

STUDIES IN PSALMS

PSALM 53, 54

PSALM 53

(Lm.) An Instructive-psalm—By David.

(N.B.—*For Title, Analysis and Exposition of this psalm, see Psalm 14, with which this psalm is practically identical—this being an Elohistic recension of that.*)

- 1 Said a vile person in his heart—"No God here!"
their conduct is corrupt their practice abominable there is
no well-doer!
- 2 God out of the heavens looked down over the sons of men,
to see whether there was one that shewed understanding in
seeking after God:—
- 3 "The whole have turned aside drawn back¹ together become
tainted:
there is no well-doer there is not so much as one!"
- 4 Have not² the workers of iniquity³ learned anything?—
devourers of my people!
they have devoured food God⁴ have they not invoked!
- 5 There dreaded they a dread, when God scattered them,
their plan was put to shame, when God rejected them.⁵
- 6 Oh that out of Zion were granted the deliverances⁶ of Israel!
When God⁷ restoreth the prosperity⁸ of his people
let Jacob exult let Israel be glad.

(Lm.) To the Chief Musician. (CMm.) With stringed instruments.

1. So Br., uniting the two verbs found, the one in 14:3 and the other in 53:3.
2. In some cod. (w. 2 ear. pr. edns., Aram., Sep., Syr., Vul.): "none of":
cp. Ps. 14:4—Gn.
3. "Naughtiness"—Dr.
4. Some cod. (w. 1 ear. pr. edn.): "Jehovah"—Gn.
5. So Br., as in 14:5, 6:
There dreaded they a dread—there was no dread!
for God had scattered the bones of the besieger.
Thou hadst put him to shame for God had rejected them.
6. Or: "great salvation" (pl. intensive). In some cod. (w. Sep., Syr.):
"salvation" (sing.). Cp. Ps. 14:7, G. Intro., 148.
7. Some cod. (w. Aram., Sep., Syr.): "Jehovah." Cp. 14:7—Gn.
8. So Br., also O.G. 986, esp. Ps. 126:1, 4.

PSALM FIFTY-THREE AND FIFTY-FOUR
PARAPHRASE
PSALM 53

Only a fool would say to himself, "There is no God." And why does he say it?¹ Because of his wicked heart, his dark and evil deeds. His life is corroded with sin.

2 God looks down from heaven, searching among all mankind to see if there is a single one who does right and really seeks for God.

3 But all have turned their backs on Him; they are filthy with sin—corrupt and rotten through and through. Not one is good, not one!

4 How can this be? Can't they understand anything? For they devour My people like bread and refuse to come to God.

5 But soon unheard-of terror will fall on them. God will scatter the bones of these, your enemies! They are doomed, for God has rejected them.

6 Oh, that God would come from Zion now and save Israel! Only when the Lord Himself restores them can they ever be really happy again.

P S A L M 5 4

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

A Prayer Prompted by the Hostile Action of the Zephites.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers 1, 2, Prayer for Salvation and Vindication; supported by a *Refrain*, ver. 3, describing the psalmist's Enemies. Stanza II., vers. 4, 5, Coming Help Welcomed and its Effects Anticipated. Stanza III., vers. 6, 7, Willing Sacrifice Promised and Thanks Formulated.

(Lm.) An Instructive Psalm—By David—When the Ziphites entered and said to Saul, "Is not David hiding himself with us?"

1 O God by thy name save me,
yea by thy heroic strength shalt thou vindicate me.

1. Implied.

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- 2 O God hear thou my prayer,
Do give ear to the sayings of my mouth.
3 For aliens¹ have arisen against me,
and ruthless ones have sought my life:²
they have not set God before them.³
4 Lo! God is bringing help to me,
my Sovereign Lord is among the upholders of my life.⁴
5 Let him turn back the mischief upon my watchful foes,
in thy truth exterminate them.
6 Willingly will I sacrifice unto thee,
I will thank thy name⁵—"For he is good;
7 For out of every distress hath he rescued me,
and on my foes hath gazed mine eye."

(Lm.) To the Chief Musician. (CMm). With stringed instruments.

PARAPHRASE

PSALM 54

Written by David at the time the men of Ziph tried to betray him to Saul.

Come with great power,⁶ O God, and save me! Defend me with Your might!

2 Oh, listen to my prayer.

3 For violent men have arisen against me—ruthless men who care nothing for God are seeking my life.

4 But God is my helper! He is a friend of mine!⁷

5 He will cause the evil deeds of my enemies to boomerang upon them. Do as You promised and put an end to these wicked men, O God.

6 Gladly I bring my sacrifices to You; I will praise Your name, O Lord, for it is good.

7 God has rescued me from all my trouble, and triumphed over my enemies.

1. Some cod. (w. 2 ear. pr. edns., Aram.): "insolent men." Cp. Ps. 86:14—Gn.

2. U.: "soul." Cp. Intro., Chap. III., "Soul."

3. "Whoever at that time in Israel feared God more than man could not have made himself the instrument of the blind fury of Saul. God had already plainly enough acknowledged David"—Del.

4. U.: "soul."

5. M.T.: "Jehovah"—not in Sep.

6. Literally, "Your name."

7. Literally, "The Lord is of them that uphold my soul."

PSALM FIFTY-THREE AND FIFTY-FOUR EXPOSITION

It is easy to see how psalm-collectors would be unwilling to let these little personal snatches of song die, and equally obvious how in after times these minor compositions could be adapted to occasions bearing some similarity to those which gave them birth. The wonder is, not that they found their way into the psalm-books of Israel, but that they were ever originated under the romantic circumstances which their superscriptions set forth. Yet it would be an irreparable loss to the history of revelation if we were to allow our wonder to land us in scepticism. Rather ought we to say:—This is the sort of man David was—at least in his unsullied youth and young manhood, while yet waiting for the kingdom: hunted, fleeing, hard-pressed, deceived by men who acted as spies and informers, circumvented at the royal headquarters by hirelings and foreigners and envious old companions now turned traitors; yet all the while maintaining his faith in his Divinely given destiny, cast down by fresh troubles, cheered by new mercies; discovering in a loving message from Jonathan, or in the arrival of a few fresh adherents tokens that *God was bringing him help*, that his *Sovereign Lord was among the upholders of his life*—not, of course, as one upholder among many, but chief mover and upholder of them all.

As for these officious Ziphites, we know too little of them to say much. The inhabitants of a little town fifteen miles to the southeast of Hebron,—though within the bounds of Judah, may very well have included some influential men of *alien* birth or at least of *insolent* disposition; and as for *tyrants*, there may have been several at Court, like Doeg and Cush, deserving of that name; among whom the writer may have mentally included the arch-tyrant Saul himself, though not more pointedly alluding to him.

The more thoroughly we enter into David's especial circumstances, the more easily shall we be able to see how naturally—nay almost inevitably—he could only conceive of the removal of such enemies from a kingdom over which he was to reign, by looking forward to their *extermination*. Even Israel as a nation might afterwards feel justified in appropriating the same language, without excusing Christians from the supreme duty of forgiving their enemies. “The ‘salvation’ for which the psalmist prays is a temporal deliverance, which can only be effected at

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the expense of the implacable enemies who are seeking his life; and it will be a vindication of God's faithfulness and a proof of His righteous government at which he cannot but rejoice"—Kp.

"The perfect tense" *hath rescued, hath looked*, "looks back from the hour of thanksgiving upon an answered prayer"—Kp. as also Per.; and therefore in the above rendering these clauses have been included in the quotation marks.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Give some possible explanation as to why psalm 53 and 14 are practically identical.
2. The paraphrase of 53:1 seems to suggest that the reason some deny God is because an admission of Him would interfere with the kind of life they want to live—is this a common cause for infidelity? Discuss.
3. Are we to understand from 53:2, 3 that among the aborigine races of the world that there is not one earnest sincere seeker after God among them? Discuss.
4. Verse 5 of the 53rd psalm is difficult of interpretation—it is different than the 5th verse of the 14th. Read the K.J. translation—How do you interpret it?
5. David was in a very real personal, physical peril at the hands of the Ziphites—is God to be called upon on such occasions or does He not feel we should use our own so called "common sense" and get out of such positions of peril? Discuss.
6. Here is a quote from an ecclesiastical commentary: "The church has taken a clear view in appointing this one of the Psalms (the 54th) in commemoration of the passion of Jesus. It is seen with greatest effect as a simple prophecy of Christ"—there surely is a danger in so interpreting this psalm or any other portion of scripture . What is the danger? Discuss.

PSALM 55

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

A Bitter Complaint of the Treachery of an Intimate Friend.