

PSALM FOURTEEN

PSALM 14

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

A Vile Person's Testimony to Prevalent Wickedness, when confirmed by Jehovah, occasions Warning and Prayer.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I. (ver. 1), An Impious Man revels in Wickedness. Stanzas II. and III. (vers. 2-3), His Testimony Confirmed by Jehovah. Stanzas IV. and V. (vers. 4-6), Warning against Present Iniquity drawn from History. Stanza VI. (ver. 7), Prayer for Israel's Salvation.

(Lm.) (Psalm)¹—By David

- 1 Said a vile² person in his heart—"No God here!
their conduct is corrupt their practice abominable there is
no well-doer!"
- 2 Jehovah out of the heavens looked down over the sons of men,
to see whether there was one that showed understanding in
seeking after God:—
- 3 "The whole have turned aside drawn back³ together become
tainted,
there is no well-doer, there is not so much as one!"
- 4 Have none of the workers of iniquity⁴ learned anything?
devourers of my people!
they have devoured food, Jehovah have they not invoked!
- 5 There dreaded they a dread when God scattered them,
- 6 their plan was put to shame when Jehovah rejected them.
- 7 Oh that out of Zion were granted the salvation of Israel!
When Jehovah restoreth the prosperity⁵ of his people
let Jacob exult let Israel be glad.

(Nm.)

1. So in one cod. (w. Sep. and Vul.)—Gn.

2. "Senseless"—Dr.

3. So Br., uniting the two verbs found, the one in 14:3, the other in 53:2.

4. So in substance Br., mainly following 53:5. M.T., here, more fully: "Because God is in the circle of the righteous man. The purpose of the humbled ye would put to shame because Jehovah is his refuge."

5. So Br., also O.G. 980, esp. Ps. 126:1, 4.

STUDIES IN PSALMS
PARAPHRASE
PSALM 14

That man is a fool who says to himself, "There is no God!" Anyone who talks like that is warped and evil and cannot really be a good person at all.

2 The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who are wise, who want to please God.

3 But no, all have strayed away; all are rotten with sin. Not one is good, not one!

4 They eat my people like bread and wouldn't think of praying! Don't they really know any better?

5 Terror shall grip them, for God is with those who love Him.

6 He is the refuge of the poor and humble when evil doers are oppressing them.

7 Oh, that the time of their rescue were already here; that God would come from Zion now to save His people. What gladness when the Lord has rescued Israel!

EXPOSITION

This psalm is highly dramatic, and as such must be interpreted: a position of so much importance in this instance, that the reader should satisfy himself of its soundness at the outset of his study. Observe well the course of observation which the psalmist takes. He tells us that *a vile person*,—coming to a spot resembling Sodom and Gomorrah with no Lot in its midst, or the world before the flood without a Noah,—felicitates himself that *there is no God there*. Since he must have had some grounds for this conclusion, and no firmer ground can be imagined than his own observation of the conduct of the people; since, moreover, bad men are ready to believe evil against their fellows,—it seems natural, having no quotation marks to guide us, to carry on the thought of this vile person to the end of the sentence, and attribute to him the further mental observation: *Their conduct is corrupt—their practice abominable—there is no well-doer*. It is certainly a little surprising to find a vile person making to himself so frank and correctly expressed an admission. But even such an observer may not have forgotten the radical distinction between good and evil; and, in any case, as only his thoughts are reported, we are not bound to conclude that the vulgar slang in which he would half mask his conclusion,

PSALM FOURTEEN

is here expressed with painful exactness. It is sufficient to conclude that here we have, correctly reported for us, the substance of his thought. And, clearly, the damaging and sweeping fact of wicked conduct to which his observations and enquiries have led him, abundantly justifies his first-expressed conclusion—*No God here!* The circumstance that he himself is a *vile person*, will excuse us if we surmise that it is with some satisfaction that he notes the absence of any thing to serve as a check on the indulgence of his own vile propensities. Here he can do as he likes. There are worse people than himself here. So he may think, little realising how vile he himself is. Thus interpreting, we get a bad man—in a bad neighbourhood—coming to a natural conclusion—and giving to himself a sufficient reason for it. In the dramatic spirit, we may picture a heavenly messenger during a visit to the place as overhearing the vile person's whisper, and as being so incensed to see how corruption breeds corruption, that he forthwith wings his way to the High Court in heaven to report what he has seen and heard. Whereupon—for so the poetic link of connection between the first and second stanza seems to forge itself—whereupon Jehovah looks down from heaven to see whether the evil has grown to these alarming dimensions.

Pausing here a moment to strengthen our exegesis of the first stanza, it is fair to say that if this account of the words *Their conduct is corrupt*, etc., be declined in favour of attributing them directly to the psalmist, then you arrive at the unacceptable conclusion, that he first says a thing imperfectly, and then says it effectively by means of a formal introduction and a more carefully graduated set of expressions. Is this likely in the case of a poet of such power as the writer of this psalm? Assuming then that in the charge of immoral conduct contained in the first stanza we have the sufficiently explicit and highly suggestive thought of the *vile person*, we can advance to the second and third stanzas with an eye open to see their moral elevation and crushing logical force.

The moral elevation of the second stanza consists in this: That JEHOVAH does not look down merely to see how bad the sons of men are, in the place reported upon,—but to discover whether there is no redeeming feature in the case, whether there is not at least one person, who with whatever failings, is at least *seeking after God!*

STUDIES IN PSALMS

The sad fact that there is not—*no! not even one* Lot in *this* Sodom—is there necessarily included in the verdict contained in the third stanza: the tremendous force of which is due partly to this implied inclusion—partly to the carefully graduated terms employed, *turned aside, drawn back, tainted, together tainted*—and partly to the endorsement of the villain's own word with a formal addition, *There is no well-doer, there is not so much as one!*

We are assuming that *Jehovah's* verdict relates to the same sphere of observation as the *vile person's*; and this we do in full view of the general phrase *the sons of men* whom *Jehovah* beholds: say, *the sons of men*—in the place referred to; *the sons of men* in general, as far as represented by these particular sons of men in this particular place. This is a correct dramatic limitation. To set this aside is to get into contextual difficulties of a most serious kind, and to have to face an incredible result. The chief contextual difficulties are, overlooking the circumstance that the context has an eye to the *devourers of Jehovah's people*, and the admission that *Jehovah* HAS *a people* to be devoured. If "the sons of men" here are simply and absolutely all the sons of men on the fact of all the earth at all times, then all minor distinctions are abolished, and all mankind without exception are swept into the all-devouring net of this hasty piece of cruel dogmatism! Besides, the appalling result is best described by saying simply—that IT IS NOT TRUE. It was not true of Sodom, as long as Lot was in it: it was not true of the antediluvian world, so long as Noah was in it. To apply the exclusive phrase *not so much as one* to spheres in which, under Divine guidance, the *one* can be found and named, is wantonly to trample underfoot the commonest laws of human speech, and needlessly and mischievously represent the Bible as contradicting itself. There may have been a spot where there was literally *not so much as one* exception; and, if that was at all symptomatic of the general moral corruption of a given age, it was quite enough for the psalmist to refer to it. That, therefore, is what we are entitled to assume is here done.

Stanza IV. now follows as an appropriate advance on what has gone before. The psalmist wishes to stay the marauding invasion begun by *devourers* of his *people*. What! he exclaims, have they *learned nothing* from the records of the past? Do they *not know* that high Heaven, too long provoked, may at length

PSALM FOURTEEN

hurl down vengeance upon them? Incidentally hitting off their character as a combination of cruel greed and light-hearted irreverence, he describes them with keen irony. They do not say grace at a common meal: much less will they *devour Jehovah's people* with any reverence towards him!

Then, in Stanza V., he recurs to the historical precedent which—as to its sin—he has already described: let us not forget what we have learned about that character. In it were practical atheism, corrupt conduct, abominable practices—the very place for a debauchee to visit: like Sodom, but worse; like the old world, but worse. *THERE dreaded they a dread*—as they had much occasion; *when*, just as they were combining for a devouring expedition, *God scattered them*; just as they had perfected their scheme, *Their plan was put to shame, for Jehovah rejected them*. Have these present would-be *devourers of Jehovah's people* never heard of this? Let them beware!

It is no objection to this exegesis that the precise historical reference eludes us. Many a place besides Sodom may have been signally overthrown; and no wonder that it was overthrown, when there was found in it, by verdict of both earth and heaven,—*not so much as one well-doer*.

It must not be thought that the above interpretation gained an unfair advantage at the outset, by starting with a *villain* instead of a *fool*. Dr. Briggs well says: "The *Nabhal* is not a 'fool' in any of the meanings of this word, but a more aggressive personality: not *aphron*, *stultus*, *fool*, but *impudent*, *contumelious*, *shameless*, as *impudens* with the double sense of *immodest* and *impudent*." In truth, then, he is a *villian*; and under the name *vile person* is well described in Isaiah 32:5-7; from which it will be seen: That he is ignoble, over-bearing, injurious; he gives his mind to plans of mischief; calls things by wrong names; injures the helpless by cruel falsehoods, and misrepresents God. Hence, we were doing him no wrong by taking a hint from his character how to interpret his words: he is glad to find *no God here*, in the recognition of the people, to hamper him in indulging in his propensities; and he has the impudence to admit with satisfaction how *depraved* the people of the place are; and, as if he had made enquiries for the purpose of discovering that there was no good man to reprove him, he shamelessly congratulates himself on that fact—*There is no well-doer*.

STUDIES IN PSALMS

Nor, again, have we taken an undue liberty in rendering *the villain's* opening exclamation relatively rather than abstractly or absolutely; as rather *No God here* than *No God at all*; seeing that the negative particle 'ayin, though confessedly strong, not only "denies existence absolutely," but "more commonly in a limited sense, *there is none here or at hand*" (O.G. p. 34).

It will be observed that the fifth stanza above (vers. 5, 6) has been given in a shorter form than that appearing in the M.T., as seen in A.V., R.V. That is due to Dr. Briggs' endeavour to harmonize the two psalms (14, 53); and the result, for its terseness and aptness, pleases well. But before we dismiss the longer form, it may be remarked how strongly it supports the protest offered above, against giving an absolutely universal application to the united verdicts of earth and heaven to human corruption; for, assuredly, it cannot be said both that "God *is* in the circle of the righteous" and that he is *not*; nor can such a circle, inclusive of the *humbled* who hath made Jehovah his refuge be wholly *tainted*. And thus both the context and the general consent of Scripture unite in opposing the ruthless endeavours of misguided men to harden drama into dogma, by representing all men, everywhere, as always and wholly depraved, beyond further advance in sin. The Bible does not teach that: least of all does the Apostle Paul, in the Third of Romans; for whom it was quite enough to take these damaging testimonies of the Hebrew Scriptures to human sinfulness as he found them, without reading into them a dogmatic universality they were never meant to bear; since his only object was to convince his Scripture-boasting Hebrew brethren that they as well as sinners from among the Gentiles had absolute need of the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

With this fifth stanza (vers. 5, 6), Dr. Briggs thinks the original psalm came to an end; and it may have done so; yet it is difficult to agree with him. Not only the standing needs of congregational worship, but even poetic justice seems to demand a more hopeful conclusion to so strong a psalm. And in view of the would-be *devourers* of Jehovah's *people*, whom the fourth stanza brought into view, it is not easy to see how a more fitting conclusion than the present could have carried the psalm to a climax. *Oh that out of Zion were granted the salvation of Israel*: that would presuppose a Saviour in Zion whose saving power

PSALM FOURTEEN

would go forth to the utmost bounds of the land, beating back every foe, and raising a defence against the further encroachments of practical atheism and moral degeneracy. When that is witnessed—*when Jehovah restoreth the prosperity of his people*—then *let Jacob exult, let Israel be glad*. The prophets of God must have good tidings to tell. There must be salt to stay corruption, light to scatter darkness. Now, in the present time, Jehovah has not only *looked down* from heaven, but has COME DOWN—“to seek and to save the lost.”

Without casting doubt on the primary Davidic authorship of this psalm, which at the first may have begun nearly as it does now, it is nevertheless fair to admit that most aptly may the allusion to *a vile person* at the outset be taken as an indignant reference to Rabshakeh (2 K. 18, 19; Isa. 36, 37): and who knows but that, among the cities of Judah which he took, he may have discovered “a sink of iniquity” in which could be found *not so much as one* to protest against his villainies. The Assyrians, at any rate, were *devourers* of Jehovah’s *people*, who little knew into whose hands they were about to fall. “The special circumstances of the city afforded ground for the additional verse”—Thirtle’s O.T.P., p. 112.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why designate the man as “a fool” who says “there is no God”? Is there a better form—? Rotherham seems to think so. Discuss.
2. Are we to imagine the entire world of mankind involved in the characterization of verses 2 and 3? Discuss the subject of total depravity.
3. Paul makes use of this psalm in Romans 3:9 ff—please read his evaluation and application before drawing any hasty conclusions.
4. It would seem from verse 4 that there are some righteous people in contrast to those who are about to devour them. How then can it be said “all have strayed away”?
5. Is the writer looking forward to the restoration of Israel to Zion or Jerusalem? If so at what period in David’s life does this psalm have meaning? Does it have a wider meaning?