

Does Psalm 12:6–7 Promise Perfect Copies of the Bible? An Exegetical Examination Woven into a Multi-Generational Interpretive Plebiscite

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Introduction

It will not do to say that meaning *is* use; even anti-foundationalist literary critic Stanley Fish says that meaning must be located in the intent of the author.¹ But in a dispensation in which we are promised that the Author will guide us into all truth, the use God's people make of a given passage of Scripture has to be one key to discovering its meaning. That Author is permitted to have plans for his words that, like his plans for the actions of Joseph's brothers, both include and outweigh the human authors' conscious intent. What the biblical writers planned for good, God planned for better. God works all his words together for good.

The writers behind the Psalms have been especially successful at doing good for God's people. The simple fact that these ancient poetic songs and laments and imprecations and supplications have been in continual use for thirty-plus centuries is itself remarkable. Like the nation of Israel in which they were born, the continued existence of the Psalms is something akin to a miracle. How many words written in the ancient Mediterranean are memorized by schoolchildren today?

Indeed,

The words of the Lord are pure words:
as silver tried in a furnace of earth,
purified seven times.
Thou shalt keep them, O Lord,
thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever.
(Psalm 12:6–7 KJV)

Or is this passage actually promising the preservation of God's words? Do these lines constitute a divine promise that God will preserve his written words from textual corruption? Does Psalm 12:6–7 promise perfect manuscript copies of the Bible?

Contemporary KJV defenders' use of Psalm 12:6–7

Today's KJV defenders, in all their varieties,² frequently appeal to this passage to demonstrate that God promised perfectly pure preservation of the text of Scripture. Two of the very words most often used to describe this act of God—"pure" and

¹ Fish simply believes that there is no final arbiter under the sun for validating that meaning, no pugilist strong enough to provide a universal knock-down argument. See, inter alia, *Winning Arguments*.

² This writer prefers a taxonomy in which there are three significant groups of "KJV-Onlyists": 1) followers of Peter Ruckman who believe that the KJV itself is inspired by God; 2) mainstream (usually fundamentalist Baptists) KJV-Onlyists who say that the Hebrew Masoretic Text and Greek Textus Receptus are the perfectly preserved word of God and the KJV the only (or only reliable) translation of those texts; 3) proponents of Confessional Bibliology who argue that to be confessionally Reformed is to use the same original language texts used by the Westminster divines.

“preserved”—are drawn from the KJV’s rendering of Psalm 12:6–7.³ Many of the most influential and capable KJV defenders use Psalm 12:6–7 in this way.

Thomas Ross & Kent Brandenburg

Thomas Ross and Kent Brandenburg are among this group. The former has produced “A Declaration of My Own Position on the Inspiration and Preservation of Holy Scripture,” to which the latter has given assent. The two men confess:

The Bible promises that God will preserve every one of His words forever down to the very jot and tittle, the smallest letter (Psalm 12:6–7, 33:11, 119:152, 160; Isaiah 30:8, 40:8; 1 Peter 1:23–25; Matthew 5:18, 24:35)... The Bible assures us that God’s words are perfect and pure (Psalm 12:6–7; Proverbs 30:5–6).⁴

A footnote leads readers to an article arguing that the Masoretic vowel points are included among the objects of God’s inspiration and preservation.

Brandenburg has also argued,

Inspiration is a miracle of God in which He supernaturally delivers every one and all of His Words to men.... Preservation is a miracle of God in which He supernaturally keeps every one and all of His Words for every generation of men.⁵

As a prooftext for the latter assertion he cites Psalm 12:6–7.

Thomas Strouse

Thomas Strouse mounts one of the two most serious cases available that Psalm 12:6–7 promises perfect textual preservation of the Bible.⁶ His argument extends to the message of the entire Psalm. He argues that Psalm 12 is a chiasm, with verse 5 serving as the lynchpin:

The wicked asserted that their words would prevail, or be preserved indefinitely. The Lord’s response to this boastful claim was that His Words, and not man’s, would be preserved, each and every one of them, forever.⁷

Strouse demonstrates some linguistic sophistication by handling a now common objection to his viewpoint, namely that the “them” in both “thou shalt keep them” and “thou shalt preserve them” is, in Hebrew, masculine, while the “words” of 12:6

³ KJV-Only doctrinal statements frequently refer to the KJV, or the MT/TR (or all three), as the “preserved Word of God.” Note that Ps 119:140 (“Thy word is very pure”) and Prov 30:5 (“Every word of God is pure”) in the KJV are the two other passages that describe God’s word as pure.

⁴ <https://faithsaves.net/inspiration-preservation-scripture/>

⁵ Thou Shalt Keep Them, p.

⁶ He originally wrote his piece as a chapter in Thou Shalt Keep Them, but the Kindle edition of that book is typographically corrupted (perhaps ironically), and Strouse has produced an expanded edition of his argument in a PDF available freely online.

⁷ p. 3 “The Permanent Preservation of God’s Words: Psalm 12:6–7 Expanded Dr. Thomas M. Strouse”

are feminine—so that “words” is unlikely to be the antecedent of “them.” Strouse explains the gender discordance he sees in the text:

It is important for the careful exegete of the Hebrew Scriptures to recognize the biblical phenomenon wherein the biblical writers employed masculine pronouns in reference to feminine antecedent nouns when those feminine nouns were synonyms for the Words of God (cf. Ps. 119). Since the words of Jehovah are an extension of this strong patriarchal God, the OT writers occasionally seemed to use masculine pronouns for [certain] synonyms [of “the word”].... The biblical writers deviated from this “grammatical norm” for theological purposes, emphasizing specific truths.⁸

Peter Van Kleeck, Sr.

Peter Van Kleeck, Sr.’s *An Exegetical Grounding for a Standard Sacred Text: Toward the Formulation of a Systematic Theology of Providential Preservation*⁹ takes the case in Strouse further by referencing Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar. He quotes these lines from Gesenius:

Through a weakening in the distinction of gender, which is noticeable elsewhere...and which probably passed from the colloquial language into that of literature, *masculine* suffixes (especially in the plural) are not infrequently used to refer to *feminine* substantives.¹⁰

Van Kleeck, Sr., also demonstrates that five interpreters of standing either seriously entertained (Martin Luther, Matthew Poole) or actually advanced (Ibn Ezra, Michael Ayguan, John Wesley) an interpretation of Psalm 12:7 in which at least the first of the two relevant pronouns— “Thou shalt keep *them*”—refers back to the “words” of 12:6. Van Kleeck, Sr., also argues that the renderings in eight early English Bible translations adopt his view.¹¹

Jeffery Riddle

Jeffery Riddle is the most important leader in the KJV-Only group known as Confessional Bibliology. He does not make regular use of Psalm 12:6–7, and his use is tepid, but he does appeal to it.

Though we might grant that the thrust of v. 7 is about the preservation of God’s people (rather than directly about the preservation of his Word) that is not a point unrelated to the doctrine of the divine preservation of Scripture. Why can God’s people have confidence in his ability to keep

⁸ p. 4

⁹ Independently published, 2021.

¹⁰ Friedrich Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch and Sir Arthur Ernest Cowley, 2d English ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 440.

¹¹ He is on shakier ground here; it is not always possible to divine with confidence the interpretation a translator is making of his source text.

them? Because the Lord keeps his promises. He keeps his word. His Word can be trusted in all generations!¹²

Others

Not all leading KJV/TR defenders appeal to Psalm 12:6–7. E.F. Hills does not mention the passage even once in either *The King James Version Defended* or *Believing Bible Study*, both of which are best-in-class defenses of the KJV/TR.¹³ Theodore Letis, likewise, in his *The Ecclesiastical Text: Criticism, Biblical Authority & the Popular Mind*,¹⁴ fails to mention this passage.¹⁵

But the overall trend at all levels, from popular to academic, is for defenders of the KJV and/or TR to use Psalm 12:6–7 as a prooftext for perfect textual preservation of the Hebrew and Greek autographs of the Bible.

KJV-Only extremists also, of course, appeal to the passage—including those who believe that the KJV itself is somehow specially anointed by God. Bible Baptist Church of Oak Harbor, Washington, confesses formally that God’s word has been

divinely preserved in the English language and [is] commonly known as the authorized, King James Version of 1611 A.D.

Among many prooftexts they list for their bibliology section, the great majority of which will be found in any standard evangelical systematic theology, are key KJV-Only prooftexts, including Psalm 119:89 (“Forever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven); Matthew 5:18 (“one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled”); and Psalm 12:6–7.¹⁶

For good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, Landmark Baptist Church of Stamford, Connecticut, confesses:

The King James Bible of 1611 is the inerrant, infallible, inspired, preserved word of God.¹⁷

They, too, cite Psalm 12:6–7.

Textual/Interpretive issues

One of the ironies created by the use of this passage to buttress a doctrine of perfect textual preservation is that the passage itself contains several textual and

¹² <http://www.jeffriddle.net/2015/07/the-vision-psalm-126-7-and-preservation.html>

¹³ Publication information

¹⁴ Publication information

¹⁵ John Owen, too, who is often appealed to by proponents of Confessional Bibliology, does not mention Psalm 12:7 anywhere in his collected works. And David Sorenson includes an entire appendix in *God’s Perfect Book* (Northstar Ministries, 2009) in which he argues that the passage has no reference to the textual history of the Bible.

¹⁶ <https://www.bbcoakharbor.org/about-us/statement-of-faith>

¹⁷ <https://landmarkbaptistct.com/about/statement-of-beliefs>

grammatical difficulties. Indeed: even if God did give us an absolutely perfect text of the Hebrew Bible and Greek New Testament, we would still be left with uncertainties. He has given no inspired dictionary to tell us what given Hebrew and Greek words mean, no inspired grammar to tell us how all the words fit together, and no inspired commentary to tell us which interpretations are best.¹⁸ I do not mean to mock; I long for the day when I know Scripture as also I am known. But I aim at a specific inconsistency in KJV/TR defenses: even the KJV translators acknowledge in their preface having to guess at the meanings of certain Hebrew words. “There be many rare names of certain birds, beasts and precious stones, etc., concerning which the Hebrews themselves are so divided among themselves for judgement that they may seem to have defined this or that, rather because they would say something than because they were sure of that which they said.”¹⁹ Having a settled text does not eliminate all the uncertainties that attend Bible reading under the sun.

Nonetheless, we must now work to establish the text we will then go on to interpret. There are two fairly significant textual/interpretive issues and two noted grammatical ambiguities in the space of just the two verses being covered in this paper.

In a furnace on/of the ground/earth (12:6)

The first textual/interpretive issue in the psalm is the precise meaning of the phrase **בעליל לארץ**. The first word is a *hapax legomenon* that is most commonly taken to mean “furnace.” But what is a “furnace of earth”? The well-known Hebrew word **ארץ** is never used to refer to physical earth.²⁰ Is this a furnace upon the earth? A furnace made of earth? A furnace that spills its pure metals onto the earth?²¹

Or does the phrase have another reference entirely? Interpreters have noticed that **בעליל** might possibly be related to **בעל**, Ba'al. Perhaps, then, this phrase refers to the specially purified silver of a lord of the earth?

McNeile is blunt:

¹⁸ As one of my mentors said, the logic continues: What good is a perfect text without a perfect translation? And what good is a perfect translations without a perfect interpretation? And how can we know we have a perfect interpretation unless we have an authoritative interpreter?

¹⁹ David Norton, ed., *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible with the Apocrypha: King James Version*, Revised edition., vol. 1 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), xxxiii.). I would like to take this argument a little further: for the Greek New Testament, in God’s providence, there is (as of the late 19th century) Light from the Ancient East to guide us in our philological forays. There is much extant **Κοινή** literature. But for the many *hapax legomenoi* in the Hebrew Old Testament, there is context, etymology, and comparative philology—all of which are less certain guides than are available for Greek. This is the situation God gave us. Even in places where there are no textual variants, he has given us some minor places of semantic uncertainty.

²⁰ Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Psalms Translated and Explained* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot; James Thin, 1864), 56–57.

²¹ A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906), 62.

The text in the second clause is corrupt.²²

Gill resorts to allegory, seeing “furnace” as a reference to 1) Jesus, who purified all wisdom and knowledge by his sufferings and death; 2) gospel ministers, who endure fiery trials that harden the clay of their earthen vessels; and/or 3) to all the people of God, “who dwell in earthly tabernacles; and who, in the midst of various afflictions, have a comfortable and confirming evidence of the purity and truth of the words of God, of the promises of his covenant, and the doctrines of the Gospel.”²³

But most interpreters feel safe enough reporting the major views,²⁴ issuing an academic shrug, and pointing to the overall meaning of the verse, which is clear enough. Indeed, on any reading the verse is saying that the words of the Lord have a special purity, a purity the psalmist then illustrates with some kind of metallurgical image, the precise nature of which is covered in some dross that has accumulated over the centuries.

In uncertain cases like this, it may be best for translators who hope for their work to be used in churches to retain whatever tradition has been created by their respective languages’ dominant historical translation(s). In English, that is precisely what the great majority of translators have done.

“Them” vs. “us” and “them” vs. “us” vs. “him” (12:7)

Of utmost importance for our purposes is the next textual/interpretive issue, which has to do with the two pronouns in 12:7.

You, O Lord, will keep **them** [or “us”];
you will guard **us** [or “him” or “them”] from this generation forever.

I will refer repeatedly throughout the rest of this paper to these two pronouns. The major English translations are all over the map. Nearly every possible combination of the options is represented:

- “them...us” (NIV²⁵, ESV, LSV, YLT, JPS Tanakh, one Vulgate edition²⁶)
- “them...them” (KJV, NKJV, NLT, ISV, WEB, ASV, ERV, Webster)

²² A. H. McNeile, “The Psalms,” in *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture: Including the Apocrypha*, ed. Charles Gore, Henry Leighton Goudge, and Alfred Guillaume, vol. 1 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942), 348.

²³ John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old Testament*, vol. 3, The Baptist Commentary Series (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1810), 574.

²⁴ William S. Plumer is especially adept at this. *Studies in the Book of Psalms: Being a Critical and Expository Commentary, with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks on the Entire Psalter* (Philadelphia; Edinburgh: J. B. Lippincott Company; A & C Black, 1872), 178.

²⁵ Effectively: it glosses “them,” as “the needy,” specifying the antecedent of the pronoun, a common practice in the NIV.

²⁶ At the time of the presentation of this paper, this writer was unable to track down which editions gave which readings. The apparatus criticus for the Vulgate to which I have access listed this verse but not this variant unit.

- “us...us” (Clementine Vulgate, Douay-Rheims, LXX, CSB, HCSB, CEV, Coverdale, BSB)
- “them...him” (NASB, AMP, GWT, NET, Geneva, Bishop’s)
- “him...him” (Alter²⁷)

Why the variation? Because, put simply, *there are important textual variants in the very verse used by KJV/TR defenders to insist that God promises perfect manuscripts of the Bible*; also, there is a possible ambiguity in the consonantal text. In addition, multiple ancient versions, especially the big two, the Vulgate and LXX, clearly read “us...us” (as do the Ethiopic and Arabic²⁸). And as for the Dead Sea Scrolls, two frustratingly fragmentary scrolls are relevant: the Nahal Hever Psalms have the first relevant phrase and not the second; 11QPs7c has one key letter of the second but nothing from the first. Put together, then, the DSS offer, “You, O Lord, will keep **them**” (Nahal Hever), “[you will guard **hi]m/u[s]** from this generation” (11QPs7c). As the bracket indicates, there is just one relevant letter left of the word at issue, and it could indicate either “him” or “us,” just like the MT.

To make matters yet more complex, the MT is pointed to read “them...him,” but the consonantal text could just possibly be read as “them...us”—though Joüon considers the latter possibility “dubious.”²⁹

Adding to the textual uncertainty, Craigie in his commentary opts for “us...us,” and says that “there is good support in the Heb. MSS (De-Rossi, IV, 6)” for this textual choice.³⁰ Though BHS says only *pauci* manuscripts—between 3 and 10—give “us” in 7a and *nonnulli*—between 11 and 20—give “us” in 7b.

The united testimony of the LXX, (some editions of the) Vulgate, and a few Heb. MSS is powerful: “us...us” is appealing. It also fits the context well. But the general principle that has guided English Bible translation since the Reformation is that the Masoretic Text must be used except where it is unintelligible. And judging merely by the spread of renderings they’ve chosen, many of today’s English Bible translators must indeed see the MT as too difficult here.³¹ Only the New American Standard Bible, of all the major modern English versions, had the strength of conviction to match the MT with its “them...him.”

But where today’s translators see confusion, many interpreters over the centuries have seen a fairly standard Hebrew method of poetic communication. The oddity of the MT was a known issue as far back as Calvin, who argues that the move from

²⁷ The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019). Alter acknowledges in a footnote that the Hebrew reads “them...him.”

²⁸ Cite Plumer.

²⁹ “In the 1st pers. pl. ִהְיִם is dubious.” Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, vol. 1 (Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2003), 173.

³⁰ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, vol. 19, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1983), 137.

³¹ More time would allow me to collect “votes” from other Indo-European language translations.

“them” to “him” “is a thing quite common in Hebrew.”³² Jacobson cites an example of a similar poetic variation in Isa 28:6 and 32:1, and he notes that

even within the psalm, the faithful in v. 1 is singular while the trustworthy is plural, and the poor and needy of v. 5 are plural, but the pronoun translated here as on their behalf (*lô*) is singular.³³

Interpretation will be left for a later section of the paper. Suffice it to say for now that “them...him” is more than sufficiently intelligible and that MT priority (though not infallibility) will be assumed here.³⁴

The respective antecedents of “them” and “him”

In the MT, “them” and “him” are both masculine. And, in general, though interpretation is still to come, this grammatical fact would seem to answer an all-important interpretive question: what are the antecedents for these pronouns? “Them” and “him” are masculine, but the “words” of 12:6 are feminine; the most recent possible masculine antecedents are the “poor” and the “needy” of 12:5.

We have already met the view of Thomas Strouse, who insists that it is common in Hebrew for a “gender discordance” to exist between pronouns and their antecedents—especially, he says, when those “words” are the words of God. God the Father exerts a masculinizing force on his words, Strouse argues.

Very few interpreters even note the possibility that the grammatical gender of the pronouns could have a bearing on the choice of antecedents for the two relevant pronouns in 12:7. That is likely because, as this paper will show, so few even consider “words” as a potential antecedent for either one.

Gill is one who tackles this issue directly, however. And he does not take Strouse’s view:

[The antecedent of “them” is] not the *words* before mentioned, as Aben Ezra explains it, for the affix is masculine and not feminine.³⁵

In the interest, again, of establishing the text upon which interpretation will be based, it will be helpful to briefly evaluate the arguments of Strouse.

³² John Calvin and James Anderson, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 178–179.

³³ Rolf A. Jacobson, “Book One of the Psalter: Psalms 1–41,” in *The Book of Psalms*, ed. E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 155.

³⁴ Berlin is too pessimistic: “Unfortunately, the psalm’s conclusion is likely corrupt and defies precise translation, though the general sense of God preserving the faithful from the evildoers is clear.” Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael Fishbane, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1295.

³⁵ John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old Testament*, vol. 3, *The Baptist Commentary Series* (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1810), 574.

First, Strouse is right that gender discordance between nouns and pronouns occurs in the Hebrew Bible. He is right to point to Psalm 119 as containing a few instances of the phenomenon.

Your testimonies [fem.] are my heritage forever,
for they [masc.] are the joy of my heart. (Psalm 119:111 ESV)

Your testimonies [fem.] are wonderful;
therefore my soul keeps them [masc.]. (Psalm 119:129 ESV)

But Strouse is unlikely to be right in his effort to read theology into grammatical gender, to say that God's masculinity leaches into pronouns referring to God's words.³⁶ For then how would he account for the places in the same psalm in which there is no gender discordance?

Give me understanding, that I may keep your law [fem.]
and observe it [fem.] with my whole heart. (Ps 119:34 ESV)

Oh how I love your law [fem.]!
It [fem.] is my meditation all the day. (Ps 119:97 ESV)

Your commandment [fem.] makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it [fem.] is ever with me. (Ps 119:98 ESV)

Your promise [fem.] is well tried,
and your servant loves it [fem.]. 119:140

If theology about actual gender is to be read out of grammatical gender, what would it mean in the places where both the term denoting God's word and its pronoun are feminine? That "law" and "commandment" and "promise" are more feminine than the apparently tomboyish "testimonies"? Hopefully, to ask this question is to answer it. Grammatical gender simply does not work this way.

Further study by a skilled exegete of the Hebrew might uncover more grammatical patterns worth noting here. He or she might answer questions such as: How often does gender discordance occur, and under what circumstances? What is the linguistic reason for this discordance? For the purposes of this paper, however, it is sufficient to acknowledge that the possibility of gender discordance remains that: a possibility. It does not prove a specific antecedent for either "them" or "him" in Psalm 12:7. In my judgment, the masculine gender of these two pronouns leans the careful interpreter toward the "poor" and "needy" as likely antecedents; after all, as Waltke says, "the primary function of gender marking is to bind parts of speech together by concord in the same sentence or discourse."³⁷ The closer proximity of "the words" (plus the demonstrated possibility of gender discordance) may lean that careful interpreter the opposite direction, but the best it can do is lead him to an equilibrium in which the interpretive question must be decided on other grounds.

³⁶ See Barr and Silva and Carson.

³⁷ Waltke, Bruce K., and Michael Patrick O'Connor. 1990. *[An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax](<https://ref.ly/res/LLS:46.20.15/2019-11-08T22:27:56Z/623787?len=120>)*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns..

Optative vs. declarative in 12:7

There is a final interpretive problem in 12:7, one that comparatively few commentators mention, but one that has potential bearing on our main question (Does Psalm 12:6 promise the perfect manuscript copies of the Bible?). There is an ambiguity in the two qal imperfect verbs. In the words of Luther,

The translator might have said more properly in the optative ‘Do thou keep,’ and ‘do thou preserve.’ for this is properly a prayer of the prophet against the generation of justiciaries.³⁸

But Hengstenberg disagrees, after specifically citing Luther:

The context demands the expression of firm hope, not of a wish.³⁹

Interpreters pay very little attention to this question; the weight of consensus is definitely with Hengstenberg and the most important ancient versions (the LXX’s φυλάξεις and διατηρήσεις are both future active indicatives; as are the Vulgate’s *servabis* and *custodies*). And lovers of the psalms know the (near-)requirements of the psalmic form; an expression of hope is indeed required here. Because an inspired prayer for divine preservation could bear the same *doctrinal* import as an inspired statement of it, this grammatical question will be set aside.⁴⁰

An interpretive plebiscite, or, a reception-historical analysis

The question before us is whether the text as now established should be read to promise perfect manuscript copies of the Bible. The primary way in which I will seek to answer this question is to demonstrate whether the text *has* been read to promise perfect manuscript copies of the Bible. I will execute something of a mass plebiscite of Bible interpreters throughout the centuries. My major question: who or what are the antecedents of the “them” (or “us”) and the “him” (or “them” or “us”) of Psalm 12:7?

Much of what follows will merely tabulate votes for the plebiscite. Quotations will be given when helpful for various reasons.

³⁸ Martin Luther, *Select Works of Martin Luther: An Offering to the Church of God in “The Last Days,”* trans. Henry Cole, vol. IV (London: T. Bensley, 1826), 27. Prinsloo apparently sides with Luther. “The fifth strophe (12:7–8) balances with the first (cf. vv. 1–2) in that it is also a prayer to the LORD.” Willem S. Prinsloo, “The Psalms,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 375.

³⁹ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869), 194.

⁴⁰ It might be noted here only that 12:7 would be a more difficult proof-text to use for KJV/TR defense if it were a prayer. “Please keep them” would not ring in the ears the same as “Thou shalt keep them.”

Ancient and medieval interpreters

Augustine commented on the Latin text available to him, which reads as he quotes it here, followed by his pithy comment:

Thou, O Lord, shalt preserve us, and keep us from this generation to eternity: here as needy and poor, there as wealthy and rich.⁴¹

The objects of preservation and keeping for Augustine are clearly the poor and needy.

The Jewish Madras Tanhuma, of uncertain origin, takes the same view:

‘You, O Lord, will keep them,’ [i.e.], watch over their instruction in their hearts; (ibid., cont.) ‘You will guard each [of them from this generation unto eternity],’ from the generation which is worthy of destruction.⁴²

The Aramaic Targum likewise:

You, O Lord, will keep the righteous; you will protect them from this evil generation forever.⁴³

Already we have seen what is most typical among the many dozens of interpreters surveyed for this paper: they assume but do not defend an answer to the question we are pursuing.

Theodoret of Cyrus took the same view as Augustine, as did Cassiodorus and Diodore of Tarsus.⁴⁴

Ibn Ezra is the earliest minority report. He issues a very brief comment in which he does refer the “them” of “you will keep them” back to the “sayings” of 12:6 (Ibn Ezra does not mention the second pronoun, 12:7b).⁴⁵

The *mem of tishmerem* (Thou wilt keep them) most probably refers to the words of the Lord (v. 7 [Heb.]).

Rashi, centuries later, takes the opposing view, explaining “shall guard them” as

Those poor and needy people being pursued by this generation, who are informers.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Augustine of Hippo, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms: Psalms 1–150*, vol. 1, *A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church* (Oxford; London: F. and J. Rivington; John Henry Parker, 1847–1857), 104.

⁴² Sefaria.org

⁴³ Sefaria.org

⁴⁴ Theodoret said, “Guarded by your grace we shall not only escape the wiles of the present generation, but shall also be provided with everlasting salvation.” Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms 1–72*, trans. Robert C. Hill, vol. 101, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 103. For quotations from Cassiodorus and Diode, see Craig A. Blaising and Carmen S. Hardin, eds., *Psalms 1–50, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 102–103.

⁴⁵ Sefaria.org

⁴⁶ [Sefaria.org](https://www.sefaria.org)

16th century interpreters

Moving all the way into the Reformation period: Luther sees a full three possibilities for the antecedent of “them” in 12:7a. While in the midst of a close reading of the Hebrew, he seems to prefer the “words” of 12:6 as the antecedent; but he immediately follows up with the other two options: the saints and even the wicked. Luther perceptively notes the gender of the Hebrew pronoun:

And instead of “thou shalt preserve *us*,” it is in the Hebrew “thou shalt preserve *them*,” and it refers to the words of God, as Hieronymus [Jerome] translates it. But it may also be referred to the saints, as it is in the masculine gender *servabis eos*. Nor should I reject the acceptation, if any one should understand it as referring to the ungodly: that God would preserve and guard them, that is, that they might not any more speak vain things, nor destroy the saints from the sons of men.⁴⁷

Whereas Van Kleeck, Sr., enlists Luther as a support for his viewpoint, when Luther comes to application, he actually conflates the first two of his three views:

Here we see, that it is not our power that can cause the words of God to remain pure, or that can prevent the saints from failing from among men, but the power of God only.⁴⁸

Calvin, too, is aware that there is some disagreement over the proper identification of the antecedents in Ps 12:7:

Some give this exposition of the passage, Thou wilt keep them, namely, thy words; but this does not seem to me to be suitable. David, I have no doubt, returns to speak of the poor, of whom he had spoken in the preceding part of the psalm.⁴⁹

Calvin notes the odd shift from plural to singular in the Hebrew of Ps 12:7 (which he quotes as “them...him”), and he actually draws a potential theological point from this minor grammatical oddity:

According to this view, the import of his language is, Although only one good man should be left alive in the world, yet he would be kept in perfect safety by the grace and protection of God.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Martin Luther, *Select Works of Martin Luther: An Offering to the Church of God in “The Last Days,”* trans. Henry Cole, vol. IV (London: T. Bensley, 1826), 27.

⁴⁸ Martin Luther, *Select Works of Martin Luther: An Offering to the Church of God in “The Last Days,”* trans. Henry Cole, vol. IV (London: T. Bensley, 1826), 27.

⁴⁹ John Calvin and James Anderson, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 178–179.

⁵⁰ John Calvin and James Anderson, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 179.

(This point recurs with minor variation through the centuries, being found in Joseph Addison Alexander⁵¹, A.F. Kirkpatrick⁵², Hengstenberg⁵³, the NET Bible⁵⁴, and Jacobson⁵⁵.)

17th century interpreters

The Westminster divines did not cite Psalm 12:6–7 in their confession; when they confess that the text of Scripture was “kept pure in all ages”⁵⁶, they cite Matt 5:18’s “every jot and tittle promise” and not Psalm 12. Though the Westminster Larger Catechism does list Psalm 12:6 as a proof-text for its statement that “the scriptures manifest themselves to be the word of God, by their ... purity,”⁵⁷ it does not cite 12:7. Apparently they did not see 12:7 as a promise of textual preservation.⁵⁸

Matthew Poole acknowledges the possible ambiguity in the pronouns of 12:7:

Thou shalt keep them; either, 1. The poor and needy, ver. 5, from the crafts and malice of this crooked and perverse generation of men, and for ever. Or, 2. Thy words or promises last mentioned, ver. 6.

⁵¹ “The plural pronoun in the first clause, and the singular in the second, refer to the same persons, viz., the sufferers mentioned in ver. 7 (6). By a licence common in the Psalms, they are first spoken of as a plurality, and then as an ideal person; see above, on Ps. 10:10.” Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Psalms Translated and Explained* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot; James Thin, 1864), 57.

⁵² “The first Thou is emphatic: them refers to the poor and needy of v. 5: him in the second line singles out each one of the victims of persecution as the object of divine care.” A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906), 63.

⁵³ “The singular suffix in the second clause is to be explained as a personification. In order to mark the contrast more pointedly between the pious and the ungodly, and to indicate that it is not one between certain individuals and certain others, “the pious man” is often set in opposition to “the ungodly man,” the righteous to the wicked; the former as the object of Divine care, the latter as the object of Divine punishment.” E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869), 194.

⁵⁴ “The third masculine singular suffix on the verb “protect” is probably used in a distributive sense, referring to each one within the group mentioned previously (the oppressed/needy, referred to as “them” in the preceding line).” Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition Notes* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), Ps 12:7.

⁵⁵ “In both v. 5c and 8b, the singular pronominal suffix carries a collective sense, referring to the plural group on whose behalf the psalmist intercedes.” Rolf A. Jacobson, “Book One of the Psalter: Psalms 1–41,” in *The Book of Psalms*, ed. E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 155.

⁵⁶ WCF 1.8.

⁵⁷ They list also Psalm 119:140: “Thy word is very pure: therefore thy servant loveth it.”

⁵⁸ Writing before the successful rise of the critical text of the New Testament, Charles and A.A. Hodge in their commentary on the confession do not see “kept pure in all ages” as a promise of perfect textual transmission. “The oldest existing Hebrew manuscripts date from the ninth or tenth century. The oldest Greek manuscripts date from the fourth to the sixth century. Many hundreds of these have been collated by eminent scholars in forming the text of modern Hebrew and Greek Testaments. The differences are found to be unimportant, and the essential integrity of our text is established.” A. A. Hodge and Charles Hodge, *The Confession of Faith: With Questions for Theological Students and Bible Classes* (Simpsonville, SC: Christian Classics Foundation, 1996), 41.

If one takes the second option, which Poole declines to do (he does not land on a specific view), he suggests this interpretation:

I.e. Thou wilt not only keep thy promise to me in preserving me, and advancing me to the throne, but also to my posterity from generation to generation.

18th century interpreters

H. Dimock makes a textual-critical comment that includes an interpretive one:

One MS., with ó. Vulg. Ar. & Æth. Houbigant, &c., reads תשמרנו, which the context requires; “Thou O Jehovah, shalt keep us.”⁵⁹

In other words, “us” in 12:7a commends itself not only for textual but for contextual reasons.

Matthew Henry, in his typical style, expands on what the reader may now fairly call the standard interpretation of the pronouns in Ps 12:7:

Let God alone to maintain his own interest and to preserve his own people. He will keep them from this generation, (1.) From being debauched by them and drawn away from God, from mingling with them and learning their works. In times of general apostasy the Lord knows those that are his, and they shall be enabled to keep their integrity. (2.) From being destroyed and rooted out by them.^{60 61}

19th century interpreters

Most of the exegetical and linguistic arguments regarding Ps 12:7 were established by the 19th century. It remains mainly to tabulate interpretive votes.

⁵⁹ H. Dimock, *Notes Critical and Explanatory on the Books of Psalms and Proverbs* (Gloicester; London; Oxford: J. F. and C. Rivington; J. and J. Fletcher; J. Hough; R. Raikes, 1791), 13.

⁶⁰ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 760.

⁶¹ One more citation meriting a footnote: a rather obscure reference in Jonathan Edwards’ *Blank Bible*—a portion of a “deleted” footnote—suggests that Edwards may have seen Psalm 12:7 as a cross reference to Psalm 25:22, “Redeem Israel, O God, out of all his troubles.” This, in turn, suggests that he saw the promise of Psalm 12:7 as referring to God’s protection of the godly. This is the only reference to Psalm 12 in all of Edwards’ available works in the famous Yale series. Jonathan Edwards, *The “Blank Bible”*: Part 1 & Part 2, ed. Stephen J. Stein and Harry S. Stout, vol. 24, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2006), 490.

In favor of the standard view are Tholuck⁶², Bellarmine (in a commentary on the Vulgate and Douay–Rheims)⁶³, Barnes⁶⁴, Hengstenberg⁶⁵, v. Ewald⁶⁶, De Liguori⁶⁷,

⁶² “V. 8. Prayer, inspired by the Spirit of God, always comprehends universal need in the particular, and the pious, in praying for himself, actually prays for all the pious. So David, as the representative of the small band of the godly in his time, virtually prays for all godly men. He conceives of the human race as divided into two camps and two generations, the one of whom fight in huge masses and great strength, while the other, though small in number and with little strength of their own, advance under the banner of that God who has promised victory to the righteous cause.” Augustus Tholuck, *A Translation and Commentary of the Book of Psalms: For the Use of the Ministry and Laity of the Christian Church*, trans. J. Isidor Mombert (Philadelphia: William S. & Alfred Martien, 1858), 98.

⁶³ “He infers from the preceding, that God will fulfill his promises. You, our Redeemer and Lord, will guard us, for the Greek, as well as the Hebrew word, implies, not only salvation, but, furthermore, an extension of it in guarding and preserving. As if one asked, what will become of the wicked, while you protect us? He replies, “The wicked will walk round about,” (while we are quietly reposing under your wings,) constantly running after the things of this world, yet never coming at the enjoyment of their desires; and they will be forever thus “Walking round about,” while the world lasts.” Robert Bellarmine, *A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. John O’Sullivan (Dublin, London: James Duffy & Co., 1866), 52.

⁶⁴ “That is, the persons referred to in ver. 5—the poor and the needy who were suffering from the wrongs inflicted on them. The idea is, that God would guard and defend them. They were safe in his hands. Comp. Ps. 37:3–7.” Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Old Testament: Psalms*, vol. 1 (London: Blackie & Son, 1870–1872), 108.

⁶⁵ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869), 194–195.

⁶⁶ “Ver. 8, them the good, and used after ver. 2, and ver. 6 c, rather him, the sufferer.” G. Heinrich A. v. Ewald, *Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. E. Johnson, vol. 1, *Theological Translation Fund Library* (London; Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1880), 200.

⁶⁷ He glosses the verse: “Thou wilt always preserve us from this race of proud and deceitful men” Alphonsus de Liguori, *The Divine Office: Explanation of the Psalms and Canticles*, ed. Eugene Grimm, Third Edition., *The Complete Works of Saint Alphonsus de Liguori* (New York; Cincinnati; Chicago; London; Dublin: Benziger Brothers; R. Washbourne; M. H. Gill & Son, 1889), 58.

Adam Clarke⁶⁸, Murphy⁶⁹, Jennings⁷⁰, Horne⁷¹, Dickson⁷², Hawker⁷³, Cowles⁷⁴, and Kirkpatrick⁷⁵.

A few interpreters of this century, notably Plumer⁷⁶, take the standard view and yet acknowledge that other interpreters refer the pronouns back to “the words” of 12:5.

⁶⁸ “He notes the textual difficulties present in 12:7 but sees each major option as viable: “Instead of the pronoun *them* in these clauses, several MSS., with the *Septuagint*, the *Vulgate*, and the *Arabic*, have *us*. The sense is equally good in both readings. God did bring forth the Israelites from Babylon, according to his word; he separated them from *that generation*, and reinstated them in their own land, according to his word; and most certainly he has *preserved them from generation to generation* to the present day, in a most remarkable manner.” Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible with a Commentary and Critical Notes*, New Edition., vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife Corporation, 2014), 252.

⁶⁹ James G. Murphy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1875), 118.

⁷⁰ ““Them:” viz. the “afflicted” and “needy” of ver. 5. The equiv[alent] to “them” in [verset] *b* is sing. —“him,”—i.e. each one of such persons.” A. C. Jennings and W. H. Lowe, *The Psalms, with Introductions and Critical Notes*, Second Edition., vol. 1 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1884), 48.

⁷¹ “As if it had been said, Yes, blessed Lord, what thou hast premised shall surely be performed, since there is with thee no variableness, nor shadow of turning: thou wilt keep thy poor and lowly servants, as thou hast promised, from being circumvented by treachery, or crushed by power; thou wilt preserve them undefiled amidst an evil and adulterous generation; thou wilt be with thy church to the end of the world, and then admit her to be with thee for ever.” George Horne, *A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1856), 70.

⁷² “Let men persecute the godly as much as God pleaseth to suffer them, yet shall God preserve a church of godly persons at all times to the end of the world: for God shall preserve the godly from this generation for ever.” David Dickson, *A Brief Explication of the Psalms*, vol. 1 (Glasgow; Edinburgh; London: John Dow; Waugh and Innes; R. Ogle; James Darling; Richard Baynes, 1834), 54.

⁷³ “These verses seem to have no immediate connection with what went before; nevertheless they come in with a blessed conclusion, to ensure the faithfulness of Jehovah. What though bad men triumph and the faithful are minished, Jesus is the same, yesterday, and to-day, and for ever. He will keep the feet of his saints, and the wicked shall be silent in darkness, for by strength shall no man prevail. 1 Sam. 2:9.” Robert Hawker, *Poor Man’s Old Testament Commentary: Job–Psalms*, vol. 4 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2013), 198.

⁷⁴ “The words of the Lord are put in contrast with the words of the wicked—pure while those are foul; true and perfectly reliable, while those are utterly treacherous. The inference just here is that when God promises to help his people or to cut off their oppressors, you need not fear that his words will fail. Therefore he will surely preserve his saints from all evil-doers forever.” Henry Cowles, *The Psalms, With Notes, Critical, Explanatory, and Practical* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1879), 51–52.

⁷⁵ “The first Thou is emphatic: them refers to the poor and needy of v. 5: him in the second line singles out each one of the victims of persecution as the object of divine care.” A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906), 63.

⁷⁶ William S. Plumer, *Studies in the Book of Psalms: Being a Critical and Expository Commentary, with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks on the Entire Psalter* (Philadelphia; Edinburgh: J. B. Lippincott Company; A & C Black, 1872), 178.

Two—Haydock⁷⁷ and Briggs⁷⁸—dutifully report the various available views without landing on one.

Only Neale, among all 19th century interpreters this writer found, openly dissents from the standard view. He cites with apparent agreement 15th century commentator Michael Ayguan as taking the first phrase (“thou shalt keep them”) as a reference to the words of verse 6:

Keep them: that is, not as the passage is generally taken, (Ay[guan]) Keep or guard Thy people, but Thou shalt keep, or make good, Thy words: and by so doing, shalt preserve him—him, the needy, him, the poor—from this generation.⁷⁹

This is a quotation used by several KJV/TR defenders, including Brandenburg and Van Kleeck, Sr. But it must be noted that Neale goes on to see the second phrase (“thou shalt preserve them”) as referring to the godly.

20th century interpreters

Those who take the standard interpretation among 20th century interpreters include F.B. Meyer⁸⁰, Arno Gaebelein⁸¹, Allen Ross⁸², and Willem VanGemenen.⁸³ Kidner similarly sees “you will keep them” as possibly referring to the promises and “you will guard us” as referring to the godly.⁸⁴

⁷⁷ “This corrupt generation; or, both in this world and in the next. Heb. “preserve them;” the just, or thy words. C.—“And thou wilt keep him.” Pagn.—Prot. marg. i.e. “Every one of them.” S. Jerom reads, “us.” H.” George Leo Haydock, *Haydock’s Catholic Bible Commentary* (New York: Edward Dunigan and Brother, 1859), Ps 11:8.

⁷⁸ “sf. 3 sg.; but **Θ** in both cases has ἡμᾶς. **Θ**, Aq., **Θ** agree with **Θ**, and refer sf. of the first vb. to the divine words. Probably all are interpretations of originals without any sfs. at all.” Charles A. Briggs and Emilie Grace Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, *International Critical Commentary* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1906–1907), 99..

⁷⁹ J. M. Neale, *A Commentary on the Psalms from Primitive and Mediæval Writers: Psalm 1 to Psalm 38*, Second Edition., vol. 1 (London; New York: Joseph Masters; Pott and Amery, 1869), 177.

⁸⁰ F. B. Meyer, *Through the Bible Day by Day: A Devotional Commentary*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1914–1918), 52.

⁸¹ He viewed Psalm 12:7 as a promise that “Jehovah will keep His people in these coming dark days.” Arno C Gaebelein, *The Annotated Bible: Ezra to Psalms*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 230.

⁸² “Therefore the psalmist trusted in God’s word that He would keep them safe in the midst of proud people who strut about in smug self-confidence.” Allen P. Ross, “Psalms,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 801.

⁸³ “Regardless of the circumstances of life, God’s children are assured of the special protection of their heavenly Father from the evil of the world in which they live. The wicked may turn the world upside down, but God will guard his own. He keeps them “safe” from the wicked.” Willem A. VanGemenen, “Psalms,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 138.

⁸⁴ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 93.

Joachim Kraus⁸⁵ and Erhard Gerstenberger follow the basic view of Neale:

You, Yahweh, safeguard them [your words]; you protect him [or according to some Hebrew manuscripts and the LXX, *us*] always from that kind of person.⁸⁶

21st century interpreters

The voters line up again in the 21st century for the standard view: Goldingay⁸⁷, Longman⁸⁸, Futato⁸⁹, Dahood⁹⁰, Eaton⁹¹, Harman⁹², Grogan⁹³, and Jacobson⁹⁴—as well

⁸⁵ “The MT reading “you will protect him” is not to be corrected to תצרכו, following Gk. The suffix refers to יפיה לו in v. 5*. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *A Continental Commentary: Psalms 1–59* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 207.

⁸⁶ Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part 1: With an Introduction to Cultic Poetry*, vol. 14, *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 81.

⁸⁷ “The crowd of dishonest confidence tricksters who seem to run the city seem set to do so forever, but now you know God will protect you.” John Goldingay, *Psalms for Everyone, Part 1: Psalms 1–72, Old Testament for Everyone* (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2013), 41.

⁸⁸ “God has said that he will protect the needy and the psalmist confidently affirms the truth of his statement (v. 7).” Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 15–16, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 94.

⁸⁹ “We too can have confidence that the Lord will protect and preserve us.” Mark D. Futato, “The Book of Psalms,” in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 7: The Book of Psalms, The Book of Proverbs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 65.

⁹⁰ Mitchell Dahood S.J., *Psalms I: 1–50: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 16, *Anchor Yale Bible* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 75.

⁹¹ “The thought becomes explicit in v. 7, where there is some doubt about the object—‘them’, ‘him’, or more likely ‘us’ (so a few manuscripts and LXX).” John Eaton, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and New Translation* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 90.

⁹² Allan Harman, *Psalms: A Mentor Commentary*, vol. 1–2, *Mentor Commentaries* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2011), 159.

⁹³ Though Grogan bases his commentary on the NIV and doesn’t give any evidence of checking the Hebrew here: “The reiterated ‘us’ [of 12:7] shows [the psalmist’s] community concern.” *Psalms, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 58.

⁹⁴ “In both v. 5c and 8b, the singular pronominal suffix carries a collective sense, referring to the plural group on whose behalf the psalmist intercedes.” Rolf A. Jacobson, “Book One of the Psalter: Psalms 1–41,” in *The Book of Psalms*, ed. E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 155.

as a number of study Bibles, including Sproul⁹⁵ and the Jewish⁹⁶, CSB⁹⁷, Faithlife⁹⁸, ESV⁹⁹, and KJV Study Bibles.¹⁰⁰

Samuel Terrien, however, takes “you will keep them” to refer to the promises God has just made.¹⁰¹ And Jim Hamilton sees 12:7a as a promise that Yahweh will guard his words and 12:7b as a promise that God will guard the “godly ones” mentioned already in 12:1a.¹⁰²

Two more interpreters bear mentioning, the two writers who made the only significant academic attempts I could locate to evaluate whether Psalm 12:6–7 has any bearing on the textual criticism of either testament, or on a doctrine of preservation.

John Feinberg is the only systematic theologian among many surveyed for this paper who so much as mentions Psalm 12:6–7 with reference to the question of textual preservation. Feinberg feels that, on the whole, the Bible teaches or at least implies a doctrine of preservation. But after a very careful exegetical discussion mirroring points already made in this paper, he concludes,

⁹⁵ 12:7, 8 These verses focus on the earth/world in trouble.

12:7 keep ... guard. In spite of the apparent chaos in the world, the believer is confident in God’s superintending care.

R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version (2015 Edition)* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 842.

⁹⁶ “Unfortunately, the psalm’s conclusion is likely corrupt and defies precise translation, though the general sense of God preserving the faithful from the evildoers is clear.”

Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael Fishbane, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1295. Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael Fishbane, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), vi.

⁹⁷ The Lord will protect his own (31:23), while the wicked prowl.

Kevin R. Warstler, “Psalms,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 827.

⁹⁸ “The psalm ends with a note of praise to Yahweh. He will act to preserve the poor and needy.” John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Ps 12:7.

⁹⁹ “It seems best to take them as the poor and needy (v. 5) and the godly (v. 1).” *Crossway Bibles, The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 953.

¹⁰⁰ “Jehovah preserves His own (31:23), but not so the wicked.” Kevin R. Warstler, “Psalms,” in *KJV Study Bible* (WORDsearch, 2012), Ps 12:7–8.

¹⁰¹ “The psalmist renews his prayer, but asks for nothing. He knows that the Lord will keep his word (v. 8).” Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary*, *The Eerdmans Critical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 156.

¹⁰² “The first-person pronominal suffix in 12:7b (MT 12:8b) is plural, “you will keep them,” and the second is singular, “you will deliver him.” I have taken these to refer to Yahweh’s words and Yahweh’s king. The ESV reads the second suffix as a first-person plural, “you will guard us,” which is a valid reading of the text. The CSB renders the first as a first-person plural, which is not a valid reading of the text as it stands, and takes the second suffix the same way, “You ... will guard us; You will protect us” (so also NIV 1984). The NIV 2011 takes the first suffix as a reference to the needy and the second as a first-person plural: “You ... will keep the needy ... and will protect us.” James M. Hamilton Jr., *Psalms*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Andreas J. Köstenberger, vol. 1, *Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 191.

Even though verses 6–7, isolated from the rest of the psalm, seem “potentially” to comment about Scripture, in the context of the whole psalm, verse 7 isn’t about Scripture at all.¹⁰³

William Combs, second, dismisses the relevance of Psalm 12:7 to any doctrine of preservation. His argument hinges on the gender of the pronouns.¹⁰⁴

Interpreting Psalm 12

Ironically, it is serious interpreters’ dedication to a principle usually upheld by responsible KJV-Onlyists that keeps them from reading the key phrase in Psalm 12:7 the way the KJV does. That principle is what I mentioned earlier: Masoretic Text priority. “Them...them,” the reading in the KJV, can be interpreted in such a way that both pronouns refer back to “the words,” but the Hebrew text cannot be interpreted justly this way. The KJV’s rendering may be an acceptable *translation*—a translator may feel that English speakers simply would not make a number switch (“them...him”) in a circumstance like 12:7. He or she may quietly regularize the number according to English expectations, as the KJV translators apparently did. But this is precisely why the Reformers fought to maintain the authority of the originals over that of mere translations. Hebrew trumps English. The KJV translators’ rendering innocently created potential for a doctrinal misreading.¹⁰⁵ Outside of the various varieties of KJV-Onlyism, no one in the history of the church¹⁰⁶ has ever read Psalm 12:7 the way KJV defenders read it.

Given MT priority, it is essentially impossible for “him” in 12:7 to refer back to the words of 12:6. The object of “preservation,” at least, is not the words of the Lord. But it is grammatically and contextually possible that the first pronoun in 12:7, “them,” refers back to the content of 12:5. “Them” is genuinely but not (in this writer’s estimation, and I speak here with regard to the human author) purposefully ambiguous.

“Keep,” too, could point in either direction. Both people and things are “kept” (שמר) in the Hebrew Bible: Adam must keep the garden, the angel later keeps the way to the tree of life, Abraham must keep God’s covenant, God promises to keep Jacob wherever he goes, the Israelites must keep the Passover and the sabbath. Lexicography will not answer this interpretive question.

But if this paper may make a few observations that have not already been made in ages past, it is unlike Hebrew parallelism for “them” and “him” to point to different referents. It is too cute, more demanding of the reader than the form typically

¹⁰³John S. Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place: The Doctrine of Scripture*, ed. John S. Feinberg, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 720.

¹⁰⁴ “The Preservation of Scripture,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, Vol. 5 (Fall 2000), 3–44.

¹⁰⁵ But see coda below.

¹⁰⁶ Insert appropriate disclaimer about proving a universal negative.

requires. In the context of the psalm, “them...him” both almost certainly refer back to the same referent(s): the poor and needy of 12:5.

“Because the poor are plundered, because the needy groan,
I will now arise,” says the LORD;
“I will place him in the safety for which he longs.” (ESV)

And another (apparently new?) contribution: even if it were warranted to make the leap from these specific “words of the Lord” to all the words of the Lord, including Scripture (indeed, could any of God’s words be “impure”?) context also delimits the meaning of the word “pure.” Those who use Psalm 12:6–7 to defend the existence of perfectly pure Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament texts have not acknowledged this. They appear to assume that “pure” means “free of textual corruption,” or the yet more specific “free of textual variants.” But that cannot be the focus of Psalm 12:6. The psalmist cannot be saying, “The promises God just made to the poor in the previous verse will be copied perfectly down through the centuries—not a וְ nor a וְ will be lost.” He has to be saying, “God’s promises are completely reliable, unmixed with ulterior motives.” Indeed, this is the way interpreters commonly take 12:6. Augustine glossed “pure” to mean “without the alloy of pretence”¹⁰⁷; Craigie to mean “free from any falsity or impairment.”¹⁰⁸ In this sense, God’s word has certainly been “kept pure in all ages,” but not in the sense meant by KJV defenders.

Defenders of a perfectly pure textual tradition will be quick to say, “But how can God’s promises be perfectly reliable if they are textually unstable? Does not the latter imply the former?”

Does it? Do the kinds of variants generally found within the manuscript traditions of the testaments change the message of Scripture? If one textual variant said, “the poor are despoiled” instead of “the poor are plundered”—would God’s promises no longer be pure? This is the situation we frequently face in both testaments: variants that are, in the words of Dan Wallace, viable but not meaningful. In other words, “despoiled” would be viable here, contextually. But it would not be a meaningful difference.

There are more serious variants in the manuscript traditions for both testaments, of course, but if we may turn from special to general revelation, there is no perfect text to be had. All of the manuscripts we have of any size in either testament differ at least a little. A textual apparatus of a sort—the *kethib-qere*—is included in the very Masoretic Text commonly said to be perfect by KJV defenders. There are no urim or thummim pointing to the Leningrad Codex over the Aleppo Codex; there are no apostles to draw straws to see which Textus Receptus is the perfect one or whether the NA28 should take the TR’s office. Defenders of the KJV/TR are persuasive to their

¹⁰⁷ Augustine of Hippo, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms: Psalms 1–150*, vol. 1, *A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church* (Oxford; London: F. and J. Rivington; John Henry Parker, 1847–1857), 104.

¹⁰⁸ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, vol. 19, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1983), 139.

own when they use Psalm 12:7 as a prooftext only because the KJV translators chose to render the pronouns “them...them.” If their translation had been one step more literal, or if they had kept the Bishop’s Bible rendering during their revision process (“Thou wylt kepe the godly, O God: thou wylt preserue euery one of them from this generation for euer”), no “KJV-Only” doctrinal statements would be citing Psalm 12:7.

The most sophisticated KJV defenders turn to

Athanasius against the world

There are serious, accredited Bible interpreters who, over the centuries, have seen in the first clause of Psalm 12:7 a promise for God to keep his “words.” Several of the most capable defenders the KJV have collected these citations.¹⁰⁹ In my research among approximately 60 writers, six saw 12:7a that way, and another five at least felt the duty to report that view as a viable option. But none—not a single Hebrew-reading interpreter I could find outside of the KJV defenders aforementioned—saw the second clause of 12:7 as a referring to the “words.” And, of course, an overwhelming majority of those surveyed, nearly 50 interpreters over the centuries, saw both pronouns as referring to the poor and needy. Majorities can be tyrannies; Bible interpretation is not a democracy. But if to the commentary tradition KJV defenders appeal, to the commentators we must go. KJV-Onlyists love to argue that God’s use of a given text (the Pericope Adulterae, Mark 16:9–20, the Johannine comma) is indication of God’s approval of that text; but what about his use of a given interpretation? The church has with great consistency seen Psalm 12:7a and b as a promise of God to defend the godly poor and needy.

And even when a few interpreters over the centuries have pointed to the “words” and not to the poor and needy as the object of God’s keeping, none to this writer’s knowledge has ever drawn the conclusion KJV defenders do as to the application of these words. None has seen in the verse a promise of perfect textual preservation of the Bible. Charles Augustus Briggs, for example, who is quoted by several of the KJV defenders mentioned earlier, is an awkward champion for them to put forward, given that his argument is that the reason so many options exist among the manuscripts and ancient versions is that “probably all are interpretations of originals without any s[uffixes] at all.”¹¹⁰

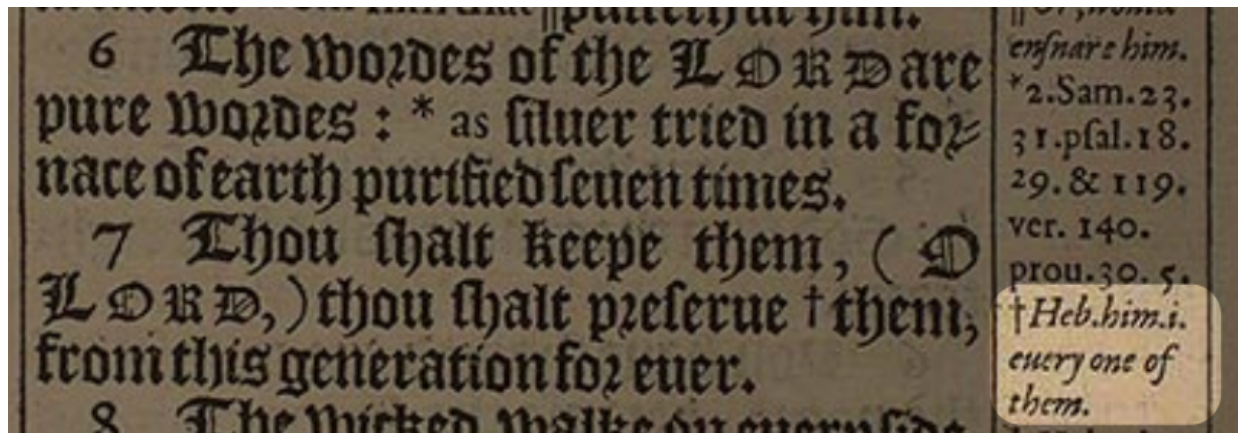
The defender of the KJV who uses Psalm 12:7 as a prooftext for his views is not quite Athanasius against the world; he is Athanasius against the vast majority of the world, minus a few footnotes mentioning the possibility that Athanasius may be half right in his interpretation but so wrong in his application that his application did not

¹⁰⁹ <https://faithsaves.net/psalm-126-7-commentators/>

¹¹⁰ Charles A. Briggs and Emilie Grace Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, International Critical Commentary (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1906–1907), 99.

even occur to a single one of them before Athanasius came along in approximately 1980.

Coda: For admittedly rhetorical purposes, I omitted one key historical interpreter of Psalm 12:7. Four hundred years ago, the preeminent biblical scholars of England issued their judgment regarding the referent of both pronouns in Psalm 12:7. The KJV translators themselves have a footnote at 12:7b:



Norton's KJV edition expands the details a tiny bit: "them: Heb. *him*, that is, *every one of them*."¹¹¹

For the KJV translators to say "him" is to point at least the second pronoun of 12:7 back to the poor and needy. And given that they regularized "him" to "them" to match the first pronoun, this almost certainly means that they regarded that first pronoun, too, to refer to the poor and needy. If the King James Bible of 1611 is "the inerrant, infallible, inspired, preserved word of God," its footnotes, presumably also inspired, undercut the very prooftext used to add that word "preserved" to the list of doctrinal descriptors. As this writer has, at sundry times and in divers manners, had occasion to say, the KJV translators were not KJV-Only.

¹¹¹ Norton also apparently accidentally puts the footnote on the wrong pronoun. David Norton, ed., *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible with the Apocrypha: King James Version*, Revised edition. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Ps 12:7.