PSALM 69: THE PETITIONER’S UNDERSTANDING
OF HIMSELF, HIS GOD, AND HIS ENEMIES

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1. Introduction

In Psalm 69 the petitioner\(^1\) complains that many people hate him without cause (v. 5). The reason why he is dealt with in that way is his zeal for the house of his God (v. 10). Yet he admits that God knows about his guilts (יַעְנָפ; v. 6). Nevertheless, this does not keep him from requesting God to add guilt to his enemies’ guilt (נָש; v. 28). He even asks God to blot them out of the book of the living (v. 29).

How does this person understand himself? That question is central to this study. However, the way in which people understand themselves is always connected to how they relate to others. Accordingly, an analysis of the petitioner’s understanding of himself must also take into consideration how he understands his God and his enemies. That is the further topic of this study.

In what follows, sections 2 and 3 provide necessary background information with respect to the psalm as a whole. In addition, section 3 explains why it is possible to limit the discussion to the final form of the text, which is the approach preferred here. The elements which relate exclusively to the petitioner’s understanding of himself are dealt with in section 4. In section 5 the scope of the analysis is enlarged so as to include the elements relating to the petitioner’s understanding of his God and his enemies. Section 6 offers provisional conclusions.

\(^1\) Throughout this study, the person meant by the first person singular in Ps. 69 will be referred to as ‘the petitioner’.
Psalm 69 is a long and complicated psalm. For that reason, it is helpful first to describe, in brief, its basic structure (§2.1) and main themes (§2.2). At the same time, this description will indicate a number of the issues involved in the interpretation of the psalm, which also bear upon the questions discussed in this study.

2.1 Basic Structure

In Hossfeld and Zenger’s commentary on Psalms 51–100 published in 2000, Zenger argues that Psalm 69 can be divided into three parts; that is, vv. 2–14a, 14b–30, and 31–37. Part One, according to this division, is dominated by complaints, but there are also some petitions in it (vv. 2a and 7). Part Two mainly consists of petitions, but it also has some complaints (see esp. vv. 20–22 and 27). Part Three is dominated by the praise of God who listens to the prayers of his people and saves them. It also has a wider scope in that it addresses the whole of creation and testifies to God’s saving intervention on behalf of all his people.

Other authors split up both Part One and Part Two into two sections; accordingly, the psalm consists of five stanzas, viz. vv. 2–5, 6–13/14a, 14/14b–19, 20–30, and 31–37.

Some parallels can be found in Part One and Part Two (or in the first and third stanza on the one hand, and in the second and fourth stanza on the other), namely:

– several nouns and verbs found in vv. 2–3 recur in vv. 15–16 (e.g. מים, ‘deep waters’, ים, ‘sea’, מים, ‘to sink’, and און, ‘to overflow’ or ‘to sweep over’);
– vv. 17–19 parallel to some extent vv. 4–5 in that both refer to the enemies of the petitioner (בְּנֵי in vv. 5 and 19) and to the urgency of God’s intervention so as to rescue the petitioner (see esp. v. 4 and פָּנַי in v. 18);