

Ponderings in the Psalms

The following is a Messianic Study on

Psalm 44

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Brit Chadashah
ברית חדשה

The *Pondering* studies were published in the Brit Chadashah Newsletter. Brit Chadashah (*New Covenant*) is a Messianic Fellowship in Sydney. Led by Paul Cohen a Jewish believer in Messiah Yeshua (Jesus). We meet together fortnightly for Bible studies from a Messianic Jewish Perspective. We are a unique fellowship made up of Jewish and Gentile people who are believers in Yeshua as the promised Messiah of Israel.

If you don't know Yeshua as your Messiah, we encourage you to search out the Scriptures for yourself. God promised in the book of Jeremiah, "*You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart*" (Jeremiah 29:13). And we hope you will make contact with us so that we can share more about the Messiah, His life and ministry.

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Pondering Psalm 44 “Why do You hide Your face?”

Psalm 44

¹ For the choir director, a maskil for the sons of Korah.

O God, we have heard with our ears,

Our fathers have told us

The work that You did in their days,

In the days of old.

² You with Your own hand drove out the nations; Then You planted them;

You afflicted the peoples, Then You spread them abroad.

³ For by their own sword they did not possess the land,

And their own arm did not save them,

But Your right hand and Your arm and the light of Your presence,

For You favoured them.

⁴ You are my King, O God;

Command victories for Jacob.

⁵ Through You we will push back our adversaries;

Through Your Name we will trample down those who rise up against us.

⁶ For I will not trust in my bow,

Nor will my sword save me.

⁷ But You have saved us from our adversaries,

And You have put to shame those who hate us.

⁸ In God we have boasted all day long,

And we will give thanks to Your Name forever.

Selah.

⁹ Yet You have rejected *us* and brought us to dishonour,

And do not go out with our armies.

¹⁰ You cause us to turn back from the adversary;

And those who hate us have taken spoil for themselves.

¹¹ You give us as sheep to be eaten

And have scattered us among the nations.

¹² You sell Your people cheaply,

And have not profited by their sale.

¹³ You make us a reproach to our neighbours,

A scoffing and a derision to those around us.

¹⁴ You make us a byword among the nations,

A laughingstock among the peoples.

¹⁵ All day long my dishonour is before me

And my humiliation has overwhelmed me,

¹⁶ Because of the voice of him who reproaches and reviles,

Because of the presence of the enemy and the avenger.

¹⁷ All this has come upon us, but we have not forgotten You,

And we have not dealt falsely with Your covenant.

¹⁸ Our heart has not turned back,

And our steps have not deviated from Your way,

¹⁹ Yet You have crushed us in a place of jackals

And covered us with the shadow of death.

- 20 If we had forgotten the Name of our God
Or extended our hands to a strange god,
21 Would not God find this out?
For He knows the secrets of the heart.
22 But for Your sake we are killed all day long;
We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.
- 23 Arouse Yourself, why do You sleep, O Lord?
Awake, do not reject us forever.
24 Why do You hide Your face
And forget our affliction and our oppression?
25 For our soul has sunk down into the dust;
Our body cleaves to the earth.
26 Rise up, be our help,
And redeem us for the sake of Your lovingkindness.

Introduction

Genre

A maskil, as explained before, is an instruction to make us wise, an educational poem, something for us to ponder. It is a community Lament Psalm, *we, us* and *our* are used frequently throughout the psalm, and even when the author says *I, me* (v6) he does so as the king, the community leader. Overall, it is a deep expression of grief and pain, centred on the complaint: “*Why do You hide Your face?*”

Author & Date

As in the previous Psalms, this psalm was most likely **for** the Sons of Korah, rather than **by** them. The ancient Aramaic translation (Targum) has David as the author, rather than the common view that it was written much later.

Nevertheless three keys are given to us to try and place it in history:

- (1) They are scattered among the nations (verse 11);
- (2) They had remembered the Lord, and they had not been unfaithful to the Covenant (verses 17-19);
- (3) They had not forgotten the Name of God, nor had they committed idolatry by extended their hands to a strange god (verse 20).

Although we cannot be sure, I tend to lean towards the time of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18-20). The Northern Kingdom of Israel was captured and the people scattered (2 Kings 17:6), then King Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized many of them (18:13). According to his custom, Sennacherib also exiled the Judean people. Sennacherib’s boast was recorded on clay cylinders or cuneiform tablets and one of these is now held in the Israel Museum.¹

¹ <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/372815>

On these prisms Sennacherib says this of Hezekiah:

“As for the king of Judah, Hezekiah, who had not submitted to my authority, I besieged and captured forty-six of his fortified cities, along with many smaller towns, taken in battle with my battering rams. ... I took as plunder 200,150 people, both small and great, male and female, along with a great number of animals including horses, mules, donkeys, camels, oxen, and sheep. As for Hezekiah, **I shut him up like a caged bird in his royal city of Jerusalem.** I then constructed a series of fortresses around him, and I did not allow anyone to come out of the city gates. His towns which I captured I gave to the kings of Ashdod, Ekron, and Gaza.”

King Hezekiah was ‘locked up like a bird’ in Jerusalem and saw this as a wakeup call. He stopped the worship of foreign gods (2 Kings 18:4-5), trusted in the LORD (2 Kings 18:5) and returned to the Torah - Law of Moses (2 Kings 18:6, see also the non-biblical book of Sirach 49:4). Again we cannot be dogmatic, but because of these connections I would place this psalm in His days.

Quotation in the Brit Chadashah

Psalm 44:22 is quoted in the Brit Chadashah (New Covenant) in Romans 8:36. The apostle Paul made an application that even when we are persecuted, nothing can separate us from the love of Messiah.

Outline

The psalm has four stanzas, he recalls the deeds of the LORD, from the exodus onwards, and notes that God appears absent, and so asks God *where are You and why are You allowing Your people to suffer*, and concludes with a prayer for redemption.

- 1) Verses 1-8 The recalling of **God’s power in history**, “*we have heard*” and “*You rescued us*”
- 2) Verses 9-16 Where are You when *we are neglected* and why are we *a byword*?
- 3) Verses 17-22 A protest, we are loyal to You O God, yet suffering.
- 4) Verses 23-26 A final prayer to God “*redeem us for the sake of Your lovingkindness.*”

Keyword

Four times in the first eight verses we see the same root-word *יָשַׁע* (*yasha*’), meaning to deliver, rescue or save us. In verses 3, 6 & 7 the NASB translate this as *save* and in verse 4 as *victories*, though the JPS uses *salvation* which is much closer.

Commentary

Verses 1-8 God’s power in history

In verses 1-8 the author looks back, he does this through “*what we heard*,” which refers to the commandments to retell the exploits of the Lord (Exodus 10:2; 12:24-27; 13:8, 14). It is the telling of the story of redemption to the next generation.

In this segment he recounts what he learned as he refers to the *Song of the Sea* (Exodus 15). The LORD drove out the inhabitants (Exodus 23:28), and it was not by their own sword (Joshua 24:12), but by the “*right Hand*” of God and the “*Arm of the Lord*” (Exodus 15:6). All this indicated that the favour of the Lord was upon them, “*Your Face*” (Numbers 6:25).

Verses 9-16 We are neglected

We then come to the Lament part of the psalm. It starts with *Yet*, or *but* *אָף* (*af*), and then there is the dialogue, the argument with God. The Psalmist blames God, *You have rejected us and You have disgraced us and You have not gone out with our armies.... God hid His face*, something Moses warned about in Deuteronomy 31:17 “*Then My anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and **hide My face** from them, and they will be consumed, and many evils and troubles will come upon them; so that they will say in that day, ‘Is it not because our God is not among us that these evils have come upon us?’*” God had delayed the punishment due to their sins (cf. Leviticus 26:1-46), and the two principles we see is that the righteous will suffer the same fate as the nation, and if there is repentance God may delay His punishment.

Many Christians find this argument with God difficult, but Abraham bargained with God (Genesis 18:16-33), Moses refused his mission (Exodus 3:11-13, 4:1, 10-13) and Asaph accused God (Psalm 80:5-8). Job proclaimed his innocence (Job chapters 6-7, all the way to chapters 26-31). In the same way the psalmist in this psalm has an argument with God. God is not challenged by this, arguing with God is a biblical and Jewish Tradition. He invites it “*Come now, and let us reason together,*” Says the Lord, “*Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool*” (Isaiah 1:18).

Verses 17-22 A protest we are loyal to You o God, yet suffering

Reading this segment in the context of Hezekiah’s reform removes the difficulty. The claim ‘we have been faithful’ was true. God had declared that when Israel was unfaithful to the Covenants she would be punished (Deuteronomy 31:14-17). Hezekiah’s claim is made in Psalm 44:17-18 “*All this has come upon us, but we have not forgotten You, And we have not dealt falsely with Your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, And our steps have not deviated from Your way*”

This should not be seen as a claim in arrogance or of his (their) self-righteousness, King Hezekiah led the repentance movement, and “*He did right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father David had done*” (2 Kings 18:3). He did seek the Lord as the prophet Isaiah says “*Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, and said, “Remember now, O Lord, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in Your sight.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly*” (Isaiah 38:2-3).

Note the inversion of Psalm 23 in verse 22, they were not led to green pastures but they were led to the slaughter. It was not green pastures in the valley of the shadow of death (verse 19), and they were not given any comfort.

Verses 23-26 A prayer “redeem us for the sake of Your lovingkindness”

“*why do You sleep, O Lord*” It seems that during the early period of the 2nd Temple a group of Levites were called upon to recite the verse “*Awake, why do you sleep, O Lord?*” In the Talmud (Bavli Sotah 48a) we read the story of a High Priest Yochanan (John Hyrcanus circa 164-104 BCE), who during the Maccabean period, stopped the practice of ‘*the awakeners.*’ Nearly five-hundred years later, rabbis posed the question: *Who are awakeners?* To which rabbi Rachava² said: ‘*On each and every day when the Levites stood on the platform in the Temple they would say*’: “*Awake, why do you sleep, O Lord?*” (Psalms 44:23 in the Hebrew text verse 24). The High Priest Yochanan knew that ‘*the keeper of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps*’ (Psalm 121:4), and the Psalmist knows this too. God is not asleep.

In verse 25 the psalmist shows physical elements of their repentance, their soul נַפְשִׁי (*nephesh*) meaning live-force is flattened into the dust of the grave, and they humbled their bodies so that it stuck to the land. In that position they asked the Lord to arise, to stand up and come to their assistance.

In verse 26 the final appeal is made: “redeem us for the sake of Your lovingkindness.” The word lovingkindness comes from חֶסֶד (*chesed*), which is translated as loyal love, faithfulness

² Rachava was a Babylonian rabbinic scholar c.290-320 CE.

and kindness. This word is connected to God's character (Exodus 34:6) and Covenant Faithfulness (Deuteronomy 7:9).

Lessons learned

We too need to recall what the LORD has done, both in Biblical history and in our own lives. When God feels far away and does not answer, it is ok to respectfully argue and ask "where are You?" But, like the psalmist, we need to repent and come back to him, and pray for redemption based on His works and lovingkindness.

Selah

Blessings in Messiah

Paul & Sue