within them*. As such, the psalmist might not be making a statement about his life, but rather calling himself to *stay silent!*

Verse 7 repeats earlier lines with notable difference. Here, the adverb *rabbah* is missing, whereas it's present in v. 3 (*I will not be greatly shaken*). Perhaps the adverb should be deleted in v. 3, as some suggest, but that act of harmonization could well

deafen the *voluntas* (so BHS). It is worth considering then if v. 7 is meant to be read over against the force of the adverb in v. 3. In other words, the B line of v. 7 *I will not be shaken* could ring with more confidence and clarity than v. 3. Of significance, this confidence is achieved after the details of *blessing* and *cursing* from his enemies (v. 5). The subsequent verse (v. 8) underscores in no uncertain terms how God brings protection and deliverance to the psalmist.

The psalmist then turns directly to his audience—with no formal marking—to call for *trust* (*biṭḥū*) in God (v. 9). The A line opens up the scope to a seemingly imaginative timeframe. The psalmist charges the people to *trust God—in all times* (cf. Ps. 34). The next imperative is one in the same clear and inexact. Put differently, we meet disambiguation and polysemy in the B line. Certainly, the commission reaches into figurative language with *pour out your heart*, using words that are not altogether together clear in order to comprehend the activity of trust. This phrase, I suggest, has to do with *scriptum* and *voluntas*. I take it as reasonable that this phrase is grasped at a basic level upon a first hearing. Yet when one gives space for further rumination, the details of the metaphorical phrase radiate and the poetry “invites prayerful trust” in the holy God (Schaefer 2001, 151). Augustine does not so much explicate the metaphors, but instead shows in sermoniac fashion where the figurative language leads. Given that God is *my refuge*, the Christian should readily *pour out* their heart. Any opposition, Augustine counsels, that attempts to frighten the Christian and their confident faith, is not in any way ‘strong than he is’ (Augustine 2001: 216-17).

Verse 10 returns us to the punch of the particle *’ak*. Following that, we meet the ever-vexing *hebel*. The semantic reach of this word is well-known. In looking in the poetic context for clarity, challenge awaits. The subject of the verbless clause is fair enough: *b^enê-’ādām* (*sons of man*). Thus, *sons of man are . . . transitory*, let’s say for the moment. But then what to make of the B line, which is altogether similar? The noun *kāzāb* (*lie*) serves as the predicate in the verbless clause, providing some level of specificity to *hebel* above. The subject of this B line is *b^enê-’iš* (*sons of man*). Translations typically read a comparison between these two lines, with the *sons of ’ādām* being ‘low’ and the *sons of ’iš* being ‘high’ in rank or estate (e.g., ESV; NRSV; KJV). I see this perceived comparison of lines as an attempt by translators to clarify ambiguity that they might see in the Hebrew text. Goldingay notes the possibility of contrast between the subjects of the A and B lines, but his translation and comments remain ambivalent (Goldingay 2007: 250). I consider this attempt to be altogether backward. This is likely a case where translators are wanting more specificity than the text is willing to give—something Augustine himself warms readers of.

In any case, the first two lines of v. 10 are grounded in the barbed point of the next two lines: *On the scales they go up / together lighter than a breath (hebel)*. The second

occurrence of *hebel* confirms at least one sense of the word, namely, *light* or *weightless*. Augustine, though not intent on turning his sermon into a lecture of ambiguity, wrestles with how there could be *many* (Augustine 2001: 217). The edge of that sense pushes back on the first occurrence of the word. Is humanity merely transitory? Perhaps something else is intended with this adjective. Here we grasp, at least at some level, the *scriptum* of *hebel*, but given the repetition of the lexeme and its referent, I suspect we're now moving into the area of *voluntas*, namely, that the psalmist wants us to consider more here than simply that these people are *light*.

Trust gets more specific in v. 11. The psalmist encourages his hearers *not to trust in wealth*—a clear and frequent command across the canon. The B line, by way of recurrence, calls the people *not to act vainly with loot* (v. 11). Here is one of the few appearances of *hbl* in verbal form (cf. 2 Kings 17:15; Jeremiah 2:5). The prepositional phrase sits easily next to the A line *in wealth*. The verb *don't act vainly* ('*al-tehbālū*), however, brings exactitude from the A line, and holds tightly to repetition of the *hebel* from v. 10. By doing so, the use of *hebel* and its relation to the psalmist's audience becomes clearer. It would seem at first that all peoples, by way of *sons of 'ādām* and the *sons of 'iš*, are but a *vain lie* (*hebel* and *kāzāb*). Yet the charge from the psalmist in v. 11 is to *not act vainly*. Thus, through the paratactic poetic lines we see glimmers of how the faithful are not completely analogous to the transitory and vain description of humanity. Our intellect and will have been shaped through engaging poetic Scripture that is at times ambiguous.

The psalmist then breaks into a bit of an enigma when he says *one thing God has spoken, two I've heard* (v. 12). Augustine comments that 'I am somewhat troubled by what he has told us, brothers and sisters, and I would ask you to give me your full attention while I share my worry with you, or any relief I may find.' Augustine's humility is entirely refreshing as he says, 'If I cannot myself [understand this line], but one of you is able to understand it where I am baffled, I shall be happy, not jealous' (Augustine 2001: 219). Augustine then puts his trinitarian rules to work in noting that 'within himself God has spoken only once, because God begot one Word' (Augustine 2001: 220). Augustine finds the referent for the *two things* in *strength* and *lovingkindness*, and 'almost all of scripture is summed up in these' (Augustine 2001: 222). The referents of the *two things* would seem to be the end of v. 12 and the beginning of v. 13, namely, *strength belongs to God / to you O Lord is lovingkindness*. Verse 13 nevertheless shifts the speech directly to God (second person, *to you*). Zenger considers the possibility of the direct address 'hints that whoever places confidence in the loving God has already experienced something of that love' (Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 117). The poem concludes in a note that could be perceived as encouraging or ominous. The psalmist ends by stating that *you yourself will repay to man according*

to his work (v. 13). This is a warning to the *people* who are called to *trust in him in all times* (v. 9), but also the specific ones who *attack* (v. 4), and even the general sweep of the *sons of 'ādām* and the *sons of 'iš* (v. 10).

Conclusion

Psalm 62 is but one example of poetic ambiguity. *Scriptum* and *voluntas* provide a network of words to work through so that readers leave with delight and wisdom in considering the semantics of particles, the tension between *rock* and *walls*, the conflict of enemies cursing and the psalmist remaining silent, and much more. To be sure, Augustine's categories are not so neat that we can categorize every occurrence of vagueness and ambiguity with precision. I don't suggest that Augustine's discussion of ambiguity wipes away any contribution of literary study of ambiguity within that last two centuries, either. The work of Augustine complements these literary studies and provides significant theological *telos* for the reader who approaches ambiguity within Scripture (I'm grateful to David Firth for correspondence on this matter). Ambiguity is paint for the artist of Scripture.

In recently rereading Adele Berlin on parallelism, I was delighted—but not at all surprised—that she concluded her thoughts on ambiguity with Psalm 62:12: *one thing God has spoken / two things I have heard* (Berlin 2008: 99). These two lines of the psalm are, to quote Berlin, testimony that '[r]edundancy and ambiguity are locked in eternal struggle in parallelism. To choose one is to lose the other . . .' (Berlin 2008: 99). That is to say, ambiguity is one part, though certainly not the only one, of poetry that is essential when reading Holy Scripture.

I'd like to close in short order with attention given to what ambiguity does in poetry and specifically Psalm 62. First, it draws us closer to the words and lines in search of clarity. Second, ambiguity develops in us appreciation and delight for the difficulty and resolutions that come therein. Third, ambiguity is leveraged for emphasis on the confident silence that comes from the move of vv. 2-3 to vv. 6-7. Tension and confidence rise together, showing later in the poem that he *will not be shaken* and that he tells himself *to be (or remain) silent*. This also appears in the disambiguation of v. 9a (*trust in the LORD at all times*) into v. 9b, while introducing ambiguity in pondering more what it means to *pour out your heart before the LORD*. Zenger thus makes a fine observation on Psalm 62 that the 'theological brilliance of the psalm lies especially in the fundamental anthropological reflection with which . . . it contrasts YHWH as the saving "refuge" of human existence with all other attempts, through such means as wealth and power, to give human life stability and security' (Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 118). In all, ambiguity is present in lexical forms, syntax, metaphors, and the constant repetition of near and exact words that lead us through the poem. As such, the reader is challenged not only by the content of the psalm, at its broadest concep-

tion, but its form, repetition, and nuance serve to humble any intellectual hubris, to invite careful attention to detail, and to prompt prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit's work of illumination and inspiration of Holy Scripture.

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