
A Song. A Psalm by the sons of Korah. For the Chief Musician. To the tune of "The Suffering of Affliction." A contemplation by Heman, the Ezrahite.

PSALM 88: 1 LORD, the God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before you.

The earnest prayer of a person in deep distress, abandoned by his friends and neighbors, and apparently forsaken of God, vv. 1-18.

Perhaps the title of this Psalm, which is difficult enough, might be thus translated: "A Poem to be sung to the conqueror, by the sons of Korah, responsively, in behalf of a distressed person; to give instruction to Heman the Ezrahite." Kennicott says this Psalm has three titles, but the last only belongs to it; and supposes it to be the prayer of a person shut up in a separate house, because of the leprosy, who seems to have been in the last stages of that distemper; this disease, under the Mosaic dispensation, being supposed to come from the immediate stroke of God. Calmet supposes it to refer to the captivity; the Israelitish nation being represented here under the figure of a person greatly afflicted through the whole course of his life. By some Heman is supposed to have been the author; but who he was is not easy to be determined. Heman and Ethan whose names are separately prefixed to this and the following Psalm, are mentioned as the grandsons of Judah by his daughter-in-law Tamar, 1Chr 2:6, for they were the sons of Zerah, his immediate son by the above. "And Tamar, his daughter-in-law, bare him Pharez and Zerah," 1Chr 2:4. "And the sons of Zerah Zimri, and Ethan, and Heman, and Calcol, and Dara, (or Darda)," 1Chr 2:6. If these were the same persons mentioned 1Kgs 4:31, they were eminent in wisdom; for it is there said that Solomon's wisdom "excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol," 1Kgs 4:30, 1Kgs 4:31. Probably Zerah was also called Mahol. If the Psalms in question were written by these men, they are the oldest poetical compositions extant; and the most ancient part of Divine revelation, as these persons lived at least one hundred and seventy years before Moses. This may be true of the seventy-eighth Psalm; but certainly not of the following, as it speaks of transactions that took place long afterwards, at least as late as the days of David, who is particularly mentioned in it. Were we sure of Heman as the author, there would be no difficulty in applying the whole of the Psalm to the state of the Hebrews in Egypt, persecuted and oppressed by Pharaoh. But to seek or labor to reconcile matters contained in the titles to the Psalms, is treating them with too much respect, as many of them are wrongly placed, and none of them Divinely inspired.

Verse 1

O Lord God of my salvation - This is only the continuation of prayers and supplications already often sent up to the throne of grace.

PSALM 88: 2 Let my prayer enter into your presence. Turn your ear to my cry.

Verse 2

Let my prayer come before thee - It is weak and helpless, though fervent and sincere: take all hinderances out of its way, and let it have a free passage to thy throne. One of the finest thoughts in

the Iliad of Homer concerns prayer; I shall transcribe a principal part of this incomparable passage - incomparable when we consider its origin: - Και γαρ τε Λιται εισι Διος κουραι μεγαλοιο, Χωλαι τε, ρυσσαι τε, παραβλωπες τ' οφθαλμω· Αι ρα τε και μετοπισθ' Ατης αλεγουσι κιουσαι· Η δ' Ατη σθεναρη τε και αρτιπος· ούνεκα πασας Πολλον ύπεκπροθει, φθανει δε τε πασαν επ' αιαν, Βλαπτους' ανθρωπους· αι δ' εξακεονται ποισσω· Ός μεν τ' αιδεσεται κουρας Διος, ασσον ιουσας, Τονδε μεγ' ωνησαν, και τ' εκλυον ευξαμενοιο· Ός δε κ' ανηνηται, και τε στερεως αποειπη, Λισσονται δ' αρα ταιγε Δια Κρονιωνα κιουσαι, Τω Ατην άμ' έπεσθαι, ίνα βλαφθεις αποτιση. Αλλ', Αχιλευ, πορε και συ Διος κουρησιν έπεσθαι Τιμην, ητ' αλλων περ επιγναμπτει φρενας εσθλων.

Iliad., 9:498-510.

Prayers are Jove's daughters; wrinkled, lame, slant-eyed,

Which, though far distant, yet with constant pace

Follow offense. Offence, robust of limb,

And treading firm the ground, outstrips them all,

And over all the earth, before them runs

Hurtful to man: they, following, heal the hurt.

Received respectfully when they approach,

They yield us aid, and listen when we pray.

But if we slight, and with obdurate heart

Resist them, to Saturnian Jove they cry.

Against, us supplicating, that offense

May cleave to us for vengeance of the wrong.

Thou, therefore, O Achilles! honor yield

To Jove's own daughters, vanquished as the brave

Have ofttimes been, by honor paid to thee.

Cowper.

On this allegory the translator makes the following remarks: "Wrinkled, because the countenance of a man, driven to prayer by a consciousness of guilt, is sorrowful and dejected. Lame, because it is a remedy to which men recur late, and with reluctance. Slant-eyed, either because in that state of humiliation they fear to lift up their eyes to heaven, or are employed in taking a retrospect of their past misconduct. The whole allegory, considering when and where it was composed, forms a very striking passage." Prayer to God for mercy must have the qualifications marked above.

Prayer comes from God. He desires to save us: this desire is impressed on our hearts by his Spirit, and reflected back to himself. Thus says the allegory, "Prayers are the daughters of Jupiter." But they are lame, as reflected light is much less intense and vivid than light direct. The desire of the heart is afraid to go into the presence of God, because the man knows, feels, that he has sinned against goodness and mercy. They are wrinkled - dried up and withered, with incessant longing: even the tears that refresh the soul are dried up and exhausted. They are slant-eyed; look aside through

shame and confusion; dare not look God in the face. But transgression is strong, bold, impudent, and destructive: it treads with a firm step over the earth, bringing down curses on mankind. Prayer and repentance follow, but generally at a distance. The heart, being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin does not speedily relent. They, however, follow: and when, with humility and contrition, they approach the throne of grace, they are respectfully received. God acknowledges them as his offspring, and heals the wounds made by transgression. If the heart remain obdurate, and the man will not humble himself before his God, then his transgression cleaves to him, and the heartless, lifeless prayers which he may offer in that state, presuming on God's mercy, will turn against him; and to such a one the sacrificial death and mediation of Christ are in vain. And this will be the case especially with the person who, having received an offense from another, refuses to forgive. This latter circumstance is that to which the poet particularly refers. See the whole passage, with its context.

PSALM 88: 3 For my soul is full of troubles. My life draws near to Sheol.

PSALM 88: 4 I am counted among those who go down into the pit. I am like a man who has no help,

Verse 4

I am counted with them, etc. - I am as good as dead; nearly destitute of life and hope.

PSALM 88: 5 set apart among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more. They are cut off from your hand.

Verse 5

Free among the dead - במתים צפשי bammethim chopshshi, I rather think, means stripped among the dead. Both the fourth and fifth verses seem to allude to a field of battle: the slain and the wounded, are found scattered over the plain; the spoilers come among them, and strip, not only the dead, but those also who appear to be mortally wounded, and cannot recover, and are so feeble as not to be able to resist. Hence the psalmist says, "I am counted with them that go down into the pit; I am as a man that hath no strength," Psa 88:4. And I am stripped among the dead, like the mortally wounded (חללים chalalim) that lie in the grave. "Free among the dead," inter mortuos liber, has been applied by the fathers to our Lord's voluntary death: all others were obliged to die, he alone gave up his life, and could take it again, Joh 10:18. He went into the grave, and came out when he chose. The dead are bound in the grave; he was free, and not obliged to continue in that state as they were.

They are cut off from thy hand - An allusion to the roll in which the general has the names of all that compose his army under their respective officers. And when one is killed, he is erased from this register, and remembered no more, as belonging to the army; but his name is entered among those who are dead, in a separate book. This latter is termed the black book, or the book of death; the other is called the book of life, or the book where the living are enrolled. From this circumstance, expressed in different parts of the sacred writings, the doctrine of unconditional reprobation and election has been derived. How wonderful!

PSALM 88: 6 You have laid me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.

PSALM 88: 7 Your wrath lies heavily on me. You have afflicted me with all your waves. Selah.

Verse 7

Thou hast afflicted me with all thy waves - The figures in this verse seem to be taken from a tempest at sea. The storm is fierce, and the waves cover the ship.

PSALM 88: 8 You have taken my friends from me. You have made me an abomination to them. I am confined, and I can't escape.

Verse 8

Thou hast made me an abomination - This verse has been supposed to express the state of a leper, who, because of the infectious nature of his disease, is separated from his family - is abominable to all, and at last shut up in a separate house, whence he does not come out to mingle with society.

PSALM 88: 9 My eyes are dim from grief. I have called on you daily, LORD. I have spread out my hands to you.

PSALM 88: 10 Do you show wonders to the dead? Do the departed spirits rise up and praise you? Selah.

Verse 10

Wilt thou show wonders to the dead! - מֵתִים methim, dead men.

Shall the dead - רִפְאִים rephaim, "the manes or departed spirits."

Arise and praise thee? - Any more in this life? The interrogations in this and the two following verses imply the strongest negations.

PSALM 88: 11 Is your loving kindness declared in the grave? Or your faithfulness in Destruction?

Verse 11

Or thy faithfulness in destruction? - Faithfulness in God refers as well to his fulfilling his threatenings as to his keeping his promises. The wicked are threatened with such punishments as their crimes have deserved; but annihilation is no punishment. God therefore does not intend to annihilate the wicked; their destruction cannot declare the faithfulness of God.

PSALM 88: 12 Are your wonders made known in the dark? Or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

Verse 12

The land of forgetfulness? - The place of separate spirits, or the invisible world. The heathens had some notion of this state. They feigned a river in the invisible world, called Lethe, Ληθη, which signifies oblivion, and that those who drank of it remembered no more any thing relative to their former state. - *Animae, quibus altera fato*

Corpora debentur, lethaei ad fluminis undam

Securos latices et longa oblivia potant.

Virg. Aen. 6: 713.

To all those souls who round the river wait

New mortal bodies are decreed by fate;

To yon dark stream the gliding ghosts repair,

And quaff deep draughts of long oblivion there.

PSALM 88: 13 But to you, LORD, I have cried. In the morning, my prayer comes before you.

Verse 13

Shall my prayer prevent thee - It shall get before thee; I will not wait till the accustomed time to offer my morning sacrifice, I shall call on thee long before others come to offer their devotions.

PSALM 88: 14 LORD, why do you reject my soul? Why do you hide your face from me?

Verse 14

Why castest thou off my soul? - Instead of my soul, several of the ancient Versions have my prayer. Why dost thou refuse to hear me, and thus abandon me to death?

PSALM 88: 15 I am afflicted and ready to die from my youth up. While I suffer your terrors, I am distracted.

Verse 15

From my youth up - I have always been a child of sorrow, afflicted in my body, and distressed in my mind. There are still found in the Church of God persons in similar circumstances; persons who are

continually mourning for themselves and for the desolations of Zion. A disposition of this kind is sure to produce an unhealthy body; and indeed a weak constitution may often produce an enfeebled mind; but where the terrors of the Lord prevail, there is neither health of body nor peace of mind.

PSALM 88: 16 Your fierce wrath has gone over me. Your terrors have cut me off.

Verse 16

Thy fierce wrath goeth over me - It is a mighty flood by which I am overwhelmed.

PSALM 88: 17 They came around me like water all day long. They completely engulfed me.

Verse 17

They came round about me daily like water - Besides his spiritual conflicts, he had many enemies to grapple with. The waves of God's displeasure broke over him, and his enemies came around him like water, increasing more and more, rising higher and higher, till he was at last on the point of being submerged in the flood.

PSALM 88: 18 You have put lover and friend far from me, and my friends into darkness.

Verse 18

Lover and friend - I have no comfort, and neither friend nor neighbour to sympathize with me.

Mine acquaintance into darkness - All have forsaken me; or מִיְדַעֵי מַחֲשָׁךְ meyuddai machsach, "Darkness is my companion." Perhaps he may refer to the death of his acquaintances; all were gone; there was none left to console him! That man has a dismal lot who has outlived all his old friends and acquaintances; well may such complain. In the removal of their friends they see little else than the triumphs of death. Khosroo, an eminent Persian poet, handles this painful subject with great delicacy and beauty in the following lines: -

Ruftem sauee khuteereh bekerestem bezar

Az Hijereh Doostan ke aseer fana shudend:

Guftem Eeshah Kuja shudend? ve Khatyr

Dad az sada jouab Eeshan Kuja! "Weeping, I passed the place where lay my friends

Captured by death; in accents wild I cried,

Where are they? And stern Fate, by Echoes voice,

Returned in solemn sound the sad Where are they?"

J. B. C.