

Psalm 81: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Psalm 81, To the Choir Master, According to the Gittith, of Asaph. Sing aloud to guard our strength, shout for joy to the God of Jacob, raise a song, sound the tambourine, the sweet lyre with the harp, blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our feast day.

For it is a statute for Israel, a rule of the God of Jacob. He made it a decree in Joseph, when he went out over the land of Egypt. I hear a language I had not known, I relieved your shoulder of the burden, your hands were freed from the basket.

In distress you called, and I delivered you, I answered you in the secret place of thunder, I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Hear, O my people, while I admonish you, O Israel, if you would but listen to me, there shall be no strange God among you, you shall not bow down to a foreign God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it. But my people did not listen to my voice.

Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels. O that my people would listen to me! That Israel would walk in my ways!

[1 : 18] I would soon subdue their enemies, and turn my hand against their foes. Those who hate the Lord would cringe toward him, and their fate would last forever. But he would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.

Psalm 81 is a festal psalm, beginning with a summons to celebrate a feast. Like the psalm that precedes it, it seems to address the northern tribes of Israel in particular.

In verse 5 of Psalm 81, he made it a decree in Joseph when he went out over the land of Egypt. In Psalm 80 verses 1-2, After the summons to worship of the first five verses, there is a two-part speech, as Conrad Schaeffer highlights.

A call for Israel to hear lies at the heart of the two sections. In verse 8, Hear, O my people, while I admonish you. O Israel, if you would but listen to me. And in verse 13, O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways.

Both of the sections begin with hearing or listening to a voice, and end with a reference to the Lord's feeding and satisfying his people. Schaeffer writes, The celebration begins with gusto, with five invitations to worship.

[2 : 45] Sing aloud, shout for joy, raise a song, sound, and blow. And five musical ways to celebrate. Choral and instrumental. The song has a full orchestral accompaniment.

Strings, lyre and harp, percussion, tambourine, and wind instruments, trumpets. Many commentators suggest that the celebration in view is that of the Feast of Tabernacles.

Verses 4 and 5 claim that the feast in question finds its origin in the time of the Exodus. The new moon in view is likely that at the beginning of the seventh month, the chief festal month, on the Feast of Trumpets.

And the full moon is on the 15th of that month, at the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles, as we see in Leviticus chapter 23. Beth Tanner questions this identification, arguing that the association with the Exodus suggests that this was more likely to be the Passover, or the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

However, the Feast of Tabernacles is the mirror image of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It corresponds in the seventh month to the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the first. The explanation for the feast is found in Leviticus chapter 23, verses 41 to 43.

[3 : 52] The Feast of Tabernacles is associated with Succoth, the first place that Israel went to after leaving the land of Egypt.

The very same day as they baked unleavened bread. The Feast of Tabernacles was also a time when the law was read and the covenant renewed, which might provide some context for this

specific psalm.

The voice of God bursts in upon the ceremony at the end of verse 5 and in verse 6, recalling the events of the Exodus, which the festival celebrates. It is the beginning of a divine oracle.

God relieved Israel's distress in the slavery of Egypt. Israel called out to God in their suffering, and they were heard and answered by him in the secret place of thunder, which Alan Ross suggests might be an allusion to the pillar of cloud and fire that led them.

They were tested by God at the waters of Meribah, an incident that is usually described as Israel's testing of God, rather than the other way round, as here. One of the complicating features of this psalm is the change in person in verses 6, 7, 11, 12, 15 and 16.

[5 : 20] In referring to Israel, the text moves between him, you and they. Tanner writes, Hearing is a dominant note throughout the psalm, and perhaps especially here.

Hearing, of course, was central to the charge given to Israel, as we see in Deuteronomy chapter 6, verses 3 to 5. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. God pleads with his people to listen here, and alludes to the first two commandments of the law, in Exodus chapter 20, verses 2 to 5.

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.

[6 : 58] God heard the voice of Israel in its distress, and rescued them from the clutches of Pharaoh. When he calls them to hear him, he is calling them to hear the one who heard them.

The profound ungratefulness of the people is implied here. Pleading with Israel to hear, and alluding to the first two commandments, should also be recognized as a gesture towards the law more generally.

The first two commandments are the heading of the ten, and the entire body of the commandments. If they would only open their mouths, the Lord would graciously fill them, providing them with what they need, much as he did during their time in the wilderness, with the manna and the quail.

The reference here to the provision of food might also fit in with the significance of the feast of tabernacles as a harvest festival. In Israel's stubbornness, they refused to listen to the voice of God, or to submit to him.

They rejected him, so he surrendered them to their own stubborn ways, to their own destruction.

God laments that they refused to listen. If they would only listen and turn to him, he would subdue their enemies and drive back those who prey upon them.

[8 : 04] Their foes would be the Lord's foes, and their fate would be fixed. In contrast to them, Israel would be bound to flee from the Lord's hand, enjoying the good gifts of God's land in faithful enjoyment of his presence and his provision.

A question to consider. Set at the time of a feast, Psalm 81 presents Israel with their sin, and challenges them to hear the voice of the Lord, to turn, and to know the Lord's blessing.

What are some of the ways in which Israel's festivals were calculated to inspire repentance and recommitment on the part of the nation?