

PSALM 56

INTRODUCTION TO PSALM 56

*To the chief Musician upon Jonathelemrechokim, Michtam of David
when the Philistines took him in Gath*

The words “jonathelemrechokim” are by our translators left untranslated. Aben Ezra takes them to be the beginning of a song; and others think they are the name of a musical instrument: but they seem rather to design the subject matter of the psalm, and may be rendered, “concerning the mute dove among them that are afar off”^{f736}, or “in far places”^{f737}; and refer to David, who, when he wrote this psalm, was among the Philistines, who were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, afar off from God and his law, and from righteousness; and when David was there, he was at a distance from his native country, his father’s house, the king’s court, and what gave him most concern, from the house and worship of God; and here he was as a mute dove. He may be compared to a dove for his innocence in the case of Saul; and to a silly dove, for his acting the part of a fool or madman before Achish king of Gath; and was mute to what the servants of Achish said, and was dumb before the Lord, who had suffered him to fall into their hands, and into this distress he was now in. They are also applicable to Christ, who is comparable to a dove for his harmlessness, innocence, meekness and humility; and was as a mute one before Pontius Pilate the Roman governor, when his enemies accused him, and he answered not a word; and when among the Roman soldiers, who mocked at him and reviled him, and he reviled not again; and when he was led to be crucified, he opened not his mouth either against God or man. They may be also applied to the church of God, which is often called a dove in (~~2001~~ Song of Solomon 4:1 5:2 6:9); and is in the wilderness, and among wicked men, that are afar off from God, and is silent under all afflictions and persecutions; (see ~~2014~~ Song of Solomon 2:14). The Targum paraphrases the words thus;

“concerning the congregation of Israel, which is like to a silent dove, at the time they are removed afar off from their cities.”

Moreover, the words may be applied to any truly gracious soul, that is sensible of sin, and mourns as a dove for it; has fled to Christ, as doves to their windows; and is harmless and humble; and living among men, aliens from God, is vexed and afflicted by them, yet patiently bears all that is said and done unto it. The fact which occasioned the writing of this psalm is related in (^{<0210>}1 Samuel 21:10-15). Of the word “michtam”, (see Gill on ^{<0961>}Psalm 16:1”), title; and Gussetius ^{f738} is of opinion, that every psalm that has this title belongs to Christ.

Ver. 1. *Be merciful unto me, O God*, etc.] For David could expect no mercy at the hands of men, among whom he was, whose tender mercies were cruel; he being at Gath, the city of Goliath, whom he had slain, and whose sword he had now with him; and among his brethren and friends, who he might justly fear would revenge his death upon him: wherefore he betakes himself to God, and pleads not any merit or righteousness of his own, but implores the grace and mercy of God; and he might expect to find grace and mercy in this his time of need, since there is mercy with the Lord; he is plenteous in it, distributes it freely, delights in so doing, and does it constantly; his mercy endures for ever, it is from everlasting to everlasting on them that fear him;

for man would swallow me up; the Targum renders it “isbi”, a wicked man: it may be understood of some one man, some great man, as Achish king of Gath; or rather Saul king of Israel, who breathed and panted after his ruin and destruction, as the word ^{f739}, signifies; who sought to eat up his flesh, to take away his life, and utterly ruin him: or collectively of many, since it appears, by the following verse, that he had many enemies who were desirous to swallow him up. This he mentions as an aggravation of his distress, and as a reason why he hoped the Lord would be merciful to him; and that he, being God, would not suffer than to prevail; (see ^{<1442>}2 Chronicles 14:12);

he fighting daily oppressth me; this shows that Saul is more especially intended, who was continually with his army pursuing him, and sometimes surrounded him and his men, and reduced him to great distress. This may be applied to the old man, the corruptions of nature, and the lusts of the flesh, which are continually warring against the soul, oppress it, bring it into captivity, and threaten to swallow it up.

Ver. 2. *Mine enemies would daily swallow [me] up*, etc.] For not one man only, but many, were his enemies; who observed and watched him, and

were eagerly desirous of his ruin. The believer has many enemies, sin, Satan, and the world, seeking to devour and destroy him, though they cannot;

for [they be] many that fight against me, O thou most High; he appeals to God, who dwells on high, and sees all things, for the truth of this, that he had many enemies both at Gath and in Israel; as well as applies to him for help, he being higher than they. Some render the words, “for [they] be many that fight against me from on high”^{f740}, or “highly”^{f741}, proudly and haughtily. Aben Ezra gives a very different sense,

“I have many angels on high that fight for me.”

But **מָרוֹם**, “marom”, is an epithet of God, as in (^{<998>}Psalm 92:8 ^{<306>}Micah 6:6); and so it is interpreted by Jarchi and Kimchi; and also by the Targum, which renders it, O God most High; and adds,

“whose throne is on high;”

which is approved by Gussetius^{f742}.

Ver. 3. *What time I am afraid*, etc.] It was a time of fear with him now; he was afraid of Achish king of Gath, (^{<9212>}1 Samuel 21:12); so believers have their times of fear; about their interest in the love, and grace, and covenant of God; about their sins and corruptions, and the prevalence of them, fearing they shall perish by them; and about their enemies, who are many, lively, and strong;

I will trust in thee; trust and confidence in the Lord is the best antidote against fears; who is unchangeable in his love, in whom is everlasting strength, and who is faithful and true to every word of promise; and therefore there is great reason to trust in him, and not be afraid.

Ver. 4. *In God I will praise his word*, etc.] Or praise him for his words for the whole Scripture that was then in being; for those testimonies which were David’s counsellors in times of difficulty and distress; and particularly for some word of promise made unto him, he was persuaded would be fulfilled, and in which he gloried and made his boast of, and on which his faith and hope were built; and this he did, and determined to do, in the strength of the Lord, and by the assistance of his grace;

in God I have put my trust; either in times past, and was not ashamed or confounded; or now, as he determined he would in (^{<563>}Psalm 56:3);

I will not fear what flesh can do unto me: or continue to fear any or all of my enemies; though I have been afraid of them, I will shake off these fears, trusting in the Lord, and depending on his word. Or, “what can flesh do unto me?”^{f743} which is as grass, and the goodness thereof as the flower of the field. Poor, frail, mortal man! what can he do against me, if God be for me? And therefore why should I fear? Men may contrive schemes, form weapons, and attempt many things against the saints, but can execute nothing, except permitted by the Lord; and the utmost they can do, when suffered, is to kill the body.

Ver. 5. *Every day they wrest my words,* etc.] Form, fashion, and shape them at their pleasure; construe them, and put what sense upon them they think fit. The word^{f744} is used of the formation of the human body, in (~~8108~~ Job 10:8); They put his words upon the rack, and made them speak what he never intended; as some men wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction, (~~6086~~ 2 Peter 3:16); and as the Jews wrested the words of Christ, (~~8219~~ John 2:19 ~~4061~~ Matthew 26:60,61). The word has also the sense of causing vexation and grief, (~~2630~~ Isaiah 63:10); and so it may be rendered here, “my words cause grief”^{f745}; to his enemies; because he had said, in the preceding verses, that he would trust in the Lord, and praise his word, and not be afraid of men; just as the Sadducees were grieved at the apostles preaching, through Jesus, the resurrection of the dead, (~~4018~~ Acts 4:1,2). Or they caused grief to himself; for because of these his enemies reproached him, cursed him, and distressed him. The Septuagint and Vulgate Latin render it, “they cursed my words”; or despised them, as the Ethiopic and Arabic versions:

all their thoughts [are] against me for evil; their counsels, schemes, and contrivances, were all formed to do him all the hurt and mischief they could.

Ver. 6. *They gather themselves together,* etc.] And meet in some one place, to contrive ways and means to do hurt, and then assemble together again to put them in execution; as did the Jews with respect to Christ, (~~4018~~ Matthew 26:3,4 ~~4027~~ Acts 4:27,28). Aben Ezra supposes a various reading without any reason; and that, instead of *wr>wgy* which Jarchi renders “they lodge”, and the Septuagint, and the versions following that, “they sojourn”, it should be read *wcdwgy*, “they assemble in troops”: because they were many: but the sense is, “they stay”^{f746}, or continue in some certain place:

they hide themselves; the Targum adds, “in ambush”: they lay in wait, and caused others to lie in wait for him, in order to take him; as did Saul and his men, and the servants of the king of Gath;

they mark my steps; they observed where he went, that they might seize him; or they observed his heels, as the old serpent did the Messiah’s, that he might bruise them; or they watched for his halting, as Jeremiah’s familiars did for his;

when they wait for my soul; to take away his life, to destroy him; (see ⁴⁸⁹⁵Psalm 119:95); they wanted not a will to do it, they only waited for an opportunity. The Targum is,

“as they waited, they did to my soul:”

or rather, “after they had hoped for my soul” ^{f747}: when they had entertained hopes of taking him, this animated them to do the above things.

Ver. 7. *Shall they escape by iniquity?* etc.] Shall such iniquity as this, or persons guilty of it, go unpunished, or escape righteous judgment, and the vengeance of God? No; and much less shall they escape by means of their iniquity; by their wicked subtlety, or by any evil arts and methods made use of, by making a covenant with death, and an agreement with hell; or escape because of their iniquity; or be delivered because of the abominations done by them, as they flatter themselves, (²⁴⁷⁰Jeremiah 7:10). Some understand these words, not as referring to the escape of David’s enemies, but of himself; and render them, either by way of petition, “because of iniquity”, the iniquity of his enemies before described, “deliver [me] from them”; or “deliver them” ^{f748}, meaning his heels they marked, and his soul they waited for: or by way of assertion or interrogation, “because of iniquity” there shall be; or shall there be “a deliverance to them?” ^{f749} his heels and his soul; or from them, his enemies. Though others choose to render the words thus; “because of [their] iniquity”, there shall be “a casting of them away” ^{f750} by the Lord, and from his presence, with loathing and contempt, as sons of Belial; reprobate silver, rejected of the Lord; which agrees with what follows:

in [thine] anger, cast down the people, O God; Saul’s courtiers, or the servants of Achish king of Gath, or both, who were in high places, but slippery ones; and such are sometimes brought down to destruction in a moment, by that God from whom promotion comes; who putteth down one, and sets up another, and which he does in wrath and anger.

Ver. 8. *Thou tellest my wanderings*, etc.] Not his sins; though these are aberrations or wanderings from the ways of God's commandments; yet these are not told by the Lord: he takes no account of them; the number of them is not kept by him; they are blotted out, cast behind his back, and into the depths of the sea; though sometimes his people think they are told and numbered by him, (^{<3846>}Job 14:16 31:4); but David's moves and flights from place to place are meant, through Saul's pursuit of him, as a partridge on the mountains. Some writers reckon twelve of these moves. The Targum renders it,

“thou numberest the days of my wandering;”

that is, the days of his pilgrimage and sojourning in this world: the number of our days, and months and years, in which we wander about in this uncertain state of things, is with the Lord, (^{<3845>}Job 14:5);

put thou my tears into thy bottle; the allusion is to “lachrymatories”, or tear bottles, in which surviving relatives dropped their tears for their deceased friends, and buried them with their ashes, or in their urns; some of which tear bottles are still to be seen in the cabinets of the curious. A description of which is given by Gejerus ^{f751}, from Olaus Wormius; and who also from Cotovicus relates, that the grave of M. Tullius Cicero was dug up in the island of Zacynthus, A. D. 1544, in which were found two glass urns; the larger had ashes in it, the lesser water: the one was supposed to contain his ashes, the other the tears of his friends: and as this was a custom with the Romans, something like this might obtain among the Jews; and it is a saying with them ^{f752},

“whoever sheds tears for a good man (deceased) the holy blessed God numbers them, and puts them into his treasures, according to (^{<3808>}Psalm 56:8);”

which shows, that they thought that reference is here had to funeral tears. The meaning of the text is, that God would take notice of David's afflictions and troubles, which had caused so many tears, and remember them, and deliver him out of them: these being desired to be put into a bottle was, that they might be kept and reserved; not to make atonement for sin; for as a thousand rivers of oil cannot expiate one sin, could they be come at; so neither as many rivers of brinish tears, could they possibly be shed: nor to obtain heaven and happiness; for there is no comparison nor proportion between the sufferings of the saints and the glory that shall be

revealed in them; though there is a connection of grace through the promise of God between them: but rather, that they might be brought forth another day and shown, to the aggravation of the condemnation of wicked men, who by their hard speeches, and ungodly actions, have caused them;

[are they] not in thy book? verily they are; that is, the tears and afflictions of his people. They are in his book of purposes; they are all appointed by him, their kind and nature, their measure and duration, their quality and quantity; what they shall be, and how long they shall last; and their end and use: and they are in his book of providence, and are all overruled and caused to work for their good; and they are in the book of his remembrance; they are taken notice of and numbered by him, and shall be finished; they shall not exceed their bounds. These tears will be turned into joy, and God will wipe them all away from the eyes of his people.

Ver. 9. *When I cry [unto thee],* etc.] In prayer;

then shall mine enemies turn back; great is the strength of prayer; the effectual fervent prayer of the righteous avails much against their enemies: when Moses lifted up his hands, Israel prevailed: the cases of Asa, Jehoshaphat, and Hezekiah, prove it; this David was assured of, and knew it to be true by experience, his prayer being often the prayer of faith in this respect;

this I know: for God [is] for me; he knew that when he prayed his enemies would flee; because God was on his side, who is greater than they; or by this he knew that God was for him, and was his God, by hearing his prayers, and causing his enemies to turn back: or, however, let things go how they will, this he was assured of, that he had a covenant interest in God, and who would be his God and guide even unto death.

Ver. 10. *In God will I praise [his] word,* etc.] These words are repeated from (~~Psalm~~ Psalm 56:4); and for the greater certainty of the thing, and to show his fixed resolution to do it, and his strong affection for the Lord and his word, they are doubled;

in the Lord will I praise [his] word: in the former clause the word “Elohim” is made use of, which, the Jews say, denotes the property of justice, and in the latter Jehovah, which with them is the property of mercy; and accordingly the Targum paraphrases the words,

“in the attribute of the justice of God will I praise his word; in the attribute of the mercies of Jehovah will I praise his word;”

and to the same sense Jarchi: that is, whether I am in adversity or prosperity, receive evil or good things from the hand of the Lord; yet will I praise him: I will sing of mercy and of judgment, (^{39A10B}Psalm 101:1); or rather the one may denote the grace and goodness of a covenant God in making promises, and the other his truth and faithfulness in keeping them; on account of both which he is worthy of praise. The word “his” is not in either clause in the original text, and they may be rendered, “in God will I praise the word; in the Lord will I praise the word”: in and by the help, assistance, and grace of Jehovah the Father, will I praise the eternal and essential Word, his Son. The Targum renders it his “Memra”; a word often used in it for a divine Person, the eternal Logos; the loveliness of his person, the love of his heart to his people, the fulness of grace that is in him, the offices he sustains on their account, and the virtue of his blood, righteousness, and sacrifice, render him praiseworthy in their esteem.

Ver. 11. *In God have I put my trust*, etc.] (See Gill on “^{3960A}Psalm 56:4”);

I will not be afraid what man can do unto me; the same with flesh in (^{3960A}Psalm 56:4), and is opposed to God, in whom he trusted; and it suggests that he was not, and would not, be afraid of the greatest of men, as well as of the meanest; (see Gill on “^{3960A}Psalm 56:4”); Arama distinguishes between “flesh” and “man”; the former, he says, means the Philistines, and the latter Saul and his army.

Ver. 12. *Thy vows [are] upon me, O God*, etc.] Which he had made to him in the time of his distress and trouble, and which he looked upon himself under obligation to perform; they were debts upon him he ought to pay off; they were with him; they were fresh in his mind and memory; he had not forgot them, which is often the case when trouble is over; and he found his heart inclined to make them good;

I will render praises unto thee; which explains what he meant by his vows; namely, sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord: when he was in distress, he had vowed and promised, that, if the Lord would deliver him, he would praise his name, and give him all the glory; and now he resolves to fulfil what he had promised.

Ver. 13. *For thou hast delivered my soul from death*, etc.] From imminent danger of death, when in the hands of the Philistines; not that the soul can

die; that is immortal; but he means his person, on which account he determines to render praise to God: moreover, this may include the deliverance of his soul from a moral or spiritual death, in which he was by nature, being conceived in sin, and shapen in iniquity; from which he was delivered by regenerating grace, when he was quickened, who before was dead in trespasses and sins; and so delivered, as that this death should no more come upon him; the grace of God in him being a well of living water, springing up unto eternal life: and it may also be understood of deliverance from eternal death, by Christ, who has redeemed his people from the curse of the law, and delivered them from wrath to come; so that they shall never be hurt of the second death; that shall have no power over them; but they shall have eternal life; all which is matter of praise and thanksgiving;

[wilt] not [thou deliver] my feet from falling? that is, “thou wilt deliver” them; for this way of speaking strongly affirms; or “hast thou not delivered [them]?”¹⁷⁵³ thou hast; and wilt still deliver, or keep from falling. The people of God are subject to falling; God is the only keeper of them; and they have reason to believe that he will keep them from a final and total falling away; because of the great love which he has for them, the gracious promises of preservation he has made unto them, and his power, which is engaged in keeping of them; and because they are put into the hands of Christ, who is able to keep them, and who has an interest in them, and an affection for them; and because of the glory of all, the three divine Persons concerned in the saints’ preservation; and this is another reason for rendering praises unto the Lord; the end of which follows;

that I may walk before God in the light of the living; to “walk before God” is to walk as in his sight, who sees and knows all hearts, thoughts, words, and actions; with great circumspection, and caution, and watchfulness; to walk according to the word and will of God, in all his ways, commands, and ordinances; and so the Arabic version, “that I may do the will of the Lord”; and so as to please him, as Enoch did, who walked with him, and whose walking with him is interpreted by pleasing him, (^{SHIB} Hebrews 11:5,6); agreeably to which the Septuagint, Vulgate Latin, Syriac, and Ethiopic versions, render the words, “that I may please before the Lord”; or do what is acceptable in his sight. Moreover, to walk before the Lord is to walk in the light of his countenance, to have his presence, enjoy his favour, and be blessed with communion with him. “In the light of the living?” that is, to walk as an enlightened and quickened person, as the children of the light; and to walk in the light of the Gospel, and as becomes

that; and to walk in Christ the light, and by faith on him; and such shall have “the light of life”, (~~f62~~John 8:12); a phrase the same with this here; and designs the light of the heavenly glory, and of the New Jerusalem church state, in which the nations of them that are saved shall walk, (~~f623~~Revelation 21:23,24). Some Jewish ^{f754}writers interpret this of paradise.