

Ponderings in the Psalms

The following is a Messianic Study on

Psalm 54

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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.

Brit Chadashah is part of Celebrate Messiah (Australia). Celebrate Messiah's desire is to bring the Good News message of Messiah to the Original Messengers and to see God's Chosen People fully restored through faith in Yeshua the Messiah. Celebrate Messiah was founded in 1995 by Lawrence and Louise Hirsch. Lawrence is a Jewish believer in Yeshua. <http://www.CelebrateMessiah.com.au>.

Brit Chadashah is committed to building the Messianic Community of Jews and Gentiles who are a living testimony for Yeshua the Messiah. By donating to Brit Chadashah, you are partnering with us to do the work of "Reaching the Original Messengers". The funds will be used in outreach to Jewish people as well as in educating Christians in effective ways to reach out.

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Pondering Psalm 54

Psalm 54

^(superscript/1) For the choir director; on stringed instruments. A Maskil of David,
^(superscript/2) when the Ziphites came and said to Saul, “Is not David hiding himself among us?”

¹⁽³⁾ Save me, O God, by Your Name,
And vindicate me by Your power.

²⁽⁴⁾ Hear my prayer, O God;
Give ear to the words of my mouth.

³⁽⁵⁾ For strangers have risen against me
And violent men have sought my life;
They have not set God before them.

Selah.

⁴⁽⁶⁾ Behold, God is my helper;
The Lord is the sustainer of my soul.

⁵⁽⁷⁾ He will recompense the evil to my foes;
Destroy them in Your faithfulness.

⁶⁽⁸⁾ Willingly I will sacrifice to You;
I will give thanks to Your Name, O Lord, for it is good.

⁷⁽⁹⁾ For He has delivered me from all trouble,
And my eye has looked *with satisfaction* upon my enemies.

Introduction

Those reading the scriptures in Hebrew, or in a Jewish publication, will note that this psalm has 9 verses, while most Christian translations only have 7 verses. The difference is that verses 1-2 in Hebrew are listed as the superscript before verse 1 in Christian tradition. Note that these words are a part of scripture, they are not chapter headings given by modern editors and translators of the Bible.

Genre & outline

This psalm is not easily classified as it contains three themes; **a prayer for salvation** (Psalm 54:1-3; in the Hebrew verses 3-5). **A declaration of confidence** that God will protect (verse 4-5; in the Hebrew 6-7); and it finishes with **a vow of thanksgiving** (verses 6-7; in the Hebrew 8-9).

Author, date & instruction (superscript; in the Hebrew verse 1)

The psalmist is David which gives us an approximate date of about 1000 BCE. It is called a *Maskil*, that is an *instruction or a teaching*, and it is to be sung with harp or lyre. Often putting words to a simple melody is a memory technique that can help us remember information. Most of us can remember songs that we have not heard for 50 years or from our childhood, little ditties or rhymes, and that is what David is doing here, setting it to music so we can retain it better.

Historical Context

The superscript (verse 2 in Hebrew) tells us that this was written in remembrance of the Ziphites¹ who betrayed David to King Saul, as is recorded: “*Is not David hiding himself among us?*” (1 Samuel 23:19). The Ziphites lived on the plateau of Ziph, and from there they were able to look down the deep gullies and ravines towards Ein Gedi (Engedi), and beyond that towards the Dead Sea, which was 600 meters below them. Because of the location they were able to observe David’s movements and betray him, not just once, but twice (1 Samuel 26:1).

David had been anointed as the future king (1 Samuel 16), and yet it would be a long time before David would actually ascend the throne as king over all Israel (2 Samuel 5). It is in between these events that we see David’s flights from Saul.

David and his 600 men were in the wilderness מִדְּבָר (midbar) of Ziph at Horesh (NASB). The word Horesh חֹרֶשׁ (choreshah) in older translations (JPS, ASV, KJV) is a *wood* or *woods* (1 Samuel 23:15,16,18,19), while in some of the newer translations it is seen as a place called “*Horesh*” (NASB, ESV and CJB). The same root is translated as *forest / woods* (2 Chronicles 27:4; Isaiah 17:9; Ezekiel 31:3). The wilderness, that is the desert of Ziph, even today is very dry. There has never been enough water for a forest. Biblically speaking *woods* would be a significant area of brushwood, not a European forest, or even something like the Australian bush.

Ziphites were from the tribe of Judah and from the town of Ziph (Joshua 15:55), about 7 kilometres south of Hebron. They were from the same tribe as David, but they were against David.

Why did the Ziphites hate David? We cannot be dogmatic about this, but Ziph was near the wilderness of Maon, where Nabal lived (1 Samuel 25:2). David had extended his protection to Nabal’s flocks when he was camping with his men in the desert of Judah (1 Samuel 25:14-16). It is implied that Nabal held more than one lavish feast, and so from time to time he and his friends got drunk (1 Samuel 25:36). Nabal covered the expenses for these parties. Maon and Ziph are neighbouring villages and so it is likely that among the residents of Ziph were family members and friends of Nabal. They may have held the same attitude against this upstart David (1 Samuel 25:10) who was asking for support against the king.

In the Septuagint it explicitly said “*that the Lord smote Nabal, and he died*” (1 Samuel 25:38, Brenton translation from the Greek). The family and friends were likely to have been angered by what happened to Nabal, especially after David had married Abigail, Nabal’s widow (1 Samuel 25:39). The free parties had come to an end when their relative or friend had died. And so twice the Ziphites urged King Saul to come and kill David, who they saw as a trouble maker.

David’s prayer for salvation (Psalm 54:1-3; in the Hebrew 3-5)

David prayed that God would be attentive to his prayer for salvation, that is his physical rescue, based on the Name of God. This is more than just reputation; it is an appeal to the Covenant God that He might do as He has promised. David pleads to the Judge for vindication, by His strength. In verse 3 we find the complaint, godless men, the strangers זָר (tzar), have arisen against David. While we normally would expect to see “*strangers*” as a

¹ Only the KJV has *the Ziphims* הַזִּיפִים instead of the usual “*the Ziphites*”.

reference to non-Jews, here the term is used for those who are *estranged* (Job 19:13), or even to those that are *offensive* (Job 19:17). Either description fits the profile of Nabal or King Saul and men like them.

David's confidence in God's protection (verse 4-5; in the Hebrew 6-7)

David moves from prayer to a declaration of confidence. Firstly, he states that God is his helper עֲזָרָה ('*ozer*') against these godless Ziphites. God also sustains his life; as the soul can mean life-force. Finally, God is the one who upholds the righteous (Psalm 37:17, 24; 41:12; 51:12; 145:14).

David first appeals to God for that vindication, by turning the evil they had planned for him back on them (Proverbs 1:18-19; Psalm 9:15. 35:7-8). And secondly, in imprecatory language: Lord you, not I, David; but LORD You destroy them in Your faithfulness according to the promises made to me, David.

David's vow of thanksgiving (verses 6-7; in the Hebrew 8-9)

While the situation has not yet changed, David expresses his willingness to worship. The sacrifice would be a *freewill offering*, given out of gratitude to God (Leviticus 7:16); to give thanks to His Name, the Covenant God, for He is good (Psalms 54:8; 69:17; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1, 29; 136:1).

The last verse can be read in two ways: God has already delivered (past tense), or it can be an expression of hope, I know He will deliver (future tense). As such my eye will see the justice of God upon the trouble makers.

I hope this illuminates our understanding of this Psalm a little.

Blessings in Messiah Yeshua

Paul & Sue

Below is a photo of 'forest' in the Judean wilderness with some caves.

