

Psalm 144: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Psalm 144 of David Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle. He is my steadfast love and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield and he in whom I take refuge, who subdues peoples under me.

O Lord, what is man that you regard him, or the son of man that you think of him? Man is like a breath, his days are like a passing shadow. Bow your heavens, O Lord, and come down. Touch the mountains so that they smoke. Flash forth the lightning and scatter them. Send out your arrows and rout them. Stretch out your hand from on high. Rescue me and deliver me from the many waters, from the hand of foreigners, whose mouths speak lies and whose right hand is a right hand of falsehood.

I will sing a new song to you, O God. Upon a ten-stringed harp I will play to you, who gives victory to kings, who rescues David his servant from the cruel sword.

Rescue me and deliver me from the hand of foreigners, whose mouths speak lies and whose right hand is a right hand of falsehood. May our sons in their youth be like plants full-grown, our daughters like corner pillars cut for the structure of a palace.

[1 : 21] May our granaries be full, providing all kinds of produce. May our sheep bring forth thousands and ten thousands in our fields. May our cattle be heavy with young, suffering no mishap or failure in bearing.

May there be no cry of distress in our streets. Blessed are the people to whom such blessings fall. Blessed are the people whose God is the Lord. Psalm 144 is a psalm attributed to David that draws heavily upon Davidic material elsewhere in the Psalter, perhaps most especially Psalm 18.

This drawing from elsewhere in the Psalter, particularly Psalm 18, can be seen in the opening verses. For instance, Psalm 18 verse 34 and 47 are both recalled here.

He trains my hands for war so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze, and the God who gave me vengeance and subdued peoples under me. James Mays writes, The correspondents of Psalm 144 to Psalm 18 are 144 verse 1 to 18 verse 1 and 34, 144 verse 2 to 18 verse 2 and 47, 144 verse 5 to 18 verse 9, 144 verse 6 to 18 verse 14, and 144 verse 7 to 18 verse 16, 44 and 45.

His servant David, His servant David, 144 verse 10, may reflect the superscription of Psalm 18. James Mays suggests that we should read this psalm as an example of using existing psalms to compose new ones.

[3 : 13] It's a remixing of existing material for new situations, taking up the phrases and the imagery of older psalms associated with David, and applying them to a new situation.

The psalmist speaks of the Lord as his rock, the one who protects him from assaults, but also is the one who trains his hands for war, who equips, empowers, and guides him in the art of war.

The Lord also is the one who subdues peoples under him, who makes his efforts successful. In Psalm 8 verses 3 to 4, the psalmist said, When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?

In Job chapter 7 verses 17 to 18, What is man that you make so much of him, and that you have set your heart on him, visit him every morning, and test him every moment?

In verse 3 here, we have a similar expression, but with a different shade of meaning. In Psalm 8, it was the contrast between man and the magnitude of the heavens that made the psalmist wonder at the fact that the Lord paid attention to man.

[4 : 19] In Job, it was the great juxtaposition between God's greatness and humanity's weakness and frailty and smallness that raised the question of how God could have meaningful dealings with humankind to begin with.

Here, however, it's the ephemerality of man's life in comparison to God's eternity that really stands out to the psalmist. Man is like a breath. His days are like a passing shadow.

This is similar to imagery that we find explored in the book of Ecclesiastes. Psalm 18 spoke of the theophanic deliverance of the Lord as a past event, but here the psalmist appeals on the basis of the Lord's praiseworthiness that he would act and provide such deliverance in his situation.

In verses 7 to 8, we see an expression that will be repeated again in verse 11. The psalmist asks for deliverance from the hand of foreigners whose mouths speak lies and whose right hand is a right hand of falsehood.

What seems to be in view here is a broken oath or treaty on the part of the foreigners. The right hand of falsehood is either the right hand raised in a false oath or the right hand shaken in a false friendship.

[5 : 26] After such a theophanic deliverance, which might recall events such as the deliverance of the Red Sea, the psalmist promises to sing a new song to the Lord, taking up the language of Psalm 33, verses 2 to 3.

Here we might recall the song of Moses at the Red Sea. Verse 11 returns to the expression of verses 7 and 8. The psalmist appeals to the Lord to be delivered from the treacherous foreigner. The psalm ends in verses 12 to 15 with a request for blessing. It asks for the blessing upon the household, upon sons, and upon daughters. The sons compared to sturdy plants, and the daughters to attractive corner pillars.

From the blessing upon the members of the household, the psalmist looks out to the possessions, to granaries, to sheep, and to cattle. The final verse of the psalm traces everything back to its source.

The people who enjoy such good things are blessed, and the ultimate source of such blessings is the Lord. Ultimately, it is in relationship to the Lord that Israel knows its blessing.

[6 : 27] Blessed are the people whose God is the Lord. A question to consider. Comparing the verses of Psalm 18 in their original context with the way that the psalmist has re-situated them here, what contrasts emerge?