

STUDIES IN PSALMS

Jehovah's people rest trustful under Jehovah's strong protection. "The political situation was one which called for the encouragement ministered by the words; and the conduct of Hezekiah in the day of adversity shows the mighty influence of Isaiah's advice and the prevailing efficacy of his prayers"—Thirtle, O.T.P., 44.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Read II Chro. 32:10 and discuss its application to this psalm.
2. Even when Sennecharib was about to conquer Jerusalem there were those who were "coquetting with the enemy"—how do we know this?
3. How do the prayers of Isaiah relate to this psalm?

PSALM 126

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

The Invader Gone: the First Sowing Begun.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers. 1-3, The Deliverance of Zion calls forth the Jubilations of her People, and the Frank Acknowledgment of Neighbouring Nations. Stanza II., vers. 4-6, Prayer for the Renewed Culture of the Devastated Land.

(Lm.) Song of the Steps.

- 1 When Jehovah turned the fortunes¹ of Zion
we became like men dreaming:
- 2 Then was filled with laughter our mouth,
and our tongue with ringing cries.
Then said they among the nations—
"Great things hath Jehovah done with these!"
- 3 Great things hath Jehovah done with us—
we are full of joy!
- 4 Oh turn Jehovah our fortunes—
as channels in the south country.
- 5 They who are sowing with tears—
with ringing cries may they reap!

1. Or: (ml. though less prob.): "the captivity"—see Exposition.

PSALM 126

- 6 Though one goeth forth and weepeth—
bearing a trail of seed²
Let him come in with ringing cries—
bringing his sheaves.

(Nm.)

PARAPHRASE

PSALM 126

When Jehovah brought back His exiles to Jerusalem, it was like a dream!

2 How we laughed and sang for joy. And the other nations said, "What amazing things the Lord has done for them."

3 Yes, glorious things! What wonder! What joy!

4 May we be refreshed¹ as by streams in the desert.

5 Those who sow tears shall reap joy.

6 Yes, they go out weeping, carrying seed for sowing and return singing, carrying their sheaves.

EXPOSITION

It may readily be conceded that, if the opening line of this psalm had been followed by a suitable sequel, the reference might easily have been to a return from literal captivity. But when we examine the usage of the expression "to turn captivity" in various places,—including especially Job 42:10 and Ezekiel 16:53, 55,—and find how "captivity" came sometimes to mean great misfortune or misery, and "turning captivity" to express the idea of turning the fortunes of any one to a former condition of prosperity,—we may well hesitate long enough to examine the context. Now it cannot be denied that the context, in this case, points to some sudden turn of fortune, or relief from distress, such as to appear incredible to the recipients of the blessing; and, at the same time, such as to be so patent to onlooking *nations* as to call forth their frank and admiring acknowledgment of the signal interposition of Israel's God. We need not deny the possibility, or probability, that when the successive companies of Jewish captives in Babylon received permission to return to their own land, the news may have appeared to them to be too good to be true, and they may

2. That is, a small quantity, which can ill be spared because of the want at home, bringing tears to the eyes of the sower.

1. Literally, "Restore our fortunes, Lord."

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have seemed to themselves like men who were *dreaming*; nevertheless, we are not aware that we possess any historical record to that effect. And when we further inquire into the allusion, supposed to be made in this psalm, as to the effect of Israelitish emancipation on surrounding and observant nations, we must acknowledge that nothing in the Ezra-Nehemiah narratives in anywise appears like a verification of this glad song. Here, in this psalm, we have an apparently frank and ungrudging acknowledgement, by foreigners, of Jehovah's interposition for his people; and this acknowledgement is gladly repeated and confirmed by the beneficiaries, as though with a smile of recognition at the courtesy of the admission. Anything more unlike this than the snarling and suspicious and intriguing behaviour of Sanballat and his associates cannot be imagined. There may, of course, have been a brief and passing smile on the face of the neighbouring nations, when they witnessed the arrival of the Jews in their own land; but history is as silent as the grave about it, and therefore it is hard to believe that it should have thus become embalmed in one of Israel's songs.

A similar line of observation may be taken with respect to the second half of the psalm. It is quite true, that returned captives would naturally, soon after their home-coming, have to turn their attention to the cultivation of their recovered lands; and it is possible, that they had to go about their task with aching hearts. But, again, we have no record of all this; and least of all have we any reason to suppose that the returned exiles were so nearly confronted by *famine* as to find it difficult to procure seed for sowing. And yet that is precisely the view which this psalm presents.

On both counts, therefore, we have reason to suspect the view-point afforded by the assumption that these psalms are post-exilic.

Take back the origin of this psalm to the days of Hezekiah, and all is changed; both stanzas of the psalm find firm bases of fact on which to rest. We *know* that the nations honoured Hezekiah and Israel after the overthrow of the Assyrians (2 Ch. 32:22, 23); and we *know* that, before the deliverance, Israel had begun to suffer severely from famine (2 Ch. 32:11); and that it was an anxious question how the people should be fed until they could again grow their own corn (Isa. 37:30, 31).

And thus the evidence of the pre-exilic origin of these beautiful psalms grows upon our hands.

PSALMS 126 AND 127

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The usual historical setting for this psalm is seriously called in question by Rotherham. He has two reasons for doing so. Discuss them.
2. Rotherham concedes the possibility of a post-exilic date but doubts it. Discuss.
3. Read II Chr. chapter 32 and Isaiah chapter 37. Discuss your agreement (or disagreement) with Rotherham.

PSALM 127

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

In Relief of Domestic and Civic Anxiety.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers. 1, 2, Jehovah's Blessing Succeeds our Endeavours, Allays our Anxieties, and Gives us Sleep. Stanza II., vers. 3-5, Children a Gift from Jehovah.

(Lm.) Song of the Steps—By Solomon.

- 1 Except Jehovah build the house
in vain¹ will its builders have toiled thereon:
Except Jehovah watch the city
in vain¹ will the watchman have kept awake.
- 2 It is vain¹ for you who early rise who late take rest,
who eat the bread of wearisome toil:
So would he give his beloved ones² sleep.³
- 3 Lo! an inheritance from Jehovah are sons,
a reward is the fruit of the womb:
- 4 As arrows in the hand of a warrior
so are the sons of the youth.
- 5 How happy the man who hath filled his quiver with them!
they shall not be put to shame,—
Surely they will speak with enemies in the gate.

(Nm.)

1. Or: "For unreality."

2. So (pl.) some cod. (w. Sep., Syr., Vul.)—Gn. M.T. (sing.).

3. Thus w. Per., rather than "in sleep"—preferred by O.G. 446a, Dav. Heb. Syntax 97, Br. and others.