

Psalm 44

Office of Readings Thursday Weeks 2&4

The psalmist is utterly bewildered. It was God who cleared the land of its inhabitants and gave it to his chosen people, Israel (verses 1-8). Yet now the foreign nations are plundering at will. Is the historical setting the invasion in the north of the Assyrian Tiglath-Pileser II in 732BC? – an hypothesis supported by the absence of any mention of Jerusalem or the temple. The psalmist would understand the calamity as divine punishment, if the people had been unfaithful to the covenant. However, as he sees it, this is not the case (verses 17 and 20). It is unthinkable that God would be unfaithful, so what is going on? Why is God so slow to remember them? God seems to have forgotten (verse 24) or to be asleep (verse 23). They can do nothing. It is up to God to act as he acted in the past. The psalmist pleads with God to reveal his kindness (verse 26). The title reads: ‘To the leader. Of the Korahites*. A Maskil*.’

The psalmist knows that God is the Lord of history.

I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.

– Isaiah 45:7

Indeed the Lord will vindicate his people, have compassion on his servants ... Then he will say: Where are their gods, the rock in which they took refuge, who ate the fat of their sacrifices, and drank the wine of their libations? Let them rise up and help you, let them be your protection! See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god beside me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand.

– Deuteronomy 32:36-39

Since God is, indeed, the Lord of history, the psalmist cannot understand why they, while innocent, are suffering.

Part One. God’s saving action

The psalmist begins by recalling God’s saving action in the lives of their ancestors. He is hoping that God will act again. Compare:

Look at the nations, and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told.

– Habakkuk 1:5

Modern archaeology does not support the understanding expressed here. The people who formed into Israel were largely indigenous. The truth underlying the psalmists words is that the Holy Land is God’s gift to the people of Israel and not something that they achieved for themselves.

¹We have heard, O God, our ancestors have told us, what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old:

²with your own hand you drove out the nations, and planted our ancestors there in their place; you brought affliction on the peoples, but brought prosperity to our ancestors.

The Lord of history

³Not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm give them victory*. It was your right hand, and your arm, and the light of your countenance, for you delighted in them.

⁴You are my King and my God; you decree victories* for Jacob.

⁵Through you we beat down our foes; through your name we trample on our assailants.

⁶For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save* me.

⁷But you have saved* us from our foes, and have put to confusion those who hate us.

⁸In God we have boasted continually, and we will call upon you in thanksgiving forever.

[Selah*]

This continues the thought of the previous verse, repeating the understanding of the formation of Israel that is presented in the Torah. The essential point is that the land is theirs because of God, not because of anything that they have done. It is a sign of God's choice of them and God's delight in them. It also places upon them the obligation to obey God's commandments, since they are living in God's land. Compare the following:

You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession.

– Exodus 15:17

Their adversaries might misunderstand and say, 'Our hand is triumphant; it was not the Lord who did all this.'

– Deuteronomy 32:27

The psalmist now turns his attention to God's saving action in his own time. We must take care not to generalise the confidence of victory expressed here. This can be seen from the misplaced confidence of the (false) prophet Zedekiah during the reign of Jehoshaphat:

Zedekiah son of Chenaanah made for himself horns of iron, and he said, 'Thus says the Lord: With these you shall gore the Arameans until they are destroyed.' All the prophets were prophesying the same and saying, 'Go up to Ramoth-gilead and triumph; the Lord will give it into the hand of the king'.

– 1Kings 22:11-12

As the true prophet Micaiah had predicted, the battle was lost, not won.

Compare:

It was not by your sword or by your bow.

– Joshua 24:12

Thus says the Lord: 'Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might.'

– Jeremiah 9:23

Part Two

The psalmist believes that the present catastrophe, too, comes from God's hand.

⁹Yet you have rejected us and shamed us.
You have not gone out with our armies.

¹⁰You made us retreat before the foe,
and our enemies plunder us at will.

¹¹You have made us like sheep for slaughter,
and have scattered us among the nations.

¹²You have sold your people for a trifle,
letting them go cheaply.

¹³You have made us the taunt of our neighbours,
the derision and scorn of those around us.

¹⁴You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughing stock among the peoples.

¹⁵All day long my disgrace is before me,
my face is covered in shame

¹⁶at the insults of the taunters and revilers,
at the sight of the enemy attacking.

Part Three

The psalmist pleads that they have not been unfaithful.

¹⁷All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you,
or been false to your covenant*.

¹⁸Our heart* has not turned back,
nor have our steps departed from your way,

¹⁹yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals,
and covered us with deep darkness.

²⁰If we had forgotten the name of our God,
or spread out our hands to a strange god,

²¹would not God discover this,
God who knows the secrets of the heart*?

²²Because of you we are being killed all day long,
and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

Verse twenty-two is quoted by Paul in Romans 8:36. In spite of this Paul is convinced that we who suffer because we follow Jesus are victorious because nothing can separate us from God's love.

Come, Lord

Part Four. A concluding plea

²³Rouse yourself, O Lord! Why do you sleep. Awake, do not reject us any longer!

‘Lord’ here is the Hebrew ^aדֹנָי [דָּוָי].
The imagery recurs in the psalms:

Israel’s guard neither slumbers nor sleeps.

– Psalm 121:4

Wake up! Bestir yourself for my defence, for my cause, my God and my Lord!

– Psalm 35:23

²⁴Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

Compare:

Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days?

– Lamentation 5:20

²⁵We sink down to the dust, our bodies unable to rise from the ground.

The plea is urgent. The ultimate basis for their supplication is not their own innocence (though that has been stressed throughout the psalm). It is God’s kindness.

²⁶Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us because of your kindness*.

A similar devastation was to happen to Jerusalem (598BC). It is reflected in the Isaiah scroll (51:9 - 52:6) in sentiments that resemble those of Psalm 44.

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of YHWH!

Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago!

Was it not you ... who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over?

So the ransomed of YHWH shall return, and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away ...

Rouse yourself, rouse yourself! Stand up, O Jerusalem,

you who have drunk at the hand of YHWH the cup of his wrath ...

devastation and destruction, famine and sword— who will comfort you? ...

Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion!

Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city;

for the uncircumcised and the unclean shall enter you no more.

Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem;

loose the bonds from your neck, O captive daughter Zion!

For thus says YHWH: You were sold for nothing,

and you shall be redeemed without money. For thus says the Lord YHWH:

Long ago, my people went down into Egypt to reside there as aliens;

the Assyrian, too, has oppressed them without cause.

Now therefore what am I doing here, says YHWH,

seeing that my people are taken away without cause?

Their rulers howl, says YHWH, and continually, all day long, my name is despised.

Therefore my people shall know my name;

therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I.