

STUDIES IN PSALMS

hold ourselves justified in accepting the traditional ascription of authorship to be well sustained.

The reader who pleases to turn to our exposition of Ps. 69 will see how far we are from offering an unqualified defence of the imprecations which several of the psalms contain; but the above considerations respecting the peculiar conditions which met in David, may suggest in great strength the plea that it is no wonder that, *in his circumstances*, he did call to Jehovah for heavy judgments on his enemies. David—notwithstanding his reverent and tender scruples against lifting up a finger to injure his tyrannical master, Saul—was, after all, looking forward to the personal occupancy of the throne of the kingdom, and where, then, could he naturally desire these turbulent enemies to be, if not swept away by the judicial visitations of Jehovah? How else could he look forward to a kingdom in which the *humbled* and *needy* should be *vindicated*, and men be free to *dwell* in safety and *thankfulness* in Jehovah's *presence*? In those circumstances probably no man living is now placed.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. This is described as an "imprecatory psalm"; what is meant by this expression? How is it to be understood?
2. Show how appropriate this psalm is to David's experience.
3. In David's circumstance we can understand his desire, as here expressed. Discuss.

PSALM 141

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

A Temptation to Conspiracy Shunned.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers. 1-3, Prayer for Guarded Speech. Stanza II., vers. 4, 5, Danger from Proffered Hospitalities. Stanza III., vers. 6, 7, Guarded Admissions. Stanza IV., vers. 8-10, Prayer for Personal Preservation.

(Lm.) Psalm—By David.

- 1 Jehovah I have called upon thee, oh haste thou unto me:
oh give ear to my voice when I call unto thee.

PSALM 141

- 2 Prepared be my prayer as incense before thee,
the uplifting of my hands as the grain-offering of the
evening.
- 3 Oh set thou Jehovah a guard to my mouth,
oh watch thou over the door of my lips.
- 4 Let not my heart incline unto a matter of wrong,
to practise practices in lawlessness with men who are
working iniquity,—¹
so shall I not taste of their dainties.
- 5 Let a righteous man smite me in kindness and rebuke me,
but the oil of the lawless let it not anoint my head;²
for still my prayer must be against their wrongs.
- 6 "When their judges have been let fall by the side of a crag
then have they hearkened to my sayings, in that they are
mild:"³
- 7 "As one plougheth and furroweth the earth
scattered are our bones at the mouth of hades."
- 8 For unto thee Jehovah Sovereign Lord are mine eyes,
in thee have I taken refuge do not pour out my life.⁴
- 9 Keep me out of the clutches of the trap they have laid for me,
and the lures of the workers of iniquity.⁵
- 10 Let lawless men fall into the snares thereof:
I shall rejoice⁶ while I pass by.

(Nm.)

PARAPHRASE

PSALM 141

Quick, Lord, answer me—for I have prayed. Listen when
I cry to You for help!

2 Regard my prayer as my evening sacrifice and as incense
wafting up to You.

3 Help me, Lord, to keep my mouth shut and my lips sealed.

4 Take away my lust for evil things; don't let me want to
be with sinners, doing what they do, sharing their dainties.

1. Or: "mischief" ("naughtiness"—Dr.).

2. So Sep.: thus intelligibly leading on to what follows.

3. So Fuerst. U.: "sweet," "pleasant," "delightful."

4. U.: "soul."

5. Or: "mischief" ("naughtiness"—Dr.).

6. So Br., reading 'hd instead of yhd. "So by an easy emendation of a
difficult text, which varies in Heb. and Sep., and is variously interpreted in
versions."

STUDIES IN PSALMS

5 Let the godly smite me! It will be a kindness! If they reprove me, it is medicine! Don't let me refuse it. But I am in constant prayer against the wicked and their deeds.

6, 7 When their leaders are condemned, and their bones are strewn across the ground¹ then these men will finally listen to me and know that I am trying to help them.

8 I look to You for help, O Lord God. You are my refuge. Don't let them slay me.

9 Keep me out of their traps.

10 Let them fall into their own snares, while I escape.

EXPOSITION

Some close connection between this psalm and the previous has been generally seen by Expositors, and indeed must be admitted on the evidence; but the situation has materially changed. There—in the foregoing psalm—the danger to the psalmist arose from the slanderous tongues of others; here, the danger apprehended is from an incautious use of his own tongue. And this perception helps us to seize the nature of the change which has come over the psalmist's enemies. Before, they wished to ensure his downfall by falsely accusing him to his master, whose permission they sought to employ violence towards the object of their hatred. Now, however, a deeper plot endangers his life. It is not for their royal master that they really care, but for themselves; and they have conceived the dark project of employing David to assassinate Saul. With the assassin, indeed, they will make short work, and place their nominee on the throne of Israel. Such is the plot.

The evidence of it is not historic, but circumstantial, and springs exclusively from the thoroughness with which such a situation accounts for the extraordinary difficulties which attach themselves to the language of the psalm: whose words, though obscure in places, are by no means so difficult to decipher, as is the connection of thought which binds them together. The psalm, in fact, is incoherent, until its main drift is detected; but, when that is discovered, difficulties materially diminish.

There were men at Saul's court wicked and unscrupulous enough for any crime consistent with their own safety and ambition: to wit, Cush the Benjamite and Doeg the Edomite.

1. Literally, "As when one plows and cleaves the earth, our bones are scattered at the mouth of Sheol."

PSALM 141

David may have unwittingly so far put himself into their power as unintentionally to lead them to contemplate the possibility of making him wholly subservient to their nefarious designs. It would be surprising if he had never betrayed, in their presence, how sorely he felt the wrong that Saul was all along doing him; and, in particular, the king's cruel slaughter of the priests of Nob may have extorted from his noble soul—in his enemies' hearing—some such identification with the sufferers as is implied in the fraternising language of one significant line in our psalm:—

Scattered are our bones at the mouth of hades;

for, in truth, the slaughter at Nob was great, and in the hasty burial of the slain, it may easily have happened that the bones of the victims were left to be upturned by some neighbouring farmer as he made his furrow in the field. How easily may David have more than once expressed so keen a regret over this horrible incident, as to betray the undoubted truth, that his sympathies were much more with the slain than with the slayer; and, so, how plausibly may an occasion have been given to those whose hatred of him was very much in the proportion of the love of others, his friends.

Only, now, their policy is not so much the slanderous use of their own tongues to Saul, as the inducing of David so to add to his lamentations over his master's cruelty as to improve their chance of inciting him to conspire against him. To this end, they flatter and court him; they invite him to a feast, and will undoubtedly entertain him well, not forgetting to *anoint his head* as an honoured guest!

This is the plot, through which the psalmist sees; of which he stands in wholesome dread; against which he prays in tones of rhythmic passion, to which he attunes his inevitable lyre. *That*, we instinctively feel, is how this psalm was produced.

Look through it carefully from this point of view and see how naturally it yields up at least the principal portion of its contents when set to this key-note, and how eloquently forcible those contents, in that case, become.

Like Daniel, at a later time, David feels that he must needs be circumspect even in his prayers; lest his enemies, overhearing him, manufacture treason out of his devotions. He is therefore urgent in this particular request:

STUDIES IN PSALMS

Jehovah, I have called upon thee, oh haste thou unto me:
oh give ear to my voice when I call unto thee.

He proceeds to crave that there may be no unguarded word in his devotions, but all be as orderly and circumspect as the ordering of a morning or evening sacrifice.

Prepared be my prayer as incense before thee,
the uplifting of my hands as the grain-offering
of the evening.

How so? the answer immediately follows:—

Oh set thou Jehovah a guard to my mouth,
oh watch thou over the door of my lips.

The reason for this prayerful caution has already become obvious.

The second stanza is naturally a little more explicit:—

Let not my heart incline unto a matter of wrong;
and would it not be "WRONG" to take away Saul's life? We know how David's soul would recoil from the thought!

Moreover, there will be foreigners in this feast whose heathenish *practices* cannot for a moment be trusted. The whole thing is *lawless*; and by teachings and ceremonies of *lawlessness* will it be sustained. So the psalmist apprehends, and wisely resolves:—

So shall I not taste of their dainties.

"I will come under no social obligation to them."

Let a righteous man smite me—it were a kindness,—
let him even rebuke me!

"It would do me no harm."

But the oil of the lawless—let it not anoint my head!

"By such courtesies I might be overcome; and I would by no means have it so: I cannot consent to unnerve my soul from praying continually against the enormous *wrong* which they are plotting."

Is the next stanza enigmatic? It may be so; and may have been intentionally so left.

"When their judges have been let fall by the side of a
crag,
then have they hearkened to my sayings, in that they
are mild."

PSALM 141

“Did I ever say this? And do they, according to the idiom of our tongue [as plural of intensity], take me to have meant, that *Our great Judge*, Saul, might be *let fall from a crag*? And do they suppose that my further meaning was: That, when the present monarchy is removed by Divine Visitation upon the Great Offender, then they will turn to me in approval of my sayings; will admit that what I had repeatedly said was well within bounds,—was reasonable,—was *mild* in comparison with what I might have said?” It is conceivable, that, while the psalmist saw how easily his enemies could thus intensify and exaggerate the meaning of these sayings so as to make them appear treasonable, the Spirit of Prophecy may have prevented his withdrawing them.

It is further possible that some link of speech has fallen out of this stanza, which, if recovered, would make easily intelligible the present bare four lines: of which a merely conjectural paraphrase has thus been submitted. And it is highly probable, as a little ago was suggested, that the psalmist would have frankly admitted that he had identified himself with the priests who had so fearfully suffered for his sake at Nob.

Our admission that this short stanza of the psalm is decidedly enigmatic, and may include one or even two proverbial sayings to which we have lost the clue, does not by any means throw the remainder of the psalm into obscurity. In any case, if the glimpse we have obtained of the origin of this psalm be correct—we cannot be surprised to find the psalmist moved by the gravity of his danger to renewed entreaties for Jehovah’s protection. If his enemies could only involve him in a plot TO TAKE AWAY SAUL’S LIFE, the *pouring out of his own life* would speedily follow! Cruel, indeed were *the clutches of the trap they had laid for him*. But by Jehovah’s help in keeping his heart right, and his eyes open, and his resolve firm not to accept of their festivities—either their anointing oil for his head or their dainties for his palate—he could calmly hope to *pass by the danger unharmed*.

Perhaps it may, without presumption, be allowable to submit in conclusion,—that the dating by some eminent critics of the composition of this psalm within that period of David’s life covered by the revolt of Absalom, utterly fails to find foothold in the first stanza of the psalm. The fundamental pre-supposition furnished by that stanza is by no means thereby met. No such critical danger at that time attached to any words

STUDIES IN PSALMS

which might fall from David's lips: no emissaries were waiting to run and report them to Absalom; and, if there had been, Absalom had not yet obtained any power to avenge them. By throwing the scene back to the days of Saul, all is changed; and the feasibility of thus obtaining a suitable situation to call forth the psalm is so patent as to render inexcusable the resort of some critics to a post-exilic period, and the violent expedient of turning the suppliant of the psalm into a nation. Leave the individualistic feature of the psalm intact; and the nation can then help itself by appropriating its own condition whatever it finds likely to contribute to its edification.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the definable similarity between this psalm and the preceding one?
2. What is the dark plot of these enemies of David's?
3. What real purpose did these men have in their plot? Who were the possible perpetrators?
4. How had David (possibly) unwittingly put himself in their power?
5. "Scattered are our bones at the mouth of hades"—how shall we understand this expression. Discuss.
6. David feels even his devotion could be a danger to him—how so?
7. The thought of daily personal devotions—i.e. prayer and the meditation on His Word is assured as the practice of David and others. Are we less in need than they? Why do we fail in this privilege?
8. What a sore temptation are social obligations! As with David so with us. How shall we protect ourselves from them?
9. There seems to be an enigmatic stanza in this psalm. Where is it? What does it mean?
10. Show how other possible solutions as to the setting of this psalm fail to properly interpret it.

PSALM 142

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

Loud Outcries in a Cave Succeed Guarded Petitions at Court.