

# A National Lament after Defeat in Battle (44:1-27)

## Bibliography

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## Translation

- <sup>1</sup> For the musical director. For the sons of Korah. A *Maskil*.
- <sup>2(1)</sup> O God, we have heard with our ears—  
our fathers told us!—  
the deed you did in their days,  
in the days of old. (3+2)
- <sup>3(2)</sup> By your hand,<sup>a</sup> you dispossessed nations, but  
planted them;<sup>b</sup>  
you crushed peoples, but set them free. (4+3)
- <sup>4(3)</sup> For they did not take possession of the land by  
their sword,  
and their arm did not bring them victory;  
but it was your right hand and your arm,  
and the light of your countenance,  
for you took pleasure in them. (4+3)
- <sup>5(4)</sup> You are my king and <sup>a</sup> my God,<sup>b</sup>  
the one who commanded <sup>c</sup> Jacob's victory. (3+3)
- <sup>6(5)</sup> With you, we push back our enemies;  
in your name, we trample our foes. (3+3)
- <sup>7(6)</sup> For I will not trust in my bow,  
and my sword will not give me victory. (4?+3)
- <sup>8(7)</sup> But you have given us victory over our enemies  
and have put to shame those who hate us. (3+2)
- <sup>9(8)</sup> In God we boasted all day long  
and we shall praise your name for ever. SELAH. (3+3)
- <sup>10(9)</sup> But now you have spurned and humiliated us  
and do not go forth with our armies. (3+3)
- <sup>11(10)</sup> You make us retreat from an enemy,  
and those who hate us have plundered at will.<sup>a</sup> (3+3)
- <sup>12(11)</sup> You hand us over like sheep for food  
and have scattered us among the nations. (3+2)
- <sup>13(12)</sup> You sell your people cheaply  
and have not profited from the price of their sale. (3+2?)
- <sup>14(13)</sup> You make us a reproach to our neighbors,  
an object of mockery and derision to those around us. (3+3)

- <sup>15(14)</sup> You make us a by-word among the nations,  
an object of sorrow <sup>a</sup> among the peoples. (3+3)
- <sup>16(15)</sup> My ignominy is before me all day long,  
and shame has covered <sup>a</sup> my face, (3+3)
- <sup>17(16)</sup> because of the voice of the reproacher and reviler,  
because of the enemy and the avenger. (3+3)
- <sup>18(17)</sup> All this happened to us, but we did not forget you  
and we did not act deceitfully in covenant with you. (4+3)
- <sup>19(18)</sup> Our heart did not turn back  
nor did our foot <sup>a</sup> turn aside from your path. (4+4)
- <sup>20(19)</sup> But you crushed us in a place of jackals  
and covered us with deathly darkness. (3+3)
- <sup>21(20)</sup> If we had forgotten our God's name  
and spread our hands in prayer to a foreign god,  
<sup>22(21)</sup> would not God discover this, (4+4)
- for he knows the heart's secrets? (3+3)
- <sup>23(22)</sup> Yet on account of you, we have been slain all day long;  
we have been reckoned as sheep for slaughter. (4+3)
- <sup>24(23)</sup> Wake up! Why do you sleep, O Lord?  
Awake! don't reject us for ever. (3+3)
- <sup>25(24)</sup> Why do you hide your face  
and forget our affliction and oppression? (3+3)
- <sup>26(25)</sup> For we <sup>a</sup> have been prostrated in the dust;  
our belly clings to the earth. (3+3)
- <sup>27(26)</sup> Arise! Help us!  
And redeem us because of your lovingkindness. (3+3)

## Notes

- 3.a. Reading יָדָבְרָה, and omitting אָתָּה (with G and S).  
3.b. The antecedent of "them" is the "fathers" referred to in v. 2.  
5.a. The conjunction is read, after G.  
5.b. Reading אֶלֶּי (with suffix); cf. G. On the final *mem*, see note c.  
5.c. מְצֹוֹחַ (participle) is read (cf. G and S), the *mem* being provided from the previous word (note b).  
11.a. Literally, "for themselves."  
15.a. Literally, "a shaking of the head."  
16.a. Reading כִּסְתֹוֹתָ, with Kraus, *Psalmen 1-59*, 479-80.  
19.a. The singular form is read, אֶשְׁרֶנּוּ, with several Heb. mss.  
26.a. Literally, "our soul."

## Form/Structure/Setting

Psalm 44 is a *national* (or communal) *lament*, reflecting the religious activity of the community following a military disaster of national proportions. The language alternates between the first person singular ("I, my, me") and the first person plural ("we, us"), and though the alternation may be merely a literary convention, it is more likely to reflect alternation of speakers. The king, who was commander-in-chief of the armed forces, speaks in the first

person singular; the people (whether the army or a national congregation) speak the words in the plural.

The overall structure of the psalm falls into three parts, and the alternation with respect to speakers pervades the whole.

1. God's past acts as basis for current confidence (44:2-9)
  - a. *People*: God's acts in the past (vv 2-4)
  - b. *King*: the appropriation of the past (v 5)
  - c. *People*: the normal grounds of confidence (v 6)
  - d. *King*: declaration of trust (v 7)
  - e. *People*: declaration of confidence (vv 8-9)
2. The Lament (44:10-23)
  - a. *People*: lament of the present crisis (vv 10-15)
  - b. *King*: declaration of shame (vv 16-17)
  - c. *People*: declaration of innocence (vv 18-23)
3. Concluding prayer (44:24-27)  
*King and people* pray for deliverance and help.

The two principal sections of the psalm appear to have an inner chiasmic structure with respect to speakers, which is resolved finally in the concluding prayer. One may suppose that the psalm was employed in an antiphonal fashion.

The setting in which the psalm was used is not known with certainty. It is unlikely that the psalm was used merely with the threat of disaster facing the nation. Thus 2 Chr 20:4-13 (cited by Kraus, *Psalmen 1-59*, 480, and Anderson, *Psalms I*, 336), in which Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast in Judah in view of the impending military attack by Moab and Ammon, does not provide in principle an appropriate type of setting for Ps 44. The lament of this psalm presupposes the battle has already been lost (vv 10-11), prisoners have been taken and made slaves (v 13), and the army has been decimated in a long day of slaughter (v 23). The lament, then, was used following a defeat, not merely when disaster threatened. And though it is possible to suppose a national setting in the temple in Jerusalem, it is more likely that one should think of the lament being used at the end of the day of battle and defeat. Thus Ps 44 should be seen as the precise counterpart of the *victory hymn* (e.g. Judg 5); just as the latter was employed after battle to celebrate victory, so this psalm was used to lament defeat.

The information contained within the psalm is not sufficiently precise to allow it to be linked to any particular occasion or military defeat, though there have been numerous attempts to do so. The psalm has been linked to disasters in the Maccabean period, the Persian period, and to various periods within the history of the Hebrew monarchy. The recent attempt by Parker (*JQR* 68 [1978] 152-68) to link the psalm to the crushing of the Phoenician Revolt of 345-44 B.C. by Antiochus III Ochus, unconsciously demonstrates the impossibility of finding hard evidence to date the psalm. On the other hand, it is likely that in the psalm's history in Hebrew life and worship, it was used in a variety of situations from the time of the monarchy, through the Maccabean period, and beyond (see further W. Beyerlin, art. cit.). All that can be reasonably proposed is that the psalm's origins are to be found

at some point in the history of the (preexilic) monarchy, when the king continued to function as the commander of Israel's armies.

### Comment

*Title* (44:1). On the meaning of *Maskil*, see note a at Ps 32:1. On psalms associated with the Sons of Korah, see THE COMPILATION OF THE PSALTER in the INTRODUCTION.

*God's past acts as a basis for current confidence* (44:2-9). The relatively cheerful and positive note with which the psalm begins is deceptive, for it merely sets the stage for the terrible lament which is to follow. Everything they had learned about the past should have led them to hope for victory that day, but such had not been the case, so there is a certain irony in the opening words. The people knew the great deeds God had done in the past; they had learned of them as children from their fathers (v 2). Indeed, the very existence of their state was a direct consequence of God's actions in the past, conquering foreign enemies and establishing their ancestors in the land (v 3). Those past achievements had not been human achievements; they had been a direct consequence of God's participation in the history of his chosen people (v 4). And it was the essence of the Hebrew faith that the past could always be appropriated for the present, that the people in faith could look in the present moment for the continuation of those mighty acts of God in the past which had been so pregnant with future implications. Hence the king affirms his faith in that same God, who in the past had given *Jacob* (viz. Israel) victory (v 5).

In v 6, the people affirm what should have been the present reality, in continuity with the past, namely the defeat of enemies. And the king's declaration of v 7 indicates that his theology was right! He knew that he would not win victory merely by virtue of his prowess as a warrior, but only through the strength that God could give (cf. Ps 20:8 [7]; Ps 33:16). And so the people join in again, affirming that God alone can give victory and he alone deserves the praise and credit for victory (vv 8-9). If Ps 44 ended with v 9, it would be a marvelous *victory hymn*, but because it continues directly to lament, the puzzled and perplexed tone of the opening verses becomes clear. The opening verses set the stage for the striking contrast which now follows.

*The Lament* (44:10-23). The present reality is introduced by the words "but now" (v 10); now, for some reason beyond the comprehension of the people, things are not what they ought to be. God had not been with the army on the day of battle (v 10), and so there had been terrible defeat, some escaping, some being killed and some being taken captive and becoming, in effect, slaves. The defeat made Israel an object of pity and scorn in the eyes of other nations (vv 14-15). The nature of the defeat was particularly puzzling, for the words describing it are reminiscent of the curses of defeat that would come upon Israel if the nation was unfaithful to the covenant stipulations (e.g. Deut 28:15-69). And not only had the nation been humiliated in defeat, but so too had the king been covered with shame (vv 16-17); as the representative of God, he felt particularly humiliated by the defeat in which God should have been victor. As the representative of the people,

the weight of the defeat rested on his shoulders and he carried the awful burden.

The real sense of perplexity finally emerges explicitly in vv 18-23. If the king and the nation had failed miserably in their covenant obligations to God, then at least their defeat in battle would be explicable. But they had not been unfaithful; they had maintained their integrity in the covenant relationship (v 18) and they had honestly walked in the path God set before them (v 19). They had not broken the first commandment (v 21) or kept any secrets from God (v 22). According to their understanding of the covenant theology, God should have been with them and given them victory; instead he had crushed them (v 20) and permitted them to be slaughtered (v 23). The meaning of the expression "place of jackals" (v 20) is not entirely certain, but the parallelism with "deathly darkness" suggests the devastation of defeat; the battlefield, where defeat was experienced, had become like the lonely palaces of postwar Babylon, inhabited only by the scavenging jackals and hyenas (cf. Isa 13:21-22). On "deathly darkness" (תוֹמָלַצ), see the *Comment* on Ps 23:4.

*The concluding prayer* (44:24-27). Neither the king nor the people have any solution to the perplexing questions raised in the lament; they can only conclude with a prayer that God not reject them *forever* (v 24). The language of the prayer evokes again the military context of the lament; on the expressions "wake up" and "arise," in a military context, see further Judg 5:12 and Num 10:35. The prayer is for divine aid in crisis (vv 24, 27), for though the battle had been lost, the war continued; but the prayer is uttered in the same perplexity as the lament, the two questions "why?" (vv 24, 25) separating the two explicit parts of the prayer. The final word of the psalm, "lovingkindness" (v 27), raises again the grounds of the plea. Though the covenant, in which the people had been faithful (v 18), had become a mystery, still it was only in the covenant lovingkindness of God that there remained any hope of redemption.

### Explanation

In a sense, there is no simple explanation to the issues raised in Ps 44, any more than there is a simple explanation to the issues raised in the Book of Job. Indeed, from a certain perspective, Ps 44 may be perceived as a communal or national parallel to the more individual and international Book of Job. But whereas the Book of Job raises some of the fundamental perplexities of human existence for examination and reflection, Ps 44 raises them only in an agonizing *cri de couer* addressed to God. Job, before his crisis, had only "heard with his ears," but after the divine revelation, he could say: "now my eyes have seen you!" (Job 42:5). But the lamenters of Ps 44 could only say, "we have heard with our ears" (v 2); for them there was no vision of God, only a desperate prayer for help.

The problem in Ps 44 appears at first to be a problem of covenant theology. If king and people had been faithful to the covenant stipulations (vv 18-22), then why was God not faithful to his covenant commitment to provide

defense and deliverance? The root problem, in other words, is precisely the problem of the Book of Job, namely the problem of God. But while the psalmist neither elaborates on the problem nor points to a resolution in theology, he points nevertheless to a more existential resolution. It is to be found in the prayer with which the psalm concludes. At the rational level, it would seem rather futile to pray and to seek God's love, when the immediate experience suggested that God could not be relied on. Yet the prayer is rooted in a faith deeper than reason. The faith also went beyond theology, which implied that God's actions could always be anticipated, if not predicted, strictly in terms of the covenant theology; the faith recognized a mystery in God's ways, beyond both reason and theology, which made prayer worthwhile even in a time of crisis that was both military and theological in its proportions. And so ultimately, Ps 44 with its concluding prayer points in the same direction as the Book of Job, namely that there is an immense mystery in God and his ways, but one must continue to trust and to pray. The faith of the psalmist is not meek and acquiescent; his prayer follows a statement of downright insolence, in which he states that it was all God's fault that so many had been killed (v 23)! But the insolence is muted by the prayer; for if God would only arise, then the life of faith could return to some kind of fragile stability.

## A Royal Wedding Song (45:1-18)

### Bibliography

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### Translation

- <sup>1</sup> For the musical director. According to *Shoshannim*.<sup>a</sup> For the sons of Korah.<sup>b</sup> A *Maskil*.<sup>c</sup>  
A love song.
- <sup>2(1)</sup> A noble theme moves my heart; (4+4+4)  
I will recite my compositions concerning the king;  
my tongue is the pen of a skillful scribe.
- <sup>3(2)</sup> You are the most beautiful<sup>a</sup> of human beings, (3+3+4?)  
with your lips anointed with grace;  
so God has blessed you forever.
- <sup>4(3)</sup> Gird your sword upon your thigh, (3+3)  
your splendor and your majesty, O warrior!<sup>a</sup>