

PSALM 76 AND 77

5. When and where and how will God defend "the meek of the earth"? (vs. 9)

PSALM 77

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

Comfort in Distress Obtained by the Study of a Song.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers. 1-3, Introductory—shewing, by quotation of Language and Statement of Fact, that the Psalmist has been Inconsolable. Stanza II., 4-9, In like manner, the Psalmist pursues his Study, rising to an Intense Spirit-Search (indented). Stanza III., vers. 10-15, A second study, conducting to a Satisfying Conclusion (indented): God is Holy, Incomparable, Redeeming. Stanza IV., vers. 16-19, The "String-Song" itself, on which the "Study" has been based (divisible into four sub-stanzas—tristichs). Stanza V., ver. 20, Conclusion: The Flock is under the Care of a Divine Shepherd (implied).

(Lm.) By Asaph—Psalm.

- 1 "With my voice unto God let me cry:
with my voice unto God, and he will give ear to me."
- 2 In my day of distress after Adonai I sought,
mine eye poured out and became not slack:¹
my soul refused to be consoled:—
- 3 "Let me remember God though I moan,
let me soliloquise though my spirit swoon."
- 4 I anticipated the night-watches with mine eyes,²
I was disturbed and could not speak:
- 5 I pondered on days out of aforetime:—
"The years of by-gone ages let me recall,—
- 6 My string-song in the night is near my heart,—³
let me soliloquise that my spirit may make diligent search.⁴
- 7 To the ages will Adonai reject?
and not again grant acceptance any more?

1. As in Lam. 3:49; and so Dr. deems probable. M.T.: "my hand by night was outstretched, and grew not numb."

2. So, nearly, Br. (w. Vul. and some cod, of Sep.).

3. Or: "mind"—so that I can easily recall it.

4 N.B.: this "spirit-search" begins with the next line.

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- 8 Hath his kindness perpetually ceased?
is speech ended to generation and generation?
- 9 Hath GOD forgotten to be gracious?
or shut up in anger his compassions?"
- 10 And I said⁵—"Now have I made a beginning:—
this changing of the right-hand of the Most High!⁶
- 11 I will commemorate the doings of Yah,—
yea let me recall out of aforetime thy wonders;"
- 12 And talk to myself of all thy works,
and of thy deeds let me soliloquise:—
- 13 O God! in holiness is thy way⁸
who is a great GOD like unto Elohim?
- 14 Thou art the GOD that did a wonderful thing,
thou madest known among the peoples thy might:
- 15 Thou redeemedst with thine own arm⁹ thy people;
the sons of Jacob and Joseph."¹⁰
- 16 Waters saw thee¹¹ O God!
waters saw thee they were in birth-throes,¹²
yea perturbed were the deeps.
- 17 Clouds poured down waters,
skies uttered a voice;
yea thine arrows flew hither and thither.
- 18 The voice of thy thunder was in the whirlwind,
thy¹³ lightnings illumined the world,
perturbed and in commotion was the earth.
- 19 In the sea was thy way,¹⁴
and thy path¹⁵ in the mighty waters;
and thy footprints could not be known.

(Nm.)

5. Renewing his "soliloquy."

6. So after Sep. Other renderings: "This is my sickness"—"sorrow"—
"cross." Also: "The years of thy r-h," instead of "changing."

7. So (pl.) (w. Aram., Sep., Syr., Vul.)—Gn.

8. Anticipating ver. 19 a.

9. So Sep. M.T.: "w, an arm."

10. So far, appar., the "spirit-searching soliloquy." Now comes the
"string-song"—confident, joyous: in tristichs which mark it off as a song in
itself. "The whole stanza [vers. 10-15] is an overture to the following hymn
of praise of God the Redeemer out of Egypt"—Del.

11. In the cloud, as thou camest up to the sea.

12. About to bring forth a nation of freed-men.

13. So it shd. be (w. Sep., Syr., Vul.)—Gn.

14. "In the sea thou didst tread with thy horses"—Br., after Hab. 3:15.

15. So to be read. Some cod. (w. 5 ear, pr. edns.) both write and read:
"path" (Sing.)—Gn.

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20 Thou didst lead like a flock thy people,
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

PARAPHRASE

PSALM 77

I cry to the Lord; I call and call on Him. Oh, that He would listen.

2 I am in deep trouble and I need His help so badly. All night long I pray, lifting my hands to heaven, pleading. There can be no joy for me until He acts.

3 I think of God and moan, overwhelmed with longing for His help.

4 I cannot sleep until You act. I am too distressed even to pray!

5 I keep thinking of the good old days of the past, long since ended.

6 Then my nights were filled with joyous songs. I search my soul and meditate upon the difference now.

7 Has the Lord rejected me forever? Will He never again be favorable?

8 Is His lovingkindness gone forever? Has His promise failed?

9 Has He forgotten to be kind to one so undeserving? Has He slammed the door in anger on His love?

10 And I said: This is my fate; that the blessings of God have changed to hate.¹

11 I recall the many miracles He did for me so long ago.

12 Those wonderful deeds are constantly in my thoughts. I cannot stop thinking about them.

* * * * *

13 O God, Your ways are holy. Where is there any other as mighty as You?

14 You are the God of miracles and wonders? You still demonstrate Your awesome power.

* * * * *

15 You have redeemed us who are the sons of Jacob and of Joseph by Your might.

16 When the Red Sea saw You, how it feared! It trembled to its depths!

17 The clouds poured down their rain, the thunder rolled and crackled in the sky. Your lightning flashed.

1. Literally, "that the right hand of the Most High has changed."

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18 There was thunder in the whirlwind; the lightning lighted up the world! The earth trembled and shook.

19 Your road led by a pathway through the sea—a pathway no one knew was there.

20 You led Your people along that road like a flock of sheep, with Moses and Aaron as their shepherds.

EXPOSITION

This is emphatically a psalm of moods and tenses, so delicately expressed in the Hebrew that only clumsily and by the aid of quotation-marks can they be represented in English, and then not without risk of overdoing. The key to the psalm lies in this: That memories which ultimately yield consolation, when first recalled aggravate present sorrow. *The right hand of the Most High*: this is what, after *diligent search*, stays and consoles the psalmist's mind—a hand put forth with redeeming efficacy in the doings that gave the nation birth. But the first apprehension concerning it is, the contrast between its former activity and its present supineness: a contrast so painful that the psalmist, though resolved on the contemplation, anticipates that it will cause him to *moan* in anguish, even to the extent of causing his spirit to *swoon*—to be enshrouded in mental darkness, to be able to think no more.

A day of anguish seems to have culminated in a night of agony. The outspoken petitions with which his prayers had been begun, not without hope of being heard, falter on his lips, and he can no longer pray—he can only *ponder*; but those apparently long-lost *days culled out of aforesaid* are his theme, and he is determined, at whatever cost, to *recall* them. Fortunately, there comes back to his mind a *string-song* of his, embalming memories of those ancient redeeming days. He does not start *singing* that song forthwith. No! he is too gloomily critical for that; but he will recall it—he will study it—he will soliloquise on that as a text, talking aloud to himself as the manner of study then was. He can at least ask questions—his *spirit* shall make *diligent search*. And then the questions follow. They are so framed as to indicate that the psalmist's mind is in process of recovering its balance. The answer suggested, without being expressed, is—"Surely not!" He cannot have *rejected* for ever! His *kindness* cannot have *perpetually ceased*! He may have changed his dealings; but surely He himself remains unchanged! He takes breath. He feels he has made a *beginning*. En-

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couraged, he follows it up. He looks in the face the conception which like a spectre had projected itself before him. "*This changing of the right hand of the Most High!*" he seems to say, "let me examine it more closely!" And this he does, by thinking of its *doings*, its *wonders*, its *works*, its *deeds*. He is fortified to think out these topics, because he already sees that a change of *dealings* by God, does not necessitate the admission of a *changed God!* It is true (we may admit in passing) that the Hebrew word *sh'noth* may be rendered by the word "years" as well as by the word *changing*; but since the recalling of the "*years* of the right hand of the Most High" seems to bring with it, as an undertone, the change made between those ancient days of activity and the present days of inactivity, we may continue to let our thoughts run on the thread of the Septuagint rendering.

To resume, then. The study of the *string-song* is renewed to such good effect, that, whereas the previous stanza culminated in questions, this one rises to conclusions, confidently addressed to God himself, conclusions indicating a rest of spirit in them on the part of the psalmist. The very first word set after the Divine name in these conclusions is reassuring: *O God in holiness is thy way*—whether in manifest mercy or not. Again, it is what *God is* which leads on to what he has *done*; and what he *is* remains for renewed manifestation. Moreover, what *was* it that *God did*? Was it not to reveal himself to the nations around, and that, as redeeming for Himself a people—the people for whom the present petitioner is pleading? Clearly, this is logically the conclusion of the soliloquy—of the study! It is all reflective thus far. And it is a great gain to recognise this conclusiveness here, inasmuch as the apparent abruptness of the formal conclusion is thereby explained.

In fact, the four tristichs which now follow, so far from being out of place or a mere afterthought, are the very forethought of the whole psalm: at least from the moment when the favourite old *string-song* came up to the surface of the poet's memory. Happy is it for men in a storm, to recall the charm of the still sunlit waters through which they have passed; who have something better than "dead selves" to help them to survive the stress of present trouble. This psalmist Asaph had improved an earlier and more auspicious time for song-making and song-singing and song-memorising; and now his song comes back to him in his night of agony, and he knows it well enough to hold

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it before his mind's eye while he ponders and reasons and questions and summarises and concludes. And then he gives the string-song itself—altogether and compact, and of a sufficiently peculiar formal structure, as—without the aid of quotation marks or altered type, of which, of course, he was innocent—to make it recognisable by us after a long lapse of ages.

The *Song* speaks for itself. It is too boldly and elementally poetical to need detailed comment. Only in its final triplet (ver. 19) does it betray as much subjectivity as to amount to a symbolical undertone. *In the sea was thy way*—as how often it is! *And thy path in the mighty waters*—too mighty for us to control! *And thy footprints could not be known*—and so it ever is, something withheld, something unknown. The work remains: the Worker disappears. When—where—how will he next reveal his right-hand! O Asaph! wait: wait until the Assyrian draws nearer, and thou shalt see!

After the four triplets of the *string-song*, comes a couplet—only—in conclusion. How little it says, and yet how much: it seems to say everything needing to be added. Under the Divine Shepherd's care, it starts the flock on its journey to its home. That flock is in itself a moving appeal to its Divine Redeemer.

With respect to the origin of this psalm, it may be added: That while, so far as direct evidence is concerned—"it remains obscure what kind of national affliction it is which impels him [the singer] to betake himself in flight from the God who is at present hidden to the God who was made manifest in olden times" (Del.); yet the earlier period of the Assyrian invasion probably afforded more than one conjuncture during which prophecy was silent, and it appeared to the strained hearts of the faithful that *an end* had come to prophetic *speech*, and *God had forgotten to show favour*. It is certainly "shown by the comfort sought in the revelations of power and grace made in connection with the earlier history of his people," that it was "an affliction shared in common with the whole of the nation." The place of this psalm, and the indications afforded by several of its companions, point in this direction.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. It is always a help to attempt to understand the historical circumstances of the psalm—what is it here?

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2. In the many prayers for help, do you feel the petitioner had a specific type of help in mind? Was it physical or spiritual?
3. Where is this man's faith? Read verses 3 and 4. Isn't this an admission of defeat?—Discuss.
4. Discuss the best use of past pleasant memories.
5. Should we ever think—feel—believe—that God has rejected us? Discuss.
6. Under two or three circumstances we can almost expect a negative, discouraged, exaggerated response. Name at least two and discuss.
7. What possible miracles were in the mind of the psalmist?
8. The holiness of God is such a basic belief—why?
9. The deliverance from bondage is an oft recurring theme. Should not this be also true of us? Discuss.
10. God leads through men. Read verse 20. Is this true now? Discuss.

PSALM 78

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

A Didactic Poem, Counselling the Re-union of the Tribes.

ANALYSIS

Part I.—THE PRELUDE

(1) An Invitation to Attend to a Series of Problems Drawn from Antiquity—vers. 1, 2.

(2) An Appeal to the history-reciting instinct: sustained by the claim that Jehovah's Might and Wonders are to be Seen in This History—vers. 3, 4.

(3) Divine Authority pleaded for such Historical Recitations—ver. 5.

(4) Their Utility for the purposes of Knowing, Believing, Observing and Avoiding: Grave Ancestral Faults Implied—vers. 6-8.

Part II.—THE COMPLAINT

Specially lodged against Ephraim, first named with Honour, but charged with Disappointing Expectation—with being Unfaithful, Disobedient, and Forgetful—vers. 9-11.

Part III.—SUGGESTIVE HISTORICAL REMINISCENCES

(1) Divine Wonder-Working in Egypt: Deliverance—the Exodus: Guidance: Provision of Water—vers. 12-16.