

Psalms of the Sons of Korah

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“At Home In Death”: --An Archaeological Exposition of Psalm 49:11

Death is a subject that intrigues and frightens. Death is discussed, debated, covered-up and ignored. I remember visiting the Egyptian wing of the Brooklyn Museum several years ago. In one of the far back rooms a mummy was on display. While I was looking at other objects in the room, a group of senior citizens entered. The elderly guide never talked about, nor did the people in the group look at, the mummy. They were deathly afraid of that object (no pun intended). After they left, a group of elementary school children came in on a class outing. What was the first, and only, thing they wanted to look at? You guessed it, the mummy. The mummy intrigued them.

The psalmist, one of the sons of Korah, writing at the end of the 8th century BC, describes the thoughts of wealthy fools who put their trust in material possession for their redemption. He wrote, “Their inner thought is that their house will continue forever, and their dwelling place to all generations; they call their land after their own name” (49:11).

This article will examine the background to this statement by the psalmist. The common interpretation will be discussed, but then archaeological material will be brought to bear to shed light on this passage. It is my contention that the architectural patterns of the burial caves of the Iron Age (Judean Monarchy) reflect the architectural patterns of the typical Iron Age “Four-

Room House". Iron Age burial caves from Jerusalem, mainly St. Etienne and Ketef Hinnom will be examined to demonstrate this proposition.

The Common Interpretation

In the psalmist's statement, "Their inner thought is that their houses will continue forever", what is the "house" referring to? Most commentators assume that "house" is the "dynasty" of the wealthy person. One commentator puts it this way: "If they do face the fact that they must die, they console themselves with the thought that the dynasties they have built will last forever" (Phillips 1986:74). This is done on the basis of the double meaning for the word "house" given in the Davidic covenant, II Samuel 7:16 (Goulder 1982:189). "And your house (dynasty) and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever." Based on the word use, the dynastic interpretation is possible. However, the context suggests a more literal meaning. In the Hebrew parallelism of the poetic structure, "house" would be synonymous to "dwelling places" in the second half of the verse. Also, King Solomon, writing during the Iron Age, calls burial caves "eternal homes." "For man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets" (Eccl. 12:5).

Another Proposal

During the summer of 1979, I worked as an area supervisor on the Ketef Hinnom excavation, just below the St. Andrews Scottish Presbyterian Church in Jerusalem. One of my responsibilities was the supervision of the excavation of Cave 25. It contained

the first intact repository of the Iron Age ever found in the archaeology of Jerusalem (Barkay 1986). The most important discoveries in this repository were two silver amulets with the oldest Biblical texts discovered to date (Barkay 1992; Coogan 1995:45).

After the excavation I had time to reflect on the burial practices of the Judean monarchy and its implication for understanding the Biblical text. Several years later, with the kind permission of the excavator, Dr. Gabriel Barkay, I published a summary of the excavation (Franz 1986). In that article, I suggested one of the implications of the excavations of the Iron Age burial caves at Ketef Hinnom was that it reflects the theology of the afterlife. I observed that the pattern of the burial caves was similar to the “four room house” of the Iron Age. “The psalmist indicated that the desire of materialistic people was their, ‘... inner thought is that their houses will continue forever, and their dwelling places to all generation’ (Ps. 49:11). However, they knew that their houses, made of stone and mudbricks, would eventually collapse. Their desire would be achieved by hewing a burial cave out of solid rock patterned after the floor plan of their earthly house” (Franz 1986:16). I would like to expand on these thoughts in this article.

Parallels Between the Iron Age Burials and the “Four Room House”

The first obvious parallel is the pattern of the burial caves and the Iron Age “four room house.” The typical Iron Age burial cave consists of an entrance with a central depression in front of it and three benches forming a “U” (horseshoe) shape around the central depression. In describing the Israelite four-room house,

Y. Shiloh states, “The principle feature of the four-room house and its subtypes is a back room the width of the building, with three long rooms stemming forward from it. The time span of this plan is from the end of the eleventh century BC down to the destruction of Judah” (1970:180, see also Shiloh 1987). Some have discerned this pattern in Egypt during the time of the Israelite sojourn in Goshen (Wood 1997:55,56). The benches in the burial cave would correspond to the two long rooms on the side and the broad room in the back of the house. The central depression would correspond to the open-air courtyard in the middle of the house.

Another parallel is the sunken panel. This can be clearly seen in the Cave Complex 1 of the St. Etienne Burial Caves. The surveyors of this cave, Gabriel Barkay and Amos Kloner, describe their findings. “A careful examination of the walls of the entrance chamber reveals that they are decorated with shallow sunken panels, rectangular in shape, that were hewn into the rock faces of the walls. These rectangular panels are probably stone copies of wooden panels that typically covered the walls of Judean palaces during the Israelite period. Until this discovery, archaeologists had not seen any Israelite or Judean palaces (or other building) of this period with a preserved superstructure of walls. At best, they had found only wall stubs. The walls of the St. Etienne burial cave can therefore teach us a great deal about how palace walls were decorated in Iron Age II. Such decoration was probably used on the walls of Solomon’s Temple. In I Kings 6:9, we read that after Solomon finished building the Temple, he covered the walls with ‘beams and planks of cedar’. ... The Hebrew word translated as ‘beam’ is *gebim*; for ‘planks’ the

word is *sderot*. *Gebim* probably refers to the sunken panels, and *sderot* to the raised strips between the panels.” Their description goes on to say that the “wall decoration continued to be used to the end of the Divided Monarchy (586 BC). Jeremiah prophesies against Jehoikim, King of Judah: ‘Ha! He who builds his house with unfairness and his upper chambers with injustice, who makes his fellowman work without pay and does not give him his wages, who thinks: I will build me a vast palace with spacious upper chambers, provided with windows, paneled in cedar, painted with vermilion! Do you think you are more a king because you compete in cedars?’ (Jer. 22:13-15)” (Barkay and Kloner 1986:27). Haggai, a post-exilic prophet, also rebukes the people of Jerusalem for misdirecting their priorities. They were dwelling in paneled houses and the House of the LORD was still not rebuilt (1:4).

The cornice is a third architectural feature that is common to some of the burial caves in Jerusalem. They decorated the top of the walls where the ceiling meets the walls. Hewn out of rock, this probably reflects the support beams in the house.

A fourth parallel is the parapets that surround the edge of each bench in some of the Iron Age tombs. “Each burial bench has a low parapet about two inches high around its outer edge, carved from rock, presumably to prevent the body and burial gifts from rolling off the bench” (Barkay and Kloner 1986:29). The parapet served a practical function in the burial caves just as they did on a house. Deut. 22:8 states, “When you build a new house, then you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring bloodguiltiness on your

house if anyone falls from it.” The parapets on the bench serve as a reminder of their function in the house.

A fifth architectural feature common to both the house and the burial cave is the threshold as illustrated by Cave Complex 1 at St. Etienne. Barkay and Kloner describe this threshold, “In this rock-hewn step there are carved two three-quarter-circle sockets; these sockets originally held the hinges of a double door that controlled access to the burial cave. Steps like this one, with similar sockets, are known from various Iron Age II (eighth to seventh century BC) structures. They are usually found at palace throne room entrance – for example, at Arsalan-Tash, at Zincirli (ancient Samal) and Tel Halaf in northern Syria; at Nimrud (Biblical Calah) (Gen. 10:11,12), and Ninevah in Assyria, and at Megiddo and Gezer in Israel” (1986:27). The door served a functional use in the burial cave, just as doors do in a house.

The final architectural feature is the headrest. As Barkay has observed, “[The] Iron Age burial benches with their headrests in the Jerusalemite and Judean burial caves were rock-cut copies of beds commonly used in ancient Israelite houses” (1988:50). The living would sleep on beds with pillows. Similarly, when the dead “sleep in death”, they were laid out on the stone bench with their head in the headrest. However, I’m sure the dead were not overly concerned with the hardness of the “pillow”!

An Intriguing Possibility

During the excavation of Cave 25 at Ketef Hinnom, the director, Goby Barkay said, “Gordon, I want you to find me an inscription in this cave!” I laughed at his request because he had taught me in his Archaeology of

Jerusalem class that inscriptions, in situ, are very rare in the archaeology of Iron Age Jerusalem. I half jokingly said I would find him one on the last day of the dig. Ironically, toward the end of the dig, we discovered a private seal with a family name on it in the repository. Goby, with “play-doe” from his son, made an impression of the seal. On it was the family name “Palta” (peh-lamed-tet-he). Apparently the Palta family was buried in this cave (Barkay 1986: 29,34).

The following year at the City of David excavation a lintel from the “Ahriel” house was discovered in Area G. This lintel had the name “Palta” on it as well (Shiloh 1984:18). Did the family have a house in the City of David and a burial cave on the escarpment overlooking the Hinnom Valley? We will never know for sure, but it is an intriguing possibility.

Perhaps this is also what the psalmist had in mind when he said, “And their beauty shall be consumed in the grave, far from their dwelling” (49:14). The family burials were outside and away from the city.

The Conclusion of the Matter

The wealthy materialistic person at the end of the 8th century BC knew that their earthly dwelling place would one-day collapse because it was made of stone, mudbrick, wooden beams and a dried mud roof with grass on top. This person desired to “live eternally” in his earthly body (Ps. 49:9), yet reality told him otherwise. Desiring a more permanent dwelling, knowing that one-day death would be the end results, a burial cave was hewn out of the rocky escarpment outside the city and was patterned after his earthly house. He wanted to feel “at home in death!”

By contrast, the psalmist puts materialism in it's proper perspective when he concludes the psalm by saying, "But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave (Sheol), for He shall receive me. Selah. Do not be afraid when one becomes rich, when the glory of his house is increased; for when he dies he shall carry nothing away; his glory shall not descend after him. Though while he lives he blesses himself (for men will praise you when you do well for yourself), he shall go to the generation of his fathers; they shall never see light. Man who is in honor, yet does not understand, is like the beasts that perish" (Psalm 49:15-20).

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Archaeology, Assyrian Reliefs and the Psalms of the Sons of Korah

Introduction

The Psalms of the Sons of Korah, like the other psalms, express the inner most feelings of the psalmists as they experience real life events. Psalms 42-49 and 84-89 reflect the end of the eighth century BC when the Assyrians afflicted the Kingdom of Judah. This article will briefly look at these psalms from a literary perspective and then place them in their historical context at the end of the eighth century BC. Some archaeological material that has been excavated in the Land of Judah, as well as Assyrian reliefs, will be employed to illustrate portions of these psalms.

The year 701 BC was a traumatic, bittersweet one for Judah. A large portion of the Judean population was deported to Assyria, yet the Lord delivered Jerusalem from the hands of the Assyrian army that encircled the city.

The Psalms of the Sons of Korah as a Literary Unit

Michael Goulder, in his book entitled *The Psalms of the Sons of Korah* (1982), suggests that these psalms were in sequential order and were employed as liturgical psalms for the fall festival or pilgrimage that was conducted to the Israelite cultic shrine, or high place, at Dan (1 Kings 12:26-33). He points out that these psalms are a literary unit and should be looked at from that perspective. The main body of liturgy was Psalm 42-48

with Psalms 84, 85 and 87 as supplementary psalms to the main corpus. He suggests that Psalm 42/43 and 84 were psalms of longing for Yahweh's "tabernacles"; Psalm 44 and 85 are national laments. Psalms 46, 47, 48 and 87 are "songs of Zion". He goes on to say, "Psalms 45 and 47 have no counterpart in the 80's, but the parallel ordering of the remaining psalms can hardly be accidental" (1982:12).

I disagree with Goulder's hypothesis that these are liturgical psalms for the fall cultic festival at Dan, but would go further than he does in seeing a unity of these psalms. Nevertheless, his ideas are stimulating, original, and creative. His scholarly efforts were appreciated. However, I think the primary interpretation of the psalms is to Zion / Jerusalem and another historical situation more aptly fits the context of the psalms. However, Goulder has broken new ground in suggesting the order and literary units.

I would like to expand on some of his thoughts and propose my own understanding of the order. Psalms 42-45 form a trilogy regarding suffering and exile composed by the psalmist as he goes into the Assyrian captivity in 701 BC. Psalms 46-48 form a trilogy of psalms exalting and praising the Lord for His deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrians in that year. Psalm 49, a wisdom psalm, points out the shortcomings of the wealthy who do not trust the Lord. Psalms 84-89 are the answer to the prayers of the psalmists expressed in Psalms 42-49.

Psalm 84 describes the psalmist returning to the Temple after having been away for a long time. This return is the answer to the petition and vow made in Psalm 42/43,

“Oh send out you light and your truth! Let them lead me; let them bring me to Your holy hill and to Your tabernacle. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and on the harp I will praise You, O God, my God” (43:3, 4). Psalms 44 and 85 are lament psalms, both individual and national, regarding the captivity and the return. The subject of Psalms 45 and 86 is the King, the Lord Himself. Psalms 46-48 and 87 are “Songs of Zion.”

The Historical Background to the Psalms of the Sons of Korah

Psalms 46-48 record a miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem at the hands of a powerful enemy. The only time this miraculous deliverance occurred was in 701 BC. The Angel of the Lord destroyed the Assyrian army that was besieging Jerusalem.

In order to put these psalms in their proper context, a brief overview of the life of King Hezekiah is in order. King Hezekiah was enthroned in the year 727 BC. He began his reign on the “right foot” by reinstituting the Passover, which led to a great revival (2 Chron. 29-31). In the “fourteenth year” (713/12 BC) of his reign, events began to sour. He had a near death experience, which he recovered from, and the Lord promised him fifteen extra years to live (2 Kings 20:1-11; Isa. 38:10-20).

Merodach-Baladan, king of Babylon, sent emissaries to congratulate him on his recovery and also to see if he would join the Babylonian coalition against the Assyrians. Hezekiah was apparently part of this revolt, which the Assyrians put down (Isa. 20:1), probably under the leadership of Sennacherib, then the crown prince and tartan. Hezekiah, along with the Philistines,

Moabites and Edomites, paid tribute to Sargon II (2 Kings 18:14-16). This disaster for Hezekiah and Judah was apparently because of the influence of the royal steward (prime minister), Shebna, who most likely was a foreigner in the courts of Judah (Isa. 22; 2 Kings 18:14-16).

In 701 BC, Hezekiah revolted again. This time, Sennacherib, now king of Assyria, was bent on the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. He began his “third” campaign down the coast of Phoenicia and took part of Philistia before he turned his attention on Judah.

The first phase of his Judean campaign was to secure the Shephelah. After Lachish, the capital of the Shephelah, fell, he felt confident enough to split his army. One part of his army, under the leadership of the Rabshakeh, laid siege to Jerusalem, and the other part continued with Sennacherib in the Shephelah and attacked Libnah. Most likely Libnah is located at Tel Goded.

The Angel of the Lord destroyed the part of the army encircling Jerusalem. When Sennacherib got word of this defeat in Jerusalem, he returned shame-faced to Nineveh. In his annals, Sennacherib describes this campaign in these words: “As for Hezekiah, the Judean, who had not submitted to my yoke, 46 of his strong, walled cities and the cities of their environs, which were numberless, I besieged, I captured, I plundered, as booty I counted them. Him, like a cage bird, in Jerusalem, his royal city, I shut up” (Luckenbill 1927:II: 143). “Caged up like a bird” is diplomatic code word for “We lost.” Sennacherib then lists the “tribute” that Hezekiah sent to him, which included 30 talents of gold and 800 talents of silver, along with male and female

singers. I suspect that since Sennacherib could not admit defeat, this “tribute” was actually booty that he plundered from the earlier part of his campaign.

This campaign was bittersweet for the Judeans. Jerusalem was delivered, but many Judeans deported, including the psalmist who composed Psalms 42-45. These psalms were his “musical diary” while going into captivity. The Biblical records only hint of this captivity in 701 BC and it was probably downplayed for theological reasons. According to Sennacherib’s annals, he deported “200,150 people, young and old, male and female ... as booty” (ANET 288). Whether this number is exaggerated or not is beyond the scope of this article. The point is, there was a deportation of Judeans in 701 BC. For a discussion of the Judean exile in 701 BC, consult Stohlmann (1983). For a discussion of the chronology of the reign of King Hezekiah, see Franz 1987.

An ancient “photograph” depicting some Lachishites going into captivity is found on a wall relief from Nineveh (Ussishkin 1982).

The historical texts of the Bible seem to downplay the Assyrian captivity of 701 BC, however, the prophet’s hint at it. Isa. 24:1 says, “Behold, the LORD makes the land [of Judah] empty and makes it waste, distorts its surface and scatters abroad its inhabitants.” The end of the so-called “Isaiah Apocalypse” has the captives returning from Assyria and Egypt (Isa. 27:12, 13). Hosea promises that some Judeans will return from Assyria and Egypt (11:11). Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, seems to describe the 701 BC campaign of Sennacherib in chapter 1. He ends the chapter with the words, “...

because of your precious children ... for they shall go from you into captivity" (1:16). They apparently were taken to Babylon as part of the Assyrian "resettlement" policy. However, Micah promises them that the Lord would rescue and redeem them (4:10).

One intriguing relief is a fragment in the British Museum. This relief is a depiction of three musicians, apparently Judeans, playing their harps, as they are being taken captive (Barnett, Bleibtreu and Turner 1998: 116; Plate 398, 399). Behind them is an Assyrian officer. [Assyrian with three musicians] My "sanctified imagination" would like to suggest we have an "ancient photograph" of a Biblical personage. Among other things, the Korahite family was musicians. At one time they lead the people of Judah in praise to the Lord during the conflict with the "Eastern Confederacy" during the reign of Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 20:14-19). One of the sons of Korah had vowed to praise the Lord in the Temple with his harp if he was delivered from captivity (Ps. 43:4). Could one of these musicians be one of the sons of Korah who composed Psalms 42-45 and 84?

The "Sons of Korah" also appear in another late 8th century BC context. Yohanan Aharoni excavated part of a bowl at Tel Arad that had an inscription on the bottom that listed several families, among which were "the sons of Korah." This bowl, inscription #49, was found in Stratum VIII of the building next to the sanctuary. Aharoni conjectures that this was "a list of contributions to the sanctuary. The letter *het* adds weight to this hypothesis, whether interpreted as wheat or as a sin-offering" (1981:82). According to Aharoni, Stratum VIII was destroyed at the end of the 8th century BC

(1981:149). Orna Zimhoni, of the Lachish Excavations, has re-evaluated the Arad material and has suggested that all the pottery of Arad Stratum X-VIII is paralleled to Lachish III pottery, which was destroyed by Sennacherib. Thus, she would also agree that the inscription should be dated to the end of the eighth century BC (Zimhoni 1985:84-88). Two questions should be raised at this point: first, what is a Levitical family doing in a non-Levitical city? Second, what was the nature of this sanctuary? Was it kosher or not? Was it a bamah (high place) or a pure Yahwistic shrine?

There is one other piece of archaeological evidence that relates to the sons of Korah. A figurine of a musician playing a harp was discovered in a burial cave at Beth Shemesh. I understand it dates to the end of the 8th century BC as well. The Korahites were allotted cities in the Land of Ephraim and Manasseh. Apparently they moved south after Jeroboam I set up the cultic shrines at Dan and Bethel and made a priesthood of anybody who was not a Levite (1 Kings 12:31; 13:33). Some Korahites settled in Arad. Perhaps some settled in Beth Shemesh as well.

An Archaeological Exposition of These Psalms

Psalm 42/43, originally one psalm, begins the set of psalms recounting the Assyrian captivity in 701 BC. In Psalm 42:6-8, the psalmist uses geographical terms to pinpoint where he is as he reflects on his departure from the Land of Israel. George Adam Smith points out "The Land of Jordan usually means in O.T. land across Jordan [The Jordan River - gf]. Hermons (not Hermonites) must refer to the triple peaks of Hermon. If these two identifications hold, the standpoint of the Psalmist is

fixed in the corner between Hermon and Jordan, where Banias stands. To the two localities the Hill Mis'ar, is placed in apposition. It may mean, as it stands, Hill of Littleness. But it may also be a proper name; and it is remarkable that in the neighborhood there should be two or three names with the same or kindred radicals: (1) Za'ura; (2) Wady Za'arah, above Banias; (3) Khubet Mezara. I suggest these may be reminiscent of a hill in this district, called Mis'ar" (1931: 476, footnote 1). As he describes the waters rolling over the waterfalls, he may be referring to the Banias waterfalls in that region. As he leaves the Land of Israel he prays for deliverance and vows he will play his harp in Jerusalem again. As previously pointed out, the alabaster relief from Sennacherib's palace depicts three barefooted musicians going through a mountainous region, possibly the Lebanon mountain range.

A good example of a lyre is displayed on a beautiful seal of the seventh century BC with the inscription "Belonging to Ma'adanah the king's daughter" (Avigad 1978: 146-151).

The psalmist declared his trust in the Lord for deliverance from his Assyrian captors. In the 44th Psalm, during his captivity, he received word that the Lord miraculously delivered Jerusalem from the hands of the Assyrians (44:7, cf. Isa. 37:36). The psalmist, however, struggles within himself, "Lord, you answered their prayers, but what about mine?" (44:9-21). After this internal struggle, he came to the point where he realized this test was "for the Lord's sake" (44:22). He finally renewed his confidence in the Lord (44:25, 26).

Two statements in this psalm are of interest to our study. The first is his statement in verse 11, "You have given us up like sheep intended for food, and have scattered us among the nations." In Sennacherib's annals, he states, "From the booty of those lands which I plundered, [Phoenicia, Philistia and Judah - gf] ... and added them to my royal equipment. The rest, the heavy spoil of enemy (captives). I divided like sheep among my whole camp (army) as well as my governors and the inhabitants of my large cities" (Luckenbill 1927:II: 137). There was also a relief in Sennacherib's palace showing Assyrian soldiers slaughtering sheep (Barnett, Bleibtreu and Turner 1998: 113; Plate 381; Parpola and Watanabe 1988:9).

The second statement of interest is the psalmist's declaration of innocence regarding idolatry. "If we had forgotten the name of our God, or stretched out our hands to a foreign god, would not God search this out?" (44:20). He may have been innocent, but the truth of the matter is, Judah was not. They were involved in idolatry. The Lachish relief depicts Assyrian soldiers carrying off at least two metallic incense burners. Micah describes Lachish in these terms, "O inhabitants of Lachish ... (She was the beginning of sin to the daughter of Zion), for the transgressions of Israel were found in you" (1:13). The transgressions of Israel could hint at the alternative place of worship set up at Dan and Bethel by Jeroboam. Micah goes on to say that Judah was involved in sorcery, soothsaying, and idolatry (5:12-14).

After a struggle within himself, the psalmist finally acknowledges the captivity he was going through was

“for your sake we are killed all day long” (44:22), a verse that the apostle Paul will quote in Romans 8:36.

The 45th psalm expresses the theme of worship in spite of the circumstances that the worshipper is in. After submitting himself to the sovereignty of God, the psalmist’s heart is overflowing with a good theme concerning the King (45:1). He describes himself as a “ready writer”. One is reminded of the Assyrian reliefs depicting scribes writing down lists of booty that had been captured. Usually there were two scribes, one scribe writing on papyrus and the other on a cuneiform tablet.

In the context of the Korah psalms, the king is not an earthly king, but rather, the Lord Himself (44:4; 47:2,6,7; 48:2,3; 84:3; Isa. 33:17,22; 44:6,8; 6:5, cf. John 12:37-41). The book of Hebrew identifies the King as the Lord Jesus (1:8, cf. 45:6, 7). The composer of this psalm describes the King as a warrior who fights for His people and the city of Jerusalem, with sword, chariots and arrows. It was the Angel of the Lord that destroyed the Assyrian army that was encircling Jerusalem that night (Isa. 37:36; 2 Kings 19:35). Ironically, this psalm may be an answer to the Lachish relief with Sennacherib sitting on his ivory throne, holding arrows in his right hand, his war chariots on display and his feet on his footstool with his enemies bowing down to him. It will ultimately be, however, the Lord Jesus who will win the final victory (Ps. 110:1; Heb. 1:8-14).

Psalm 45:8 mentions the ivory palaces. Ivory was used to adorn palaces of the eighth century BC. Some ivory has been found in the excavations at Ramat Rachel, probably the administrative palace built by Hezekiah

called “MMST” (Barnett 1982:47,88, footnote 44, unpublished; Barkay 2006: 34-44). Sennacherib also paneled his palace with ivories (Smith 1878:147).

Psalms 46-48 were composed as songs of praise and thanksgiving after the Lord delivered Jerusalem from the hands of the Assyrians. Jerusalem took on a special connotation because the God who acted in the affairs of human history was residing in the city. Psalm 48 was composed in Jerusalem, and more specifically in the city of David, so he used the geography of the city in the opening of the song. “Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised, in the city of our God, in His holy mountain [the Temple Mount]. Beautiful in elevation [the 600 meters walk from the Pool of Siloam to the Temple Mount with a 95 meter elevation change], the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion on the sides of the north [from the City of David, the Temple mount is north], the city of the great King” (48:1,2). The term “great king” is also a title that the Assyrians kings used for themselves.

Psalm 49 ends this section with a wisdom psalm regarding rich fools who think their wealth came bring them salvation. Verses 10 and 11 say, “For he [the rich fool] sees that the wise men dies; likewise the fool and the senseless persons perish, and leave their wealth to others. Their inner thought is that their houses will continue forever, and their dwelling place to all generations.” Most commentators suggest the “house” in verse 11 refers to the dynasties of the wealthy individuals. I would like to suggest that the phrase should be taken more literally. In the second half of the verse, “houses” are paralleled with “dwelling places”, a literal structure. The materialistic fool knows his earthly house, made of stones and mud brick, will eventually

collapse. He hewn's out of bedrock a burial cave [an "eternal house" - Eccl. 12:5] patterned after his earthly house so he will feel "at home in death" (pardon the pun).

It is interesting to note the parallels between the Iron Age burial caves and the typical Israelite "four-room house". The pattern is quite similar. The burial cave has an entrance, a central depression, and two benches on either side and one in the back. The "four-room house" has an entrance leading to a central courtyard with two long rooms on both sides of the courtyard, and a broad room in the back. Sunken panels have been observed in some of the large tombs of Jerusalem. Some of the royal structures had panels of cedar on their walls (1 Kings 6:9; Jer. 22:13-15; Hag. 1:4). Parapets on the benches are reminders of parapets on the roof to prevent people from falling off the house (Deut. 22:8). For a further exposition of this passage, see Franz 2002: 85-91.

Psalm 84 begins the second set of Korah psalms (Psalms 84-89). These psalms complement the first set. In this psalm, the procession to the House of the Lord is described as going up through the Valley of Baca. Josephus, the first century AD Jewish historian, seems to situate this valley close to the Valley of Rephaim (Antiquities 7:71-77; LCL 5: 397-399; Feliks 1981: 49-51). Quite possibly the psalmist has returned from his captivity in Nineveh and is making his first pilgrimage to the Temple for the Feast of Succoth. The date for this feast is hinted at with the mentioning of the "early rains" (84:6). The psalmist also seems to hint at where he has been in Nineveh. He says, "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the House of my God, than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (84:10). Judean captives worked as

slave laborers on Sennacherib's "palace without rival" (Ussishkin 1982: 127-130). Was the psalmist one of them? If so, he saw the wickedness that was inherent in the palace and pledged he would rather be a humble doorkeeper in the Temple than to hang around Sennacherib's palace.

The historical circumstances surrounding the return of at least some of the Judeans from the Assyrian captivity is uncertain. After Hezekiah died, his son Manasseh reigned. He was a vassal of the Assyrian kings, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal. Any one of these kings could have released Judean captives because of Manasseh's subjection.

The Conclusion of the Matter

This article has tried to demonstrate that the psalms of the sons of Korah should be taken as a literary unit and the order in which they are grouped is significant. It has also placed these psalms in the year 701 BC, a traumatic year for the people of Judah. The first group of psalms (42-48) express the inner most thoughts and feelings of one going into captivity as well as the rejoicing of those who stood still to see the salvation of their God in Jerusalem. Psalm 49, a wisdom psalm, stands alone and is set in the 14th year, 713/12 BC. The second set of psalms (84-89) compliment the first set and showed God faithfulness to His people and the answered prayer of the psalmist. The Assyrian reliefs and archaeology are used to illustrate the words of the psalmist.

It is my impression that more of the psalms belong to the end of the 8th century BC. More attention should be placed on this period. The commentary writers or expositor of the Scriptures should utilize more of the

Assyrian reliefs and archaeological data to illustrate the Word of God. For an interesting attempt at this, see Keel (1985).

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Psalm 42/43: “Captive For The Lord’s Sake”

Introduction

Have you ever been deeply in love with someone when all of a sudden an external force shattered the relationship? Perhaps it was the death of the spouse or a divorce. Or perhaps your boyfriend or girlfriend unexpectedly and unceremoniously “dumped” you for someone else. Remember the pain you felt? The questions that went through your mind, “How did this happen? Lord why?” Do you remember the struggles that you had with your attitudes toward the Lord and other people? The love you still had for the other person? These are human emotions and attitudes we experience throughout life.

The psalmist, a Levite and one of the sons of Korah, went through a similar experience. At one point in his life he led pilgrims up to Jerusalem for the three feasts of the Lord (Lev. 23; Deut. 16:16) and he served as a doorkeeper in the house of his God (Ps. 84:10). He loved going to the House of the Lord in order to worship Him. Yet in 701 BC, tragedy struck. The psalmist, rather than leading pilgrims to Jerusalem, was being led into captivity by the Assyrians and marched off to a foreign land. This trilogy of psalms expresses the inner most feelings and attitudes of the psalmist as he went through this traumatic experience.

Historical Background

The year 701 BC was a mixture of tragedy and blessing for the Kingdom of Judah. It was a year that saw the mighty Assyrian army, led by King Sennacherib, march against Judah and destroy most of King Hezekiah's kingdom. In his annals he boasts that he destroyed 46 strong walled cities of Judah as well as the small cities that surrounded them (Luckenbill 1989:II:120). On the other hand, there was a miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from the part of the Assyrian army that had encircled the city. The Angel of the Lord intervened and destroyed 185,000 Assyrians soldiers at night (2 Kings 18:17-19:36; 2 Chron. 32:9-21; Isa. 36:2-37:36).

The historical books, Kings and Chronicles, in the Bible are silent as to what happened after the destruction of the cities of Judah. The prophet Micah, a contemporary of King Hezekiah, hinted that some were taken captive and resettled in Babylon according to Assyrian resettlement policy (4:10). Sennacherib himself boasts that he took an exaggerated number of 200,150 Judeans captive, "great and small, male and female", the daughters of King Hezekiah, his harem and male and female musicians (Luckenbill 1989:II: 120, 121). A wall relief was found in Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh depicting the siege and fall of Lachish (2 Kings 19:8; 2 Chron. 32:9; Isa. 37:8). This relief showed Judeans being taken captive from that city along with their personal possessions (Ussishkin 1982: 108-113). Another wall relief from his palace showed some Judeans building his palace in Nineveh. Another wall relief, its provenience unknown, but most likely came from Sennacherib's palace, depicts three Judean musicians playing their harps being marched off by an Assyrian soldier. They

appear to be in a mountainous region, possibly in the region of Lebanon. It is clear, there was a Judean captivity in the year 701 BC.

The inspired Scriptures preserve a trilogy of psalms (Ps. 42/3. 44. 45) that relate to this event by one who went through it.

Overview of the Psalms of the Sons of Korah

The theme of these three psalms is the lessons to be learned from suffering while in captivity. The next three psalms (45-48) describe the joy of salvation by those who were in Jerusalem when the Lord delivered the city from the Assyrians. Psalm 49 stands alone in this section, but reflects an incident that happened earlier in the reign of King Hezekiah. In the “fourteenth year” (713/12 BC) he bribed Crown Prince Sennacherib to leave Judah (2 Kings 20:12-19; 2 Chron. 32:24-31; Isa. 39). The principle lesson from this psalm is not to trust in material possessions for salvation.

There are at least three more companion psalms written by the sons of Korah. Psalm 82 compliments Psalm 42/3 and describes the return of the psalmist from captivity to the House of the Lord that he loved. Psalm 85 is the companion psalm for Psalm 44. It expresses the praise and worship of that answered prayer for salvation. Psalm 87 is the companion psalm for Psalms 46-48. This psalm ascribes praise to Zion (Jerusalem).

Literary Structure and Theme of Psalm 42/3

In the English Bible this psalm is divided into two separate psalms. Originally it was one psalm. The evidence for that is twofold: First, some ancient manuscripts have it as one psalm. Second, internal

evidence points in this direction. The psalm is divided into three stanzas, each ending with a common refrain (42:5, 11; 43:5). Each stanza has a progressive time sequence: past, present and future. The absence of a title in Ps. 43 seems to suggest it was once part of Ps. 42.

The theme of this psalm is the desire of the psalmist for the House of the Lord; in spite of external circumstances that hinder him from going there, he relies solely upon the Lord to return him to the place that he loved.

Exposition of Psalm 42/43

The Past Experience of Worship. 42:1-5.

The psalmist was taken from his home, probably Beth Shemesh (Josh. 21:15), at the beginning of the Assyrian campaign against Judah during the late spring of 701 BC. As he is being carried away captive, he realized he might never see the House of the Lord in Jerusalem again. He is going into captivity and the Assyrian army was threatening the capital, Jerusalem. He did not what the future would hold. The Lord and His House had been the desire of his heart all his life (2 Kings 8:22-30). Thus he used the analogy of a deer panting after scarce water in the dry wilderness of Judah to express his deep yearning and desire for the Lord and His House. As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? (42:1,2).

This was an emotional experience for him because he had many unanswered questions. He wept because the place he loved was inaccessible to him. Apparently he declared to his captors his faith in the Lord God of Israel

as the only true God, and not the Assyrian deity, Ashur. The Assyrians, not wanting to be mocked, taunted him, "Where is your God?" In Assyrian theology, the side that won the battle had the stronger God. They thought Ashur was stronger than Yahweh because they had conquered a number of Judean cities. The psalmist let his theology slip for a few minutes and raised the question in his mind: How could his God be real if he was in captivity and the kingdom was on the verge of defeat? My tears have been my food day and night, while they continually say to me, "Where is your God?" (43:3).

To combat his fears and doubts, he recalled the pleasant times he had leading the pilgrims up to Jerusalem. If his home were in Beth Shemesh, he would lead the throngs, as he played his harp, up into the Hill Country of Judah. There were two possible roads up to Jerusalem from his hometown. One road went up via Nahal Kesalon and Kiriath-Jearim (Dorsey 1991:186-188, Route J5). This is the road the Ark of the Covenant was taken up into the Hill Country after it was returned by the Philistines (I Sam. 6:20-7:2). The second road went up via some ridges going through the upper reaches of the Sorek Valley to Bethlehem. At Husan, they would turn and go through the Valley of Rephaim into Jerusalem (Dorsey 1991:189, Route J8). Along the way, they would admire the lovely vineyards situated on the hillsides (Isa. 5:1,2). If they approached the city from the south, the fertile Valley of Rephaim, with its rich agriculture of wheat, barley grapes and olives would come into view (Isa. 17:4-6). Guarding the southern approach to Jerusalem was the administrative center of "MMST" (today Ramat Rachel) where King Hezekiah had recently completed a

beautiful palace complex. Then they went on to Jerusalem to visit the historic sites there as well as the House of the Lord. Ah, such pleasant memories of the sweet time of fellowship with the Lord's people as they went on pilgrimage. As he remembered these things, the psalmist poured out his heart to the Lord. When I remember these things, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of praise, with a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast (42:4).

All Judean males, 20 years old and older, were required to go up to Jerusalem three times a year to worship the Lord (Ex. 23:14-19; 34:23; Deut. 16:16). The first feast was Passach (Passover), the second was Shavuot (Pentecost), and the last was Succoth (Tabernacles).

This stanza ends with the refrain, Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance (42:5). Throughout his ordeal there was a "still small voice" encouraging him not to be in despair; for somehow, someday, the Lord would answer his prayer and bring him back to Jerusalem. He had to be patient and wait on (i.e. hope in) the Lord.

The Present Exclusion from Worship. 42:6-11.

As the psalmist was marched toward Assyria, he realized each stop took him further and further away from the place he longed for and loved. When he reached the northern part of Israel, near the city of Dan, he was in turmoil. His soul was depressed, yet he struggled to keep his mind on the Lord. O my God, my soul is cast down within me; therefore I will remember You from the land of the Jordan, and from the heights of Hermon,

from Hill Mizar (42:6). As he was forced to leave the Land of Israel he saw the springs and streams of the Jordan River ("the land of the Jordan"), the three peaks of Mt. Hermon, and another mountain, Mt. Mizar.

George Adam Smith, a Bible geographer has observed, "Hermon (not Hermonites) must refer to the triple peaks of Hermon. ... The standpoint of the Psalmist is fixed in the corner between Hermon and Jordan, where Banias stands. To the two localities the Hill Mis'ar, is placed in apposition. It may mean, as it stands, Hill of Littleness. But it may also be a proper name; and it is remarkable that in the neighborhood there should be two or three names with the same kindred radicals: (1) Za'ura; (2) Wady Za'arah, above Banias; (3) Khurbet Mezara. I suggest these may be reminiscent of a hill in this district, called Mis'ar" (1931:476, footnote 1).

His life was in turmoil. Calamity filled his soul like the waters tumbling down the waterfalls of the Jordan River. Deep calls unto deep at the noise of Your waterfalls; all Your waves and billows have gone over me (42:7). His soul was tossed between depression and contemplation of the Lord, between questioning God and trusting Him. Is it wrong to question God? No, but it is wrong to doubt His goodness and love.

Yet the Lord reassured him of His loving kindness in the daytime. The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime, and in the night His song shall be with me – a prayer to the God of my life (42:8). The Hebrew word for loving kindness is *hesed* and can be translated a number of ways. Usually it is translated mercy, loving kindness, goodness or lovingly loyal. One way the Lord could remind the psalmist was by a flock of storks flying overhead as they migrated south for the winter through

the Jordan Rift Valley. The Hebrew word of stork is *chasidah*. The Hebrews noted a quality characteristic in the stork of “devoted maternal and filial affection” toward its young (Tristram 1873:244). The LORD was the same way. He was lovingly loyal to His people based on His covenant that He made with Abraham.

In the night, he would sing the songs that he learned in the House of the Lord. Many of the psalms, especially the Davidic ones, have as their theme the loving kindness or mercy of the Lord (Ps. 63:3; 101:1; 106:1; 107:1; 115:1; 117:1; 118: 1.2.3.4.29; 136). These songs, Scripture put to music, reminded him of the promises of God, so that he could pray in faith that God would comfort and deliver him.

The Assyrians intensified their taunting, and the psalmist was emotionally crushed. This led him to question the Lord, “Have you forgotten me?” I will say to God my Rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?” As with the breaking of my bones, my enemies reproach me, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?” (42:9,10). Verse 10 might hint as physical torture by the Assyrians, they were masters at it. Yet through it all, that “still small voice” came back to remind him not to despair, but to wait upon God because one day he would praise the Lord. Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God (42:11).

Over 700 years later, the Lord Jesus Christ was in the same area, i.e. Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:13). It was at this point in His ministry that He began to plainly tell

His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem to suffer at the hands of sinful men, be killed and be raised again the third day (Matt. 16:21 // Mark 8:31 // Luke 9:22). This psalm must have gone through His mind as He contemplated the striking contrast between Himself and the psalmist. The psalmist was taken into captivity because of the nations sinfulness, yet the loving kindness of the Lord sustained him during the time he was hindered from going to Jerusalem for the feasts of the Lord. On the other hand, because of humankind's sinfulness, the loving kindness of the Lord compelled the Lord Jesus to go to Jerusalem to be the Passover Lamb (Luke 9:44,45,51; I Cor. 5:7).

The Lord Jesus takes one phrase from the refrain of this psalm (42:5,11; 43:5) and applies it to Himself. While He is in Gethsemane He said, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful" (Matt. 26:38 // Mark 14:34; Archer and Chirichigno 1983: 69,71).

The Future Expectation to Worship. 43:1-5.

The Assyrians had continually taunted the psalmist as to where his God was. The psalmist, in desperation, turns to the Lord and pleads with Him to vindicate, and plead his cause against the Assyrians, and to deliver him from the clutches of Sennacherib. Vindicate me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation; Oh deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man! (43:1).

The psalmist acknowledges that God is his strength but wants some tough questions answered; such as, "Why did you do this to me Lord?" and "Why am I going through this? What is the purpose?" For you are the god of my strength; Why do you cast me off? Why do I go

mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? (43:2).

The psalm ends with the psalmist praying to the Lord to send His light and truth to lead him back to the Temple in Jerusalem and the place that he loved. Oh, send out Your light and Your truth! Let them lead me; let them bring me to Your holy hill and to your tabernacle (43:3). The light and truth could refer to one of two things. The first possibility is the Word of God. The Scriptures have been called light (Ps. 119:105) and truth (Ps. 119: 43,142,160). The second possibility is the Son of God. As we will see in Psalm 45, the King of Israel is a preincarnate appearance, called a Christophany, of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the Gospels, the Lord Jesus says He is the Light of the World (John 8:12) and the Truth (John 14:6).

The psalmist makes a vow and promises the Lord that when he returns to Jerusalem he will offer a sacrifice and praise the Lord in song, thanking Him for the salvation that He accomplished and the answer to his prayer. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and on the harp I will praise You, O God, my God (43:4).

The refrain repeats itself again. This reinforces and encourages the psalmist through this crisis situation. Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God (43:5).

Personal Applications

Facts often seem to contradict faith. The psalmist questioned the Lord, "God, if you are real, why are you

allowing this to happen to me?” The Lord’s loving kindness and the Word of God encouraged him to “walk by faith and not by sight” (II Cor. 5:7). He fully believed that God had a purpose for this ordeal and that one day He would answer his prayer for deliverance. As we will see later, the answer is seen in Psalm 84. Yet until that happens he must keep in mind that “God’s grace does not lead where His grace does not sustain.”

As the psalmist went through this ordeal, his love for the Lord and His House deepened. Someone once said, “Distance makes the heart grow fonder.” Sometimes we do not realize how much we love something or someone until it is taken away from us. We should not take the things of the Lord for granted.

Finally, realizing that God was in control of his life, the psalmist began the psalm by “panting” (desiring the Lord and His House); but ends by “praising” when God heard and answered his prayer for deliverance.

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