

Psalm 44: Lord of history



Psalm 44 (43) (Mode 3. 3....12 / 4.....271)

The psalmist is utterly bewildered. It was God who cleared the land of its inhabitants and gave it to his chosen people, Israel (verses 1-8). Yet now the foreign nations are plundering at will.

Is the historical setting the invasion in the north of the Assyrian Tiglath-Pileser II in 732BC? – an hypothesis supported by the absence of any mention of Jerusalem or the temple.

The psalmist would understand the calamity as divine punishment, if the people had been unfaithful to the covenant. However, as he sees it, this is not the case (verses 17 and 20). It is unthinkable that God would be unfaithful, so what is going on? Why is God so slow to remember them? God seems to have forgotten (verse 24) or to be asleep (verse 23). They can do nothing. It is up to God to act as he acted in the past. The psalmist pleads with God to reveal his kindness (verse 26).

God is the Lord of history.

‘I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things’(Isaiah 45:7).

‘The Lord will vindicate his people, have compassion on his servants ... Then he will say: Where are their gods, the rock in which they took refuge, who ate the fat of their sacrifices, and drank the wine of their libations? Let them rise up and help you, let them be your protection! See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god beside me. I kill and I give life; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand’(Deuteronomy 32:36-39).

We heard with our own ears, O God,
Our ancestors have told us the story
of the things you did in their days,
you yourself, in days long ago:
how you uprooted nations to plant your own people,
how you put down others so your people could flourish.

They won the land, but not by their own sword.
They won victory, but not by their own strength.
It was your strength, O God,
and the light of your countenance,
for in them you delighted.

Modern archaeology does not support the understanding expressed here. The people who formed into Israel were largely indigenous. The truth underlying the psalmists words is that the Holy Land is God's gift to the people of Israel and not something that they achieved for themselves.

It was you, my king and my God
who led Jacob to victory.

It was through you, through your name,
that we crushed those who rose against us.

I did not rely on my bow,
and my sword did not save me.

It was you, God, who rescued us from danger
and put our foes to shame.

In God we boast every day.
We never fail to thank you.

‘It was not by your sword or by your bow’(Joshua 24:12).

‘Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might’(Jeremiah 9:23).

Yet now you have rejected us and shamed us.
You no longer march with our armies.
You make us retreat before the foe,
and our enemies plunder us at will.

You make us like sheep for slaughter,
and scatter us among the nations.
You sell your people for nothing,
and make no profit by the sale.

You make us the taunt of our neighbours.
They scoff and they sneer.
You make us a byword among the nations,
a laughing stock among the peoples.

All day long my disgrace is before me,
my face is covered with shame
when I hear all the taunting
from foes hungry for revenge.

We endure all this,
though we did not forget you.

We did not betray your covenant.

We did not withdraw from you our hearts.

We did not stray
from the way you set before us.

Yet you banished us to the haunt of jackals,
you plunged us into darkness.

If we had forgotten the name of our God,
or to a strange god had stretched out our hands,
would not you have found this out,
you who know the secrets of the heart?

It is because of you
that we face death every day.

We are reckoned as sheep
ready for the slaughter. [see Romans 8:36]

Rouse yourself, O Lord! Why do you sleep?

Awake, do not reject us any longer!

Why do you hide your face?

Why do you ignore our affliction and oppression?

We grovel in the dust,
and lie prostrate on the ground.

Rise up, come to our help.

Rescue us, because of your love.

Isaiah 51:9 - 52:6

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord!
Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago! Was it not you ... who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over? So the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away ...

Isaiah 51:9 - 52:6

Rouse yourself, rouse yourself! Stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath ...devastation and destruction, famine and sword— who will comfort you? ...

Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion! Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for the uncircumcised and the unclean shall enter you no more.

Isaiah 51:9 - 52:6

Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem; loose the bonds from your neck, O captive daughter Zion! For thus says the Lord: You were sold for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money. For thus says the Lord God: Long ago, my people went down into Egypt to reside there as aliens; the Assyrian, too, has oppressed them without cause.

Isaiah 51:9 - 52:6

Now therefore what am I doing here, says the Lord, seeing that my people are taken away without cause? Their rulers howl, says the Lord, and continually, all day long, my name is despised. Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I!