
For the Chief Musician. To the tune of "Silent Dove in Distant Lands." A poem by David, when the Philistines seized him in Gath.

PSALM 56: 1 Be merciful to me, God, for man wants to swallow me up. All day long, he attacks and oppresses me.

David prays for support against his enemies, whose wickedness he describes, Psa 56:1-6; and foretells their destruction, Psa 56:7; expresses his confidence in God's mercy, expects deliverance, and promises thanksgiving and obedience, Psa 56:8-13.

The title of this Psalm is very long: "To the conqueror, concerning the dumb dove in foreign places: golden Psalm of David." The Vulgate translates the original thus: "to the end. For the people who were afar off from holy things." "This inscription David placed here for a title when the Philistines - took him in Gath;" so the Septuagint and Ethiopic. The Chaldee is profuse: "To praise, for the congregation of Israel, which are compared to the silence of a dove, when they were afar off from their cities but being returned, they praise the Lord of the world, like David, contrite and upright, when the Philistines kept him in Gath." The Syriac: "A thanksgiving of the righteous man, because he was delivered from his enemy, and from the hand of Saul. Also concerning the Jews and Christ." Bochart translates, "To the tune of the dove in the remote woods."

If the title be at all authentic, David may mean himself and his companions by it, when he escaped from the hands of the Philistines; particularly from the hands of Achish, king of Gath. אֵלֶם elem signifies to compress or bind together; also, a small band or body of men: and יוֹנָת yonath, from יָנָה yannah, to oppress or afflict, is properly applied to the dove, because of its being so defenseless, and often becoming the prey of ravenous birds. It is possible, therefore, that the title may imply no more than - "A prayer to God in behalf of himself and the oppressed band that followed him, and shared his misfortunes in distant places." Others will have it to mean a simple direction "To the master of the band, to be sung to the time of a well-known ode, called 'The dumb dove, in distant places.'" There is no end to conjectures, and all the titles in the whole book are not worth one hour's labor. Perhaps there is not one of them authentic. They may have been notices that such a Psalm was to be sung to such and such a tune; giving the catch-words of some well-known song or ode: a custom that prevails much among us in songs and hymns, and is to be found even among the Asiatics.

Verse 1

Be merciful unto me - I am assailed both at home and abroad. I can go nowhere without meeting with enemies: unless thou who art the Fountain of mercy and the Most High, stand up in my behalf, my enemies will most undoubtedly prevail against me. They fight against me continually, and I am in the utmost danger of being swallowed up by them.

PSALM 56: 2 My enemies want to swallow me up all day long, for they are many who fight proudly against me.

Verse 2

O thou Most High - מרום marom. I do not think that this word expresses any attribute of God, or indeed is at all addressed to him. It signifies, literally, from on high, or from a high or elevated place: "For the multitudes fight against me from the high or elevated place;" the place of authority - the court and cabinet of Saul.

Most of the Versions begin the next verse with this word: "From the light of the day, though I fear, yet will I trust in thee." From the time that persecution waxes hot against me, though I often am seized with fear, yet I am enabled to maintain my trust in thee. Dr. Kennicott thinks there is a corruption here, and proposes to read: "I look upwards all the day long."

PSALM 56: 3 When I am afraid, I will put my trust in you.

PSALM 56: 4 In God, I praise his word. In God, I put my trust. I will not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?

Verse 4

In God I will praise his word - באלהים belohim may mean here, through God, or by the help of God, I will praise his word. And, that he should have cause to do it, he says, "In God I have put my trust," and therefore he says, "I will not fear what flesh can do unto me." Man is but Flesh, weak and perishing; God is an infinite Spirit, almighty and eternal. He repeats this sentiment in the tenth and eleventh verses.

PSALM 56: 5 All day long they twist my words. All their thoughts are against me for evil.

Verse 5

Every day they wrest my words - They have been spies on my conduct continually; they collected all my sayings, and wrested my words out of their proper sense and meaning, to make them, by inuendos, speak treason against Saul. They are full of evil purposes against me.

PSALM 56: 6 They conspire and lurk, watching my steps, they are eager to take my life.

Verse 6

They gather themselves together - They form cabals; have secret meetings and consultations how they may most effectually destroy me, under the pretense of justice and safety to the state.

They hide themselves - They do all secretly.

They mark my steps - They are constantly at my heels.

They wait for my soul - They lie in wait for my life. Our translators have missed the meaning of נפש nephesh and ψυχη, - which generally signify the animal life, not the immortal spirit, - more than any other words in the Old or New Testament.

PSALM 56: 7 Shall they escape by iniquity? In anger cast down the peoples, God.

Verse 7

Shall they escape by iniquity? - Shall such conduct go unpunished? Shall their address, their dexterity in working iniquity, be the means of their escape? No. "In anger, O God, wilt thou cast down the people."

PSALM 56: 8 You number my wanderings. You put my tears into your bottle. Aren't they in your book?

Verse 8

Thou tellest my wanderings - Thou seest how often I am obliged to shift the place of my retreat. I am hunted every where; but thou numberest all my hiding-places, and seest how often I am in danger of losing my life.

Put thou my tears into thy bottle - Here is an allusion to a very ancient custom, which we know long obtained among the Greeks and Romans, of putting the tears which were shed for the death of any person into small phials, called lacrymatories or urns lacrymales and offering them on the tomb of the deceased. Some of these were of glass, some of pottery, and some of agate, sardonyx, etc. A small one in my own collection is of hard baked clay.

Are they not in thy book? - Thou hast taken an exact account of all the tears I have shed in relation to this business; and thou wilt call my enemies to account for every tear.

PSALM 56: 9 Then my enemies shall turn back in the day that I call. I know this, that God is for me.

Verse 9

When I cry unto thee, then shall mine enemies turn back - As soon as they know that I call upon thee, then, knowing that thou wilt hear and save, my enemies will immediately take flight. The cry of faith and prayer to God is more dreadful to our spiritual foes than the war-whoop of the Indian is to his surprised brother savages.

This I know - I have often had experience of the Divine interposition; and I know it will be so now, for God is with me. He who has God With him need not fear the face of any adversary.

PSALM 56: 10 In God, I will praise his word. In the LORD, I will praise his word.

Verse 10 , Psa 56:11

See on Psa 56:4 (note), where the same words occur.

PSALM 56: 11 I have put my trust in God. I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?

PSALM 56: 12 Your vows are on me, God. I will give thank offerings to you.

Verse 12

Thy vows are upon me - I have promised in the most solemn manner to be thy servant; to give my whole life to thee; and to offer for my preservation sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving.

Reader, what hast thou vowed to God? To renounce the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanities of this wicked world, and all the sinful desires of the flesh; to keep God's holy word and commandment, and to walk before him all the days of thy life. These things hast thou vowed; and these vows are upon thee. Wilt thou pay them?

PSALM 56: 13 For you have delivered my soul from death, and prevented my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of the living.

Verse 13

Thou hast delivered my soul from death - My life from the grave, and my soul from endless perdition.

My feet from falling - Thou hast preserved me from taking any false way, and keepest me steady in my godly course; and so supportest me that I may continue to walk before thee in the light of the living, ever avoiding that which is evil, and moving towards that which is good; letting my light shine before men, that they may see my good works, and glorify my Father which is in heaven. To walk before God is to please him; the light of the living signifies the whole course of human life, with all its comforts and advantages.