

STUDIES IN PSALMS

Regard the plant, Thou once didst love so well,
And chief Thy pleasant branch, the hope of Israel.
Burnt though she be and rent, her haughty foe
The deathful terrors of Thy wrath shall know.
But on the man, by Thee with strength array'd,
The Son of Man by Thee for conquest made,
Thy hand shall rest; till we Thy triumphs see,
Resound Thy praise, and still remember Thee.
Turn us again, Thou God of heav'n's high powers,
Beam with Thy radiance forth, and peace shall still be ours.

PSALM 81

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

A Mission-Song, to be Sung to the Northern Tribes.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers. 1-5, A Festive Celebration Invoked; in which People, Levites, and Priests can Recall the Early History of the Nation. Stanza II., vers. 6-10, The Voice of the Divine Redeemer of the Nation is Heard; Recounting the Deeds by which He made the Nation His Own, and Summarising the Covenant into which He Entered with it. Stanza III., vers. 11-16, Divine Lamentation over the Nation's Past Failures, with Renewed Invitations and Promises designed to Win the People back to their Allegiance.

(Lm.) By Asaph.

- 1 Ring out your joy unto God our strength,
give a sacred shout to the God of Jacob:
- 2 Raise ye a melody and hold forth¹ the timbrel,
the lyre so sweet with the lute:
- 3 Blow at the new moon the horn,
at the full moon for the day of our feast.
- 4 Because a statute for Israel it is,
a regulation by the God of Jacob:
- 5 A testimony in Joseph he appointed it,
when he went forth over the land of Egypt:

1. Or: "bring hither"—Leeser, Dr., Per.; "strike"—Carter; "sound"—Del., Kp.

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- the language² of One I have not known I now hear:—³
- 6 "I have removed from the burden his shoulder,
his hands⁴ from the basket⁵ are set free:°
- 7 In distress thou didst cry and I rescued thee,
I answered thee in the hiding-place of thunder,⁷
I tried thee at the waters of Meribah
- 8 'Hear O my people and I will adjure thee,
O Israel If thou wilt hearken to me
- 9 There must not be within thee a strange GOD,
nor mayest thou bow down to the GOD of an alien:
- 10 I Jehovah am thy God,
who brought thee up out of the land of Egypt:
Open wide thy mouth and I will fill⁸ it.' "
- 11 But my people hearkened not to my voice,
and Israel consented not unto me:
- 12 So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart,
they might walk in their own counsels;
- 13 Oh that my people were hearkening unto me,
that Israel in my ways would walk.
- 14 Right soon their foes would I subdue,
and against their adversaries would I turn my hand:
- 15 The haters of Jehovah would come cringing unto him,⁹
so let their own time be to the ages:
- 16 I would feed thee with the choicest¹⁰ of the wheat,
and out of the rock with honey would I satisfy thee.¹¹

(Nm.)

2. Ml.: "lip."

3. "The Psalmist, speaking in the name of the nation, says that at the Exodus Israel first learnt to know the voice of its Deliverer"—Dr.

4. Ml.: "palms."

5. "Hod"—Thrupp.

6. Ml.: "passed."

7. "That is, in the pillar of cloud; cp. 18:11, Exo. 14:19, 24"—Dr. "The thunder-cloud, in which he at once revealed and concealed Himself, thundering down Israel's foes (which is to be understood more especially of the passage through the Red Sea; *vid.* 77:19)"—Del.

8. "A believing yearning, which is hungering for grace and eager for salvation (119:131)!"—Del.

9. "Should offer flattery unto him"—Leeser; "crouch to him"—Carter; "Their haters would have to fawn on them"—P.B.

10. Ml.: "marrow-fat."

11. Cp. Deu. 32:13.

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PARAPHRASE

PSALM 81

The Lord makes us strong! Sing praises! Sing to Israel's God!

2 Sing, accompanied by drums; pluck the sweet lyre and harp.

3 Sound the trumpet! Come to the joyous celebrations at full moon, new moon and all the other holidays!

4 For God has given us these times of joy; they are scheduled in the laws of Israel.

5 He gave them as reminders of His war against Egypt where we were slaves on foreign soil. I heard an unknown voice that said,

6 "Now I will relieve your shoulder of its burden; I will free your hands from their heavy tasks."

7 He said, "You cried to Me in trouble and I saved you; I answered from Mount Sinai¹ where the thunder hides. I tested your faith at Meribah, when you complained there was no water.

8 Listen to Me, O My people, while I give you stern warnings. O Israel, if you will only listen!

9 *You must never worship any other god, nor ever have an idol in your home.*²

10 For it was I, Jehovah your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. Only test Me!³ Open your mouth wide and see if I won't fill it! You will receive every blessing you can use!

11 But no, My people won't listen. Israel doesn't want Me around.

12 So I am letting them go their blind and stubborn way, living according to their own desires.

13 But oh, that My people would listen to Me! Oh, that Israel would follow Me, walking in My paths!

14 How quickly then I would subdue her enemies! How soon My hands would be upon her foes!

15 Those who hate the Lord would cringe before Him; their desolation would last forever.

16 But He would feed you with the choicest foods. He would satisfy you with honey for the taking.⁴

1. Implied. Literally, "in the hiding place of thunder."

2. Literally, "There shall no foreign god be in you."

3. Implied.

4. Literally, "honey out of the rock."

PSALM 81
EXPOSITION

The best introduction to this psalm is the series of Asaphic psalms which leads up to it; yet, when thus reached, this psalm will be found to have features all its own, which immensely add to its interest and to its instructiveness for other times. Its adaptation to the Northern tribes is seen, in part, in the Divine and National titles which it employs—*God of Jacob* (vers. 1, 4); *Israel* (vers. 4, 8, 11, 13), *Joseph* (ver. 5), *My people* (vers. 8, 11, 13): in part also in its omission of any direct allusions to Judah, Jerusalem or the Temple: perhaps, moreover, in the probability that the Feast of Trumpets would be the last to fall out of observance among any of the tribes. It has often been remarked how lively an interest in the Northern tribes Asaph everywhere displays; nor is it difficult to account for this, when we call to mind the non-localisation of the tribe of Levi, and the distribution of the Levitical cities throughout all the land—North as well as South. It may thus quite easily have happened that this Asaph of Hezekiah's days was, by domicile, a Northerner, while yet loyal to the Divine preference for the South. There needs but one touch further to make the picture live before us; and that is, the conception of a missionary Levite traversing the North, harp in hand, and trying to win back the wanderers by singing to them this song. Other songs of the series there were which he may have sung at other times, or in alternation with this. His was a harp of many strings. At one time he would gently remind Ephraim how he had "turned in the day of battle," and how Joseph had irrevocably lost the honour of having the Sacred Tent within his bounds (78). At another time he would boldly claim for Judah the supreme honour of having the Cherubic Throne in his midst (80). But, even before he could win attention to those messages, here was one which would strike a winsome herald note, impinging on no susceptibilities save of aspostates wholly given to idolatry: containing no allusion to the South, no mention of David. Radical reform, it is true, would demand the declaration of fuller truth in these regards; but all cannot be done at once—it is worth an effort, costing self-restraint, to win the ear of the rebellious, even for a moment, provided some essential thing can be successfully lodged therein. And truly the most essential thing of all, for Israelites wandering away into idolatry, is here: their covenant-relation to Jehovah, and his inexorable claim that their obligations under that covenant be fulfilled. From this point of view, how

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skilfully the story is told: with all the charms of music, introduced; with all the fascinations of ancient history, the famous and irreversible past, commenced; barbed with pointed reminiscences of old-time refractoriness; merged into the pathos of direct appeal; ascending to the height of positive mandate; coming down again to the attraction of bountiful and all-comprehensive promise; sobered by tones of Divine lament; invigorated by rapid transition from the irredeemable past to present lingering possibilities—*Oh that my people were even now hearkening!* hearkening to *counsels* which must still be maintained, *walking in ways* of obedience that must still be trodden: oh that they were! oh that they would! *Right soon would I subdue their foes*: these Syrians those Assyrians, yonder Greeks and Romans. Is there nothing here to give point to appeal and make it victorious? Only let Israel RETURN (2 Ch. 30:6-9), and all shall yet be well. No real blessing should then be too rich, too good to be bestowed on obedient Israel: *fattest wheat, freshest honey*—nothing too good!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why does Rotherham feel this psalm is addressed to the northern tribes?
2. Who is Asaph? Discuss.
3. There seems to be a large number of musical instruments used in Israel's worship—why?
4. What feast is here celebrated?
5. The very worst thing that can happen to a man is described in verse 12. What is it? Discuss.
6. God has promised "honey in the rock" for His people—but upon what conditions?

PSALM 82

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

The Judgment of Unjust Judges.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I., ver. 1, Introductory Vision. Stanza II., vers. 2-7, Reprimand of the Judges by the Judge of Judges. Stanza III., ver. 8, Closing Prayer.