

Psalm 20

Evening Prayer Tuesday Week 1

It would appear that Jerusalem is under siege. Those living in the city have assembled in the temple to plead with YHWH to come to the aid of the king and the army. The title reads: 'To the leader. A Psalm* of David'. A first century BC Aramaic version of this psalm in Egyptian script has been discovered which has the Egyptian god, Horus, where the psalm reads YHWH. Is this a translation from an ancient Egyptian text which the psalmist has borrowed, or did the devotees of Horus borrow Psalm 20 and adapt it?

There is a close connection with Psalm 18, in which David looks back over the vicissitudes of his life and sees the providence of YHWH in the victories which won the Holy Land. Here a campaign is about to begin. The king is fighting YHWH's cause and according to the current ideology, a nation's gods were expected to fight at the head of the army.

Hezekiah appointed combat commanders over the people, and gathered them together to him in the square at the gate of the city and spoke encouragingly to them, saying, 'Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid or dismayed before the king of Assyria and all the horde that is with him; for there is one greater with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is YHWH our God, to help us and to fight our battles.'

– 2Chronicles 32:6-8 (see also 2Chronicles 20)

The following psalm, Psalm 21, is a prayer of thanksgiving after a successful campaign

Part One

¹May YHWH* answer you in the day of siege!

May the name of the God of Jacob protect you!

²May he send you help from the sanctuary, and give you support from Zion.

³May he remember all your offerings, and look with favour upon your sacrifices.

The 'God of Jacob' is the God of the twelve tribes: the God who marches with Israel's army.

The word 'protect' carries the image of God being an impregnable fortress for his people. Compare the following:

The name of YHWH is a strong tower.

– Proverbs 18:10

I will rescue the one who loves me;

I will protect those who know my name.

– Psalm 91:14

The 'sanctuary' is the temple. Zion is the city Jerusalem as the city of the king and the place of YHWH's temple. It was a common practice at the time for armies to offer cultic sacrifices to seek (assure?) the help of their god in a military campaign.

Selah*

The king is to carry out the desires of YHWH's heart, and YHWH carries out the desires of the king's heart.

YHWH has sought out a man after his own heart; and YHWH has appointed him to be ruler over his people.

– 1Samuel 13:14

O Lord YHWH, because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have wrought all this greatness, so that your servant may know it.

– 2Samuel 7:21

'Deliverance' is assured if YHWH helps. See the article 'Saving Help' in the Introduction. Military standards were inscribed with the name of YHWH (see Numbers 2 and 10).

We do not see our emblems; there is no longer any prophet, and there is no one among us who knows how long this will last.

– Psalm 74:9

⁴May he grant you your heart's* desire, and fulfil all your plans.

^{5a}May we shout for joy over your deliverance*, and in the name of our God set up our standards.

Oracle

From the sanctuary the presiding priest pronounces a favourable oracle! Hence the expression of confidence in Part Two.

^{5b}YHWH will fulfil all your petitions.

Part Two

O sing to YHWH a new song, for he has done marvellous things. His right hand and his holy arm have achieved victory.

– Psalm 98:1

Then I will also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can give you victory.

– Job 40:14

⁶Now I know that YHWH will give deliverance* to his anointed*; he will answer him from his holy heaven with the might of his victorious right hand.

They place their trust, not in their military might, but in YHWH whose name they invoke,

Through your name we trample on our assailants.

– Psalm 44:5

All the nations surrounded me; in the name of YHWH I repulsed them!

– Psalm 118:10

Our help is in the name of YHWH, who made heaven and earth.

– Psalm 124:8

⁷Some boast in chariots, and some in horses, but we invoke YHWH our God.

Plea for victory

**⁸They will collapse and fall,
but we shall rise and stand
upright.**

Give victory with your right hand, so that those
whom you love may be rescued. Answer us!

– Psalm 108:6

This is the day that YHWH has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
Save us, we beseech you, YHWH!
YHWH, we beseech you, give us success!

– Psalm 118:24-25

**⁹Give deliverance* to the
king, YHWH; answer us
when we call upon you.**

This shout rises from the assembly in support of the
petition of the king, as the troops prepare to march
out to defend their city against the army that is be-
sieging the city. They are praying to be rescued from
the attacking army.