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A Song of Ascents.

PSALM 126: 1 When the LORD brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like those who dream.

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The joy of the Israelites on their return from captivity, and the effect their deliverance had upon the heathen, Psa 126:1-3. The prayer which they had offered up, Psa 126:4. The inference they draw from the whole, Psa 126:5, Psa 126:6.

This Psalm is not of David, has no title in the Hebrew or any of the Versions, and certainly belongs to the close of the captivity. It might have been composed by Haggai and Zechariah, as the Syriac supposes; or by Ezra, according to others. It is beautiful, and highly descriptive of the circumstances which it represents.

Verse 1

When the Lord turned again the captivity - When Cyrus published his decree in favor of the Jews, giving them liberty to return to their own land, and rebuild their city and temple.

We were like them that dream - The news was so unexpected that we doubted for a time the truth of it. We believed it was too good news to be true, and thought ourselves in a dream or illusion. When the Romans had vanquished Philip, king of Macedon, they restored liberty to the Grecian cities by proclamation. It was done at the time of the Isthmian games, and by the crier, who went into the circus to proclaim them; none but the Roman general T. Quintius knowing what was to be done. Multitudes from all Greece were there assembled; and the tidings produced nearly the same effect upon them, according to Livy, that the publication of the decree of Cyrus did on the Jews, according to what is here related by the psalmist. I shall give the substance of this account from the Roman historian. When the Romans had sat down to behold the games, the herald with his trumpet went into the arena according to custom, to proclaim the several games. Silence being obtained, he solemnly pronounced the following words: -

Senatus romanus et t. Quincius imperator, philippo rege macedonibusque devictis; liberos, immunes, suis legibus esse jubet corinthios, phocenses, locrensesque omnes, et insulam euboeam, et magnetas, thessalos, perrhaebos, achaeos, phthiotas. "The Roman Senate, and T. Quintius the general, having vanquished king Philip and the Macedonians, do ordain that the Corinthians, Phocensians, all the Locrensiens, the island of EubOea, the Magnesians, Thessalians, Perrhaebians, Achaeans, and Phthiotians, shall be free, be delivered from all taxes, and live according to their own laws."

The effect that this produced on the astonished Grecians who were present, is related by this able historian in a very natural and affecting manner; and some parts of it nearly in the words of the psalmist.

Audita voce praeconis, majus gaudium fuit, quam quod universum homines caperent. Vix satis se credere se quisque audisse: alii alios intueri mirabundi velut somnii vanam speciem: quod ad guemque pertineret, suarum aurium fidei minimum credentes, proximos interrogabant. Revocatur praeco, cum unusquisque non audire, sed videre libertatis suae nuncium averit, iterum pronunciaret eadem. Tum ab certo jam gaudio tantus cum clamore plausus est ortus, totiesque repetitus, ut facile appareret, nihil omnium bonorum multitudini gratius quam Libertatem esse.

T. 54: Hist., lib. xxiii., c. 32.

This proclamation of the herald being heard, there was such joy, that the people in general could not comprehend it. Scarcely could any person believe what he had heard. They gazed on each other, wondering as if it had been some illusion, similar to a dream; and although all were interested in what was spoken, none could trust his own ears, but inquired each from him who stood next to him what it was that was proclaimed. The herald was again called, as each expressed the strongest desire not only to hear, but see the messenger of his own liberty: the herald, therefore, repeated the proclamation. When by this repetition the glad tidings were confirmed, there arose such a shout, accompanied with repeated clapping of hands, as plainly showed that of all good things none is so dear to the multitude as Liberty.

O that God may raise up some other deliverer to save these same cities with their inhabitants, from a worse yoke than ever was imposed upon them by the king of Macedon; and from a servitude which has now lasted three hundred years longer than the captivity of the Israelites in the empire of Babylon!

Constantinople was taken by the Turks in 1453; and since that time till the present, (October, 1822), three hundred and sixty-nine years have elapsed. Why do the Christian powers of Europe stand by, and see the ark of their God in captivity; the holy name by which they are called despised and execrated; the vilest indignities offered to those who are called Christians, by barbarians the most cruel, ferocious, and abominable that ever disgraced the name of man? Great God, vindicate the cause of the distressed Greeks as summarily, as effectually, as permanently, as thou once didst that of thy oppressed people the Jews! Let the crescent never more fill its horns with a victory, nor with the spoils of any who are called by the sacred name of Jesus: but let it wane back into total darkness; and know no change for the better, till illuminated by the orient splendor of the Sun of righteousness! Amen! Amen!

How signally has this prayer been thus far answered! Three great Christian powers, the British, the French, and the Russian, have taken up the cause of the oppressed Greeks. The Turkish fleet has been attacked in the Bay of Navarino by the combined fleets of the above powers in October, 1827, under the command of the British Admiral, Sir Edward Codrington, and totally annihilated. After which, the Mohammedan troops were driven out of Greece and the Morea; so that the whole of Greece is cleared of its oppressors, and is now under its own government, protected by the above powers - March, 1829.

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PSALM 126: 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."

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Verse 2

Then upas our mouth filled with laughter - The same effect as was produced on the poor liberated Grecians mentioned above.

Then said they among the heathen - The liberty now granted was brought about in so extraordinary a way, that the very heathens saw that the hand of the great Jehovah must have been in it.

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PSALM 126: 3 The LORD has done great things for us, and we are glad.

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Verse 3

The Lord hath done great things for us - We acknowledge the hand of our God. Deus nobis haec otia fecit, "God alone has given us this enlargement."

We are glad - This is a mere burst of ecstatic joy. O how happy are we!

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PSALM 126: 4 Restore our fortunes again, LORD, like the streams in the Negev.

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Verse 4

Turn again our captivity - This is either a recital of the prayer they had used before their deliverance; or it is a prayer for those who still remained in the provinces beyond the Euphrates. The Jewish captives did not all return at once; they came back at different times, and under different leaders, Ezra, Nehemiah, Zerubbabel, etc.

As the streams in the south - Probably the Nile is meant. It is now pretty well known that the Nile has its origin in the kingdom of Damot; and runs from south to north through different countries, till, passing through Egypt, it empties itself into the Mediterranean Sea. It is possible, however, that they might have had in view some rapid rivers that either rose in the south, or had a southern direction; and they desired that their return might be as rapid and as abundant as the waters of those rivers. But we know that the Nile proceeds from the south, divides itself into several streams as it passes through Egypt, and falls by seven mouths into the Mediterranean.

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PSALM 126: 5 Those who sow in tears will reap in joy.

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Verse 5

They that sow in tears shall reap in joy - This is either a maxim which they gather from their own history, or it is a fact which they are now witnessing. We see the benefit of humbling ourselves under the mighty hand of God; we have now a sweet return for our bitter tears. Or, We have sown in tears; now we reap in joy. We are restored after a long and afflicting captivity to our own country, to peace, and to happiness.

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PSALM 126: 6 He who goes out weeping, carrying seed for sowing, will certainly come again with joy, carrying his sheaves.

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Verse 6

He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed - The metaphor seems to be this: A poor farmer has had a very bad harvest: a very scanty portion of grain and food has been gathered from

the earth. The seed time is now come, and is very unpromising. Out of the famine a little seed has been saved to be sown, in hopes of another crop; but the badness of the present season almost precludes the entertainment of hope. But he must sow, or else despair and perish. He carries his all, his precious seed, with him in his seed basket; and with a sorrowful heart commits it to the furrow, watering it in effect with his tears, and earnestly imploring the blessing of God upon it. God hears; the season becomes mild; he beholds successively the blade, the ear, and the full corn in the ear. The appointed weeks of harvest come, and the grain is very productive. He fills his arms, his carriages, with the sheaves and shocks; and returns to his large expecting family in triumph, praising God for the wonders he has wrought. So shall it be with this handful of returning Israelites. They also are to be sown - scattered all over the land; the blessing of God shall be upon them, and their faith and numbers shall be abundantly increased. The return here referred to, Isaiah describes in very natural language: "And they shall bring all your brethren for an offering to the Lord out of all nations, upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, upon mules, and upon swift beasts, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, saith the Lord, as the children of Israel bring an offering in a clean vessel into the house of the Lord," Isa 66:20.