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PSALMS
73-150



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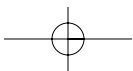
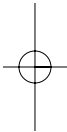
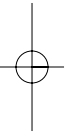
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Note on the numbering of the pages in this volume

Since this volume completes the commentary on the Psalms, its pages are numbered from the point at which the volume on Psalms 1 – 72 ended. The fairly frequent references to the Introduction, and other allusions to the earlier part of the commentary, are therefore identified simply by page numbers between 1 and 277. This avoids, incidentally, the possible confusion between the two volumes of the commentary and the five books into which the Psalter is traditionally divided.



CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

Anderson	<i>The Book of Psalms</i> by A. A. Anderson (<i>New Century Bible</i> , Oliphants), 1972.
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i> by J. B. Pritchard, ² 1955.
AV	English Authorized Version (King James), 1611.
BDB	<i>Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> by F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, 1907.
BH	<i>Biblia Hebraica</i> edited by R. Kittel and P. Kahle, ⁷ 1951.
Briggs	<i>Psalms</i> by C. A. and E. G. Briggs (<i>International Critical Commentary</i> , T. & T. Clark), 1906–07.
Dahood	<i>Psalms</i> by M. J. Dahood (<i>Anchor Bible</i> , Doubleday), 1966–70.
Delitzsch	<i>Psalms</i> by F. Delitzsch, ⁴ 1883.
Eaton	<i>Psalms</i> by J. H. Eaton (<i>Torch Bible Commentaries</i> , SCM Press), 1967.
EV	English versions.
Gelineau	<i>The Psalms: A New Translation</i> arranged for singing to the psalmody of Joseph Gelineau (Fontana), 1963.
G-K	<i>Hebrew Grammar</i> by W. Gesenius, edited by E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, ² 1910.
Gk.	Greek.
Heb.	Hebrew.
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i> .
JB	Jerusalem Bible, 1966.
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i> .

- K-B *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* by L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, 1953.
- Keet *A Study of the Psalms of Ascents* by C. C. Keet (Mitre), 1969.
- Kirkpatrick *Psalms* by A. F. Kirkpatrick (*Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, CUP), 1891–1901.
- Kissane *Psalms* by E. J. Kissane (Browne and Nolan), 1953–54.
- LXX The Septuagint (pre-Christian Greek version of the Old Testament).
- mg. margin.
- Moffatt *A New Translation of the Bible* by James Moffatt (Hodder and Stoughton), 1934.
- Mowinckel *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* by S. Mowinckel (Blackwell), 1962.
- MS(S) manuscript(s).
- MT Massoretic Text.
- NBD *The New Bible Dictionary* edited by J. D. Douglas et al. (IVP), 1962.
- NEB The New English Bible, 1970.
- PBV Prayer Book Version, 1662.
- Perowne *The Psalms* by J. S. Perowne (G. Bell), 1864.
- RP The Revised Psalter (SPCK), 1964.
- RSV American Revised Standard Version, 1952.
- RV English Revised Version, 1881.
- Syr. The Peshitta (Syriac version of the Old Testament).
- Targ. The Targum (Aramaic version of the Old Testament).
- TEV Today's English Version, the Psalms: *Sing a New Song* (Fontana), 1972.
- TRP *The Text of the Revised Psalter*. Notes by D. W. Thomas (SPCK), 1963.
- VT *Vetus Testamentum*.
- Vulg. The Vulgate (Jerome's Latin version of the Bible).
- Weiser *Psalms* by A. Weiser (*Old Testament Library*, SCM Press), 1962.

BOOK III: PSALMS 73 – 89

The eleven psalms 73 – 83, which make up the bulk of this third ‘book’, bear the name of Asaph, founder of one of the temple choirs (1 Chr. 25:1). Psalm 50 is their isolated forerunner in Book II. Four of the remaining psalms belong to the Sons of Korah (84f., 87f., supplementing the group in Book II, 42 – 49); the rest are divided between David (86), Heman (who shares with the Korahites the heading to Ps. 88) and Ethan (89). For some further details see the Introduction, 2, pp. 17f.; 6.b, p. 49.

Psalm 73. ‘Beyond compare’

This great psalm is the story of a bitter and despairing search, which has now been rewarded beyond all expectation. It recalls the kind of questions that distracted Job and Jeremiah; but at the end they no longer seem unanswerable, and the psalmist has a confession and a supreme discovery to share.

Title

On *Asaph*, see Introduction, p. 50.

73:1-14. The blight of envy

Verse 1 stands somewhat by itself, and is the key to the whole psalm, telling not merely of what God can do for a man but of what he can be to him. The phrase, *pure in heart*, is more significant than it may seem, for the psalm will show the relative unimportance of circumstances in comparison with attitudes, which may be either soured by self-interest (3, 13) or set free by love (25). *Pure* means more than clean-minded, though it certainly includes it (see the ruinous effect of impurity in Titus 1:15; 2 Pet. 2:14); basically it is being totally committed to God. As for *heart*, its occurrence six times in the psalm emphasizes, as Martin Buber has pointed out, that 'the state of the heart determines whether a man lives in the truth, in which God's goodness is experienced, or in the semblance of truth, where the fact that it "goes ill" with him is confused with the illusion that God is not good to him'.¹

The upright (1) is an emendation (see mg.), made by dividing the consonants of 'Israel' (*yśr'ł*) into two words, *yśr'ł* (but RSV, NEB then omit the second of them, a synonym for 'God'). This is unsupported and hardly necessary, since 'Israel' makes good sense and is an appropriate reminder, at the outset, of God's grace and covenant, which precede the individual's response.

2, 3. Unsettling doubt. The NEB conveys the precarious situation better than RSV, with 'My feet had almost slipped, my foothold had all but given way'. On the reasons for this crisis of faith the psalmist is refreshingly frank. Where he might have affected a disinterested passion for justice he confesses to envy and to having judged only by what he *saw* (contrast Isa. 11:3).

4-9. Daunting display. It is curious that to be physically *sound and sleek* is still viewed in some circles as the believer's birthright, in spite of passages such as this and, e.g., Romans 8:23; Hebrews 12:8. In the very description the psalmist reveals the temptation to arrogance which goes with too much well-being; which indeed would have become his own temptation had his original wish been granted.

4. This verse as read by RSV, etc., makes excellent sense, though

1. *Right and Wrong* (SCM Press, 1952), p. 37. The six occurrences are in verses 1, 7, 13, 21, 26, 26.

it involves dividing one Hebrew word into two. While this was hardly justified in verse 1 (see comment there on *the upright*), here the awkwardness of the alternative makes a case for it.²

7. NEB is preferable in the second line: ‘while vain fancies pass through their minds’.

The whole passage is a masterly picture of these darlings of fortune: overblown, overweening; laughable if they were not so ruthless; their vanity egging them on to hector the very universe. There are companion portraits in e.g. Psalms 12 and 14; and in the present psalm a telling contrast of attitude to *the heavens* and *the earth* (9) in verse 25.

10–14. Lonely dissent. The idea that ‘we needs must love the highest when we see it’³ finds no support here, unless by ‘highest’ we mean whatever appears to have the upper hand. The *Most High* (11) receives the least respect of all, and the psalmist has the mortification of seeing sin not only well paid but well thought of (10; see comment). It is not a purely modern phenomenon.

10. The text of this verse seems to have suffered in transmission. Literally the first line reads either ‘... he will bring back his people here’ or ‘... his people will return here’; and the second line (cf. RV) ‘and water of a full (vessel) will be drained by them’. But the lack of any clear connection with the context has prompted attempts by RSV and others to restore the original text. The Hebrew emendations are fairly small,⁴ and most modern versions find here the popular worship of success.

13. The phrase, *and washed my hands in innocence*, is a bitter echo of

2. Cf. RV: ‘For there are no bands (or ‘pangs’) in their death.’ Death seems to be introduced too early in the passage. ‘In their death’ is a single Heb. word, *lēmôtām*; divided it is read as *lāmô; tām*, i.e. as the italicized words in the sentence: ‘... no pangs *for them*; *sound* and sleek is their body.’

3. Tennyson, *Guinevere*, 1. 647 (*Idylls of the King*).

4. E.g. ‘*ālēhem* (‘to them’) for MT *bālōm* (‘hither’); and *mūm lō’ yimš’ū* (‘find no fault’) for MT *mē mālē yimmāšū* (‘water of a full [vessel] will be drained’). In defence of the Massoretic Text (MT) cf. perhaps our own metaphors of ‘imbibing’, ‘drinking in’, ‘lapping up’ what people say (cf. Eaton here).

the devoted resolve of 26:6. To decide that such earnestness has been a waste of time is pathetically self-centred – what did I get out of it? – but the very formulating of the thought has shocked the writer into a better frame of mind, which he now describes.

73:15–28. *The radiance of faith*

The transformation of his outlook had its decisive moment, pinpointed by the *until* of verse 17, but there was heart-searching before it, and much to explore beyond it.

15–20. The dawn of truth. The first step to enlightenment was not mental but moral: a turning from the self-interest and self-pity revealed in verses 3 and 13 to remembering basic responsibilities and loyalties (15). The writer had still no inkling of an answer (16), but this shift of attention was itself a release after his fixation on one part of the scene, the worldlings. The high title he uses for his fellow-believers, ‘the family of God’ (NEB), or lit. ‘thy sons’ (15), introduces a forgotten factor, a relationship which is wealth of quite another kind.

17. The light breaks in as he turns to God himself, and to him as an object not of speculation⁵ but of worship. Against his eternity, sovereignty and underived being, these men of the moment are seen as they are. *Their end* is literally ‘their afterward’, their future which will unmake everything they have lived for. By contrast, a related word for ‘afterward’ in verse 24 will introduce a quite different and glorious prospect.

18–20. Judgment is not simply the logical end or ‘afterward’ of evil, though it has this quality (see on verse 17); it is ultimately God’s personal rejection, his dismissal of someone as of no further account or interest (20) which is the ‘shame and everlasting contempt’ of Daniel 12:2, and the ‘I never knew you’ of Matthew 7:23. ‘We can be left utterly and absolutely *outside* – repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored.’⁶

5. JB (cf. Gelineau) has ‘until ... I pierced the mystery’, but this is an unwarranted spiritualizing of the straightforward statement ‘until I went into the sanctuary’.

6. C. S. Lewis, ‘The Weight of Glory’, *Transposition* (Bles, 1949), p. 30.

21–26. The full blaze of glory. ‘On the other hand’ (to continue the quotation above) ‘we can be called in, welcomed, received, acknowledged.’ It was this that the writer had forgotten – for nothing is so blinding (and his terms are still stronger, 22) as envy or grievance. This was the nerve the serpent had touched in Eden, to make even Paradise appear an insult. Now the true values come to light, in a passage which must be unsurpassed, brief as it is, in the record of man’s response to God.

21, 22. There is a new depth in the singer’s repentance of his former mood. In verse 2 he had noticed his own peril from it; in verse 15 he saw it as a betrayal of his fellows; now he confesses the affront he has been offering to God. This has come of finding himself in God’s presence (cf. ‘into the sanctuary’, 17), for *toward thee* is literally ‘with thee’; but that presence, at first accusing, will now become his delight. The same expression, ‘with thee’, is taken up at once in 23a, and again in 25b (see note), transformed by its new context.

23, 24. The tenses, while they are not always as sharply temporal in Hebrew as in English, seem designed here to bring out the long span of the phrase, *continually with thee*. The sequence can be read (somewhat as in JB):

You took hold of my right hand,
You guide me with your counsel,
And in the end you will receive me with glory.

The word *afterward*,⁷ or ‘in the end’, makes it clear that the last line looks beyond the steady progress of the middle sentence, to the climax of the whole. Whether that climax (which can be translated either *to glory* or ‘with glory’) is the comparatively modest one of promotion to earthly honour, as some would judge, or the crowning joy

7. This word, *’ahar*, can be used either as an adverb, i.e. ‘afterward(s)’, ‘after that’, etc. (e.g. Gen. 10:18; 18:5; Lev. 14:8, 19; etc.), or as a preposition ‘after’. The latter (*’after glory*) would make little sense here; but LXX understood it so, and RP emended it to *’ōrah* (*‘along the path of honour’*). The sense ‘afterwards’ involves no such difficulty.

of passing into God's presence, is something of an open question. To the present writer, the second is altogether the more likely. Verbally, the word *receive* suggests it, and doubly so by its use in the story of Enoch (Gen. 5:24, 'for God took him'; the verb is the same) and in Psalm 49:15. In the latter, the line 'for he will receive me' completes a couplet which begins 'But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol'. Further, the thrust of the present paragraph is towards God alone, from its opening theme, 'continually with thee', to its supreme confession in 25f., 'Whom have I in heaven but thee?' This mounting experience of salvation, 'grasped, guided, glorified', is a humble counterpart to the great theological sequence of Romans 8:29f., which spans the work of God from its hidden beginning, 'whom he foreknew', to the same consummation as here, 'he also glorified'. We may well conclude that if eternal life was visible to a discerning eye even in the saying 'I am the God of Abraham, ... Isaac, and ... Jacob', as our Lord pointed out, here it lies open for all to see. For some other passages where this hope comes into view, see the final comment on Psalm 111.

25. Having reached assurance on what God is doing for his salvation ('hold ... guide ... receive', 23f.), the psalmist comes to rest in what God is to him, however unpromising his situation.

Heaven and *earth* are, at one level of language, simply a way of saying 'anywhere at all'. But addressed to God, the two words keep their full meaning. Certainly the Bible's presentation of heaven is wholly God-centred –

Thou its light, its joy, its crown,
Thou its sun which goes not down⁸

– and in its view of earth it shows that the motto, 'To me to live is Christ', is not an excluding but an enriching of other relationships.⁹

Note in passing that *besides thee* is the same Hebrew expression here as 'toward thee' (22) and 'with thee' (23); a link which is not

8. W. C. Dix, 'As with gladness men of old'. Cf. Rev. 4:2ff.; 21:22 – 22:5.

9. Phil. 1:21. Cf. the warm and enduring friendships of Paul, whose motto this was.

translatable but real enough, emphasizing the poet's sense of standing in God's presence, which has transformed his outlook. NEB may well be right in rendering this line not '... besides thee', but '*And having thee*, I desire nothing else on earth'.

26. Here death itself is faced, for the word *fail* looks in this direction, meaning 'come to an end' rather than 'be inadequate'.¹⁰ But with true realism the psalmist refuses to modify either this or the contrasted eternity of God (note the uncompromising words 'rock', RSV mg., and *for ever*); and he invokes the indissoluble bond between the two parties, which, as our Lord pointed out, must override death (Matt. 22:32). As a Levite, furthermore, he had an explicit assurance that God was his *portion* (Num. 18:20), an assurance which David could claim only by analogy: see on 16:5, 6.

27, 28. The real comparison. From this vantage-point the singer can look back at his fretting and jealousy, and see them truly. 'Envious of the arrogant' (3)? But they are doomed. 'All in vain' my godliness 13? But I possess the chief and only *good* (28), which is *to be near God*.

So, whereas at one point the best thing he could do was to keep his thoughts to himself (15), now his lips are open. In the light of his discovery we turn back to his first exclamation with new understanding: 'Truly God is good ... to those who are pure in heart.'

Psalm 74. Havoc

This tormented psalm has the marks of the national disaster that produced Psalms 79 and 137 and the book of Lamentations, i.e. the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 BC. Perhaps the closest parallel is in Lamentations 2:5–9, where the silencing of prophecy is, as here (verse 9), one of the most disorientating blows of all. In AV, RV, a mention of 'synagogues' (8) gives an impression of a later age, such as the great persecution by Antiochus

10. JB's 'pining with love' assumes too much. The verb can have this sense when it is linked to its object by the preposition 'for', as in 84:2; 119:81; but here it stands by itself.

Epiphanes in 168–165 BC (when we are again told of the absence of any prophet: 1 Macc. 4:46). But ‘synagogues’ is a debatable translation here, and most interpreters agree in placing the psalm within a lifetime, at most, after the events of 587.

The complete change of tone in verses 12–17, not unlike the triumphant interlude in Psalm 60, suggests a new voice breaking in (note the singular, ‘my’, after the ‘us’ and ‘our’), or else a breath of fresh air from another psalm otherwise unknown to us. The tragic note will return, but at least the discipline of offering praise and of facing other facts will have made the plea more confident, if no less urgent.

Title

On *Maskil* and *Asaph* see Introduction, pp. 53, 50.

74:1–3. The cast-off heritage

It is faith, more than doubt, that precipitates the shower of questions which begins and ends this half of the psalm (verses 1, 10, 11), since the real perplexity is not over the bare fact of punishment but over its apparent finality. ‘Is it for ever?’ (1a, NEB; cf. 10) – yet how can it be, when this is ‘*thy* pasture ... *thy* congregation ... *thy* heritage’? We might add, it is thine by choice and long standing; for such is the implication of the series in verse 2: *thou hast gotten of old ... redeemed ... dwelt*. On this theme see Romans 11:1f., 29.

2. On the practical implications of *Remember*, see on 13:1. In the Psalms, the theme of *Zion* as God’s earthly dwelling evokes a great variety of moods, from the present bewilderment to the eager longings of Psalm 84, the jubilation of 68, the world-vision of 87, the defiant faith of 46, and more besides. Of the present verse Perowne has well said that ‘the two great facts, the redemption from Egypt, and God’s dwelling in the midst of them, ... seem here, as in the 68th Psalm, to sum up all their history’.

Tribe can also mean ‘rod’ or ‘sceptre’, and was so translated by the ancient versions; but the emphasis here is on belonging to God as his own folk, not on being wielded as his instrument (cf. likewise Jer. 10:16 and the plural in Isa. 63:17).

3. *Direct* is literally ‘lift up’; hence JB has the vivid but doubtful touch, ‘Pick your steps over these endless ruins’. It is more likely to

mean 'hasten to';¹¹ and the ruins are seemingly irreparable, rather than endlessly extensive.

74:4–8. *The pillaged temple*

After the questions and entreaties, the facts are now spread before God. The sharp detail of the picture, evidently an indelible memory, adds greatly to its force.

4. For *roared* . . ., NEB has, more realistically, 'The shouts of thy enemies filled the holy place'. But 'roared' was probably meant to convey a comparison with wild beasts. 'Bellowed' might be a better combination of realism and metaphor. The word used here for *thy holy place* is 'thy meeting place' (cf. 8), which recalls the term 'tent of meeting', i.e. the place where God promised to be available to his people (Exod. 29:42). Already the scene is a brutal enough contrast to the setting in which Isaiah heard the seraphim's *Sanctus* and the voice of God.

The *signs* would be the military ensigns (cf. the same word in Num. 2:2). The explanatory note, *for signs*, which may look superfluous, directs our attention to some very different 'signs' appointed for the sanctuary: the beaten-out censers from Korah's rebellion, and Aaron's miraculous rod (Num. 16:38; 17:10 [17:3, 25, Heb.]) . . . To these reminders of inviolable holiness the heathen emblems were a humiliating retort. There were worse abominations to come, but both the Old Testament and the New contemplate them as signs of the enemy's last onslaught and imminent defeat (Dan. 11:31; Matt. 24:15).

5. The RV is the most faithful to this difficult verse, with 'They'¹² seemed (or, 'made themselves known',¹³ mg.) as men that lifted up

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11. NEB ('Now at last restore') uses a common meaning of the verb, but modifies 'thy steps' to make the word (without 'thy') an adverb as in, e.g., Gen. 2:23. It is ingenious but unwarranted.
12. The verb is singular, but this can have the force of 'each one of them'. LXX attaches this verb to the previous verse, but reads it as 'and they knew not'; cf. JB, Gelineau, who further modify it by assuming an original reading '(which) we knew not'.
13. It is this verb which AV translates as 'a man was famous'.

axes upon a thicket of trees.’ It is a picture of furious destructive energy.

6, 7. 1 Kings 6:21f., 29 reveals that the *carved* work was overlaid with gold (RSV adds the word *wood*). If any of this plating remained (cf. 2 Kgs 18:16), verse 6 may describe its stripping off before the burning of the woodwork: cf. the careful collecting of metals for removal to Babylon, 2 Kings 25:13–17.

8. *Meeting places* is the plural of the word translated ‘holy place’ in verse 4, where see comment. If this is the sense here, their multiplicity is a problem, since only one sanctuary was recognized by God (Deut. 12:13f.). Possibly, however, this verse sees the Jerusalem temple as the last of God’s successive meeting places (Exod. 20:24), all of which had now been destroyed. Cf. Shiloh (Ps. 78:60–64). If, instead, it means ‘assembly places’ (cf. ‘synagogues’, AV, RV), there is no clear supporting evidence for such buildings at this early date, apparently within living memory of the events of 587 BC. The LXX offers a third possibility by understanding it as ‘appointed feasts’, a sense which it often has; but it would require a different verb, e.g. ‘made to cease’. There is, so far, no clear solution, but on balance the first seems the most likely.

74:9–11. The impenetrable silence

The lack of any ‘sign of thy favour’ (cf. the plea of Ps. 86:17), let alone any word through a prophet, are deeper wounds than the enemy’s, for ‘by these things men live’ (Isa. 38:16; cf. Deut. 8:3). The only *signs* within memory had been the enemy’s (cf. 4b). Incidentally, the role of a *prophet* emerges clearly here as one who was entrusted with inside knowledge (Amos 3:7) and could see ahead. Cf. the expression, ‘your eyes, the prophets’ (Isa. 29:10).

Historically, this cry could well be that of the derelict community left in the homeland after the deportations to Babylon and the emigration to Egypt (Jer. 43:5–7) which had removed first Ezekiel and then Jeremiah.¹⁴ We can see, at this distance, how fruitful the fallow period of God’s apparent neglect was to be, in dissolving Judah’s

14. See, however, the other possibilities discussed in the opening paragraph and in the comment on verse 8.

political structures in readiness for its next phase, as a church rather than a kingdom. The *How long* (10), as always, had a limit, and the *Why* (11) an answer.

74:12–17. *The ancient exploits*

On the sudden burst of praise, see above, in the second introductory paragraph.

12. The psalm is swung into a new direction on the pivotal opening, *Yet God ...*, as are many other passages of Scripture: e.g. Psalm 22:19 (see comment); Ephesians 2:4. While the pronoun *my* may imply that a single voice now takes the lead, it speaks for the nation, as in the similar utterance of 44:4ff. (where ‘I’ and ‘we’ alternate). With the words *God my King* there is a tacit turning from the earthly monarchy to the heavenly; the former a brief episode in history, late on the scene and soon overpowered; but the latter immemorial and irresistible. (The contrast would disappear with the Messiah, who is also *from of old*: Mic. 5:2 [1, Heb.].) The human enemies and their havoc (4–8) now look small against the powers which God has quelled and the universe he formed. What the heathen had done ‘in the midst’ of the sanctuary (4) was as nothing to what God at the exodus had done *in the midst of the earth* (12) – their earth, as they had thought.

13–15. The parting of the Red Sea and the crushing blow to Egypt, that dragon of the deep (cf. Ezek. 32:2ff.), invite comparison with the Canaanite boast of Baal’s victories over the personified Sea and River, over the Dragon (*tnn*; cf. the plural *tannînim*, *dragons*, here) and over the seven-headed serpent Lotan (the equivalent word to *Leviathan*¹⁵). The point here is that what Baal had claimed in the realm of myth, God had done in the realm of history – and done for his people, *working salvation*. Scripture will also use this language for the battle with ‘the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places’

15. The allusion to the Canaanite material is unmistakable in Isa. 27:1, where the unusual adjectives as well as the nouns are those of the Baal poem. See *Documents from Old Testament Times*, ed. D. Winton Thomas (Nelson, 1958), pp. 129–133. For comparable passages see Ps. 89:10; Isa. 51:9f.

(cf. Isa. 27:1; Rev. 12:7ff.; 13:1ff.); but here verses 12–15 survey the earthly scene, clothing the exodus events in its lively imagery, from the Red Sea (13a) to the Jordan (15b), and from the realm of judgment on the enemy (13b, 14a) to that of God's turning the wilderness into a scene of plenty (14b, 15a). It was highly relevant to the current crisis of verses 1–11, as indeed it is to the vicissitudes of the Christian church.

On *Leviathan* (14) see above. The slaying of a monster has its natural sequel in the devouring of its carcass, a picture elaborated with relish in Ezekiel 32:4ff., where Egypt is again the dragon (*tannin*). To RSV, the feast is enjoyed by *the creatures of the wilderness* (cf. JB, Gelineau), while NEB conjectures 'the sharks'; but these are emendations of the Hebrew text,¹⁶ which reads 'to a people, to desert-dwellers' (or desert-creatures, interpreting 'people' as in Prov. 30:25; but see 72:9 mg., and comment *ad loc.*). At the risk of over-pressing a poetic image, we may perhaps see a reference to the wealth which the Israelites brought away with them from Egypt; 'thus they despoiled the Egyptians' (Exod. 12:35f.). The mention of *food* corresponds to the metaphor of Egypt as a carcass, not necessarily to the literal provision it yielded.

16, 17. Now the thought takes wings, to God as Creator, not only as Redeemer. It is tempting to read a parable in the phrase, *thine also the night*; likewise in the final word, *and winter*; but the psalmist gives no sign of speaking figuratively. Nevertheless he is claiming the whole created order, with all its contrasts, powers and changes, for God. In the psalm's context of suffering, it forestalls our hasty conclusions in the same way as the closing chapters of Job, by looking beyond the immediate problem to the total scene which God coordinates in wisdom.

74:18–23. *The continuing ordeal*

The suffering remains, and the psalm ends with a stream of urgent

16. MT reads *l'ām lēšiyīm*; RSV simply omits the former word (cf. mg.); Wellhausen suggested *la'as*, a conjectured synonym for food: NEB ('sharks') retains the consonants but reads as *l'amlēšē yām*, from a conjectured derivative of the root *mlš*, 'be smooth'. See K-B, s.v. **amlāš*.

prayers. But, perhaps significantly, the questions of verses 1–11 ('Why?' 'How long?' 'Why?') have ceased.

Some inconspicuous, probably unconscious, features of the prayer are instructive. Its first request, as in the Lord's prayer, is for God's good *name* (18); and this concern shows through again in 21. Another fingerprint is the frequent use of '*thy*', which relates friend and foe to God, not only to one another (see further on 72:1–4). And the appeal to God's *covenant* gives a steadying foothold where all else is in movement.

A few further details call for comment:

18. *Impious*, here and in verse 22, is *nābāl*, the word for the blasphemous and overbearing fool who meets us in 14:1, where see comment.

19. *The soul of thy dove* was read by the ancient versions as 'the soul that confesses thee' (NEB), a difference of one letter (*d* for *r*, easily confused in Hebrew). But 'dove', a term of tender affection (e.g. Song 6:9), makes equally good sense.

20. This verse is particularly haunting in its AV form, where *the land* is translated 'the earth', and *violence* 'cruelty'. The RSV is more accurate, since the setting of the psalm is local,¹⁷ and the meaning of the final word is not as specialized as our word 'cruelty'. But when the details are filled in, as in Lamentations 5:11 ff. ('Women are ravished . . . Princes are hung up by their hands . . .'), or as in man's continuing record, 'cruelty' is not too strong a word, nor 'the earth' too wide a scene.

Psalm 75. Disposer supreme

Joy in God's great reversals, his 'putting down one and lifting up another' (7), is a note which this psalm shares especially with the *Magnificat* and the Song of Hannah. It is happily placed to follow the plea of 74:22f. that God will bring his case to court. Here he is no reluctant plaintiff but the Judge: the case will open when he chooses (2), and be settled without compromise.

17. NEB widens it in this verse by revocalizing *bērit*, 'covenant', as *bēriyyōt*, 'creatures', a word found only in Num. 16:30 (singular); a gratuitous and unconvincing alteration.

Title

On *the choirmaster* and *Do Not Destroy*, see Introduction, pp. 55, 58.
On *Asaph*, see p. 50.

75:1. The wondrous story

Here are the *thanks* that are prompted by memory, and memory by 'recital'; that is, by a re-telling of the great things God has done (cf. 78:4; Deut. 31:10ff.). This is still an indispensable part of worship: cf. 1 Corinthians 11:23–26.

On the expression, *wondrous deeds*, see on 9:1. In this line then RSV follows the ancient versions,¹⁸ whereas NEB keeps closer to the existing Hebrew with 'thy name is brought very near to us in the story of thy wonderful deeds'.¹⁹ God's *name* is part of his self-giving: a revelation of who he is (Exod. 34:5ff., 14) and an invitation to call upon him (Acts 2:21). Brought 'near' in all his acts, it was brought right among us in Christ (John 17:6, 26).

75:2–5. Word from the Judge

Now (perhaps initially through a prophet) the voice of God breaks in, with the same massive authority as in 60:6–8: first to reassure (2f.) and then to warn (4f.).

2. *The set time* is an important word in the Old Testament account of God's ordering of the world. It is used for the 'seasons' of the year, with their steady rhythm (Gen. 1:14), for the 'appointed feasts' (Lev. 23:2)²⁰ which gave the annual pattern of worship (and, unknown to Israel, set the times when Christ would suffer, rise and send the Holy Spirit), and for the 'time, times and a half' which, unknown to us, mark the approaching end (Dan. 12:7). No word could better express his control, and no word better befits a judge than *equity*, its companion here.

18. E.g. *qārō' b-*, 'call on', where MT has *qārōb*, 'near (is)'.
19. Lit. 'thy name is near, thy wonders declare (it)'; cf. Exod. 9:16.

20. The same word also served for the 'appointed place' where God would meet his people (see on 74:8), and, rarely, for the 'assembly' itself (Num. 16:2). AV, PBV choose the latter meaning here, not very intelligibly. NEB is straightforward: 'I seize the appointed time'.

3. There is an almost panic-stricken glimpse of crumbling foundations in Psalm 11:3, with an answering reminder of the throne set in heaven. Here is the other aspect: God as the stabilizing strength within the structure. It can be spelt out in terms of ‘common grace’, his gift of wholesome influences and institutions which shore up even a godless society; but also more directly, by his holding all things in being (Acts 17:25), by his guiding hand on events and by his truth in certain men’s lives. Cf. the ‘he’ of Isaiah 33:6 and the ‘you’ of Isaiah 58:12.

4, 5. After the reassurance, the warning; for those who think themselves ‘pillars’ of society (3) may be only the pushers in the herd. NEB brings 5a to life, with ‘toss not your horns against high heaven’; but in 5b it unnecessarily follows LXX and Vulg, in finding a reference to God (‘arrogantly against your Creator’).²¹ The ‘insolent neck’ (RSV, as MT) is well suited to the figure of the tossing horns; it refuses the yoke, as the wicked refuse God.

75:6–8. *Vision of justice*

This is the responsive comment on God’s oracle, driving home two of its points in particular.

6, 7. The root word for *lifting up*, in both these verses, is picked up from God’s rebuke to the self-promoted (4, 5; this is the drawback of NEB’s vivid ‘toss not your horns’). In verse 6 the Hebrew nouns are less stereotyped than ours, and emphasize not the points of the compass but the element of inaccessibility (the place of going forth [of the sun], the place of evening, and the wilderness; and the latter is not the Negeb in the south, but any wilderness). In other words, search where you will, there is no other arbiter but God;²² therefore no worldly rank that is anything but provisional.

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21. For *ṣawwā’r*, ‘neck’, LXX and Vulg. may have read *šūr*, ‘Rock’, a difference of one consonant. But if so, the fact that they paraphrased it to ‘God’ is an admission of its slight awkwardness here. There is no need to alter MT (‘neck’).
22. In 6b, *ḥārīm*, ‘lifting up’ could alternatively be the noun ‘mountains’, which finds support in MT’s pointing of the previous word, yielding the phrase ‘wilderness of the mountains’ (cf. LXX, Vulg.). This underlies

8. Now God's pledge of ultimate action (2) is translated into a powerful vision. The figure of a *cup* of judgment meets us often elsewhere, and its final occurrence in Scripture presents it as retribution: in our phrase, a dose of one's own medicine; 'a double draught for her in the cup she mixed' (Rev. 18:6). Other passages give further play to the metaphor, picturing the recipients reeling, vomiting, crazed, prostrate (e.g. Isa. 51:17; Jer. 25:15f., 27f.). *Well mixed* is a reference to the spices which might be added for pungency; so NEB, 'hot with spice'.

75:9, 10. *Endless glory*

Rejoice is what LXX read; a difference of one letter from 'declare'. But the latter is the text we have, and matches the concern of the second line to give God the glory.

With verse 10 the theme of tossing horns and of true exaltation returns. Strictly, the one who will act is not 'he' (RSV) but 'I'. This may mean that the worshipper pledges himself to fight God's battles; but in view of the emphasis on the one Judge, more probably this echoes God's own proclamation of 4 and 5. So patience and suffering are not the end of the story: there will be a time for power without aggression, and glory without pride.

Psalm 76. *Lion of Judah*

There is a strong simplicity in the pattern of this psalm, which first looks back to a great deliverance (1-6), and then on to a greater judgment (7-12). The former is local and defensive, with Zion, God's earthly base and residence, under concerted attack; the latter half is cosmic, with heaven as God's seat, the world his kingdom, and all who suffer injustice his concern. So it is to some extent a miniature of the biblical story itself, from the circumscribed and fiercely fought beginnings to the end-time when, through all man's opposition, God's salvation and judgment will have reached their climax and full spread.

JB, RP and Gelineau, but it involves some small adjustments to make sense. RSV, NEB are preferable.

Title

On *the choirmaster* and *Asaph*, see Introduction, pp. 55, 50. On *A Song*, see p. 52.

76:1–3. God in his stronghold

Nothing could be narrower or more provincial than this beginning, taken as a statement of *God's* glory; but as the glory of Israel nothing could be richer or more fruitful for the world. The fact that in Judah God was *known* has become the blessing of all men, 'for salvation is from the Jews' (note the connection of this with the claim that 'we worship what we know', in John 4:22). Likewise for the church, these are still the priorities: that God be *known* (Phil. 3:10) in it, and his *name* held *great* (John 12:27f.).

2. Not his '*abode*' but his '*covert*' or '*lair*'²³ is the bold expression here, with its tacit comparison of the Lord to a lion (cf. Jer. 25:38, and see on Ps. 27:5, with the references there; also, for his defence of Jerusalem, Isa. 31:4). *Salem* is a shorter form of Jerusalem (cf. Gen. 14:18; Heb. 7:2); its alternative name of *Zion* was that of the hilltop and fortress which David captured. On God's choice of this city, a major theme in the Psalms, see on 46:4; 68:15–18; 87.

3. The *flashing arrows* are literally 'thunderbolts (cf. 78:48) of the bow'. The great deliverance will be enlarged upon in the next section.

76:4–6. The helpless aggressor

The occasion that springs to mind here is the elimination of Sennacherib's army overnight by the angel of the Lord (Isa. 37:36). The LXX brings in an allusion to it in its version of the title, and no event could be more strongly suggested than this by verses 5f. While Psalms 46–48 sing of Zion's salvation in figurative terms, as if to avoid confining it to any one occasion, this language seems designed to recall a particular night in history,²⁴ as if to remind us that

23. The longer form of this word is used for a man-made shelter or hut (cf. 'tent', NEB, JB, here); but the word used here denotes a natural thicket, the latter as impenetrable as the former is flimsy.

24. On the theory that such references arise from a cultic drama, see Introduction, pp. 21ff.

miracles are actual and datable, not picturesque statements of general truths.

4. *The everlasting mountains* is a reading borrowed from the LXX, probably rightly, in place of the somewhat obscure 'mountains of prey' (AV, RV).²⁵ Various other suggestions have been made (e.g. JB, TEV), but have no textual evidence to support them.

5. The phrase, *were unable to use their hands* (lit. 'did not find their hands') is put better by NEB: 'cannot lift a hand'. So God fulfilled his promise: 'He shall not come into this city, or shoot an arrow there ...' (Isa. 37:33). There is a series of such miraculous restraints on the enemy, within Scripture and without, in the history of God's church; but not an unbroken series (as Pss 74 and 44, to look no further, make clear enough). What one's expectation of miracles should be, has never been better put than by the three friends in Daniel 3:17f.

76:7-9. *God rises for judgment*

The action is no longer localized, or past, or defensive. God is foreseen striking the final blow against evil everywhere, as Judge; and, in the concluding stanza, receiving the world's homage, as its King.

7. *Who can stand ...?* is echoed (perhaps quoted) as the climax of the judgment vision of Revelation 6:12-17, which is a most powerful exposition of this verse.

8. This is the end-time, and the vision of it is so certain as to be presented to us as past and complete. (This happens often enough in the Prophets to have given rise to the term 'the prophetic perfect', often translated by the future.²⁶) The picture of the earth hushed into

25. This may be a compressed expression for the mountains which are the haunts of predators. Cf. note on verse 2. D. W. Thomas, however (*TRP ad loc.*), suggests that 'ad, 'for ever', may have been the original reading, but through its proximity to the root for 'spoil' (5a) a copyist mistook it for the other 'ad, a rare word meaning 'prey' (Gen. 49:27), and inserted the more usual word to clarify it. Such association of ideas is not unknown. Both words occur in Gen. 49:27.

26. An example from a well-known prophecy is Isa. 9:6 (5, Heb.), where the whole verse has the form of narrative, but is usually translated by a mixture of perfects and futures.

silence is akin to that of verses 5f., which like all God's judgments gives a foretaste of his final day. God is now seen, however, not entrenched in Zion but enthroned in heaven.

9. Note the purpose of *judgment*, which is *to save* those who commit their cause to God. This is the chief aspect of justice in the Psalms, where the plight of those who either cannot or will not hit back at the ruthless is a constant concern. Here the victims are the latter sort: the 'humble' (NEB, JB) or 'meek' (AV, RV) rather than simply the 'oppressed'. See the comments on the word '*anām*' at 18:27 (the second word discussed there). Note, too, the breadth of God's care: his little kingdom of verses 1–3 was his bridgehead, never his boundary. This was as wide as *the earth*, and his objective the salvation of '*all* (9b) poor men and humble'.

76:10–12. *The rebels submit*

Verse 10, one of the most striking sayings in the Psalter, creates some problems of detail by its very boldness. But most of our translations agree on the first line, well conveyed by Coverdale in 'The fierceness of man shall turn to thy praise'. This statement of God's providential control (to have its supreme demonstration at Calvary, cf. Acts 2:23) is the main thrust of the verse. The familiar sequel, 'the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain' (AV, cf. PBV), distorts the meaning of the verb, which is always used in the Old Testament to mean 'gird' or 'gird on', not 'bind' in the sense of 'restrict'. The picture then is probably like that of Isaiah 59:17, where the Lord 'wrapped himself in fury as a mantle',²⁷ and it is a moot point whether *the residue of wrath* is thought of as man's or God's. If it is the latter, it implies that whatever is lacking in the judgment man brings on himself (thereby vindicating God's name), the wrath of God will supply when he arises to judge the world.

27. LXX, however, has 'keep festival' (Heb. *hgg*) instead of 'gird' (*hgr*), which raises the further question whether 'the residue' should mean 'the survivors' (as it often does). Hence TEV, 'those who survive the wars will keep your festivals'. NEB adopts a similar starting-point, but also revocalizes 'man' in the first line and 'wrath' in the second, to read 'Edom' and 'Hamath' respectively (kingdoms to the south and north of Israel).