

Psalm 129: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Psalm 129, A Song of Ascents Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth. Let Israel now say, Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth.

Yet they have not prevailed against me. The plowers ploughed upon my back. They made long their furrows. The Lord is righteous. He has cut the cords of the wicked.

May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward. Let them be like the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up, with which the reaper does not fill his hand, nor the binder of sheaves his arms.

Nor do those who pass by say, The blessing of the Lord be upon you. We bless you in the name of the Lord. Psalm 129 personifies Israel.

Within it, a likely post-exilic Israel reflects upon its experience from its youngest days. It begins with what some have called an instance of staircase parallelism.

[0 : 58] Two successive lines begin with the words, Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth. The effect of this is a rhetorical heightening of suspense as you move into the body of the psalm.

Here Israel speaks as an individual looking back upon his life of hardship. He's faced a great many enemies. The Amalekites, the Midianites, the Moabites, the Philistines, the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Babylonians.

All of these enemies have afflicted Israel, but they have not prevailed. Israel is described as if it were a field that is ploughed by its enemies. In Micah chapter 3 verse 12 we find similar imagery. Therefore because of you Zion shall be ploughed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height. Here we also have the introduction of an agricultural metaphor.

The enemies of Israel are ploughing like farmers preparing to sow. The ploughers never prevailed, however, because the Lord, being righteous and faithful to his people, cut the cords of the wicked.

[2 : 00] On numerous occasions he delivered his people from the hand of their oppressors and adversaries. As this personified Israel looks back upon his experience, he can take comfort and assurance in the present.

Much as the Lord had frustrated the schemes of his enemies in the past, so he calls for the Lord to frustrate those who oppose Zion in the present. Here he merges botanical and agricultural imagery. The roofs of houses in Israel would often be made of soil. Grasses might start to grow there, but they would not be able to put down any deep roots, and as a result they would be withered and stunted.

The psalmist imagines a situation in which reapers might come to the roofs of houses, looking for grains to reap. However, nothing growing on the roof of such a house would be worthy of harvesting.

Similar imagery is employed in Isaiah chapter 37 verses 26 to 27. Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what I now bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins, while their inhabitants, shorn of strength, are dismayed and confounded, and have become like plants of the field, like tender grass, like grass on the housetops, blighted before it is grown.

[3 : 13] The psalm ends with a curse which is essentially a negated blessing. Nor do those who pass by say, The blessing of the Lord be upon you. We bless you in the name of the Lord. It is possible that this is a blessing and an answering response.

We see something like this in Ruth chapter 2 verse 4, which suggests that it would be a blessing given around the time of harvest. And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem, and he said to the reapers, The Lord be with you.

And they answered, The Lord bless you. Read in its immediate context, Psalm 129 comes after a psalm that speaks about fruitfulness and blessing. In verses 1 to 4 of Psalm 128, Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways.

You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands. You shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house. Your children will be like olive shoots around your table.

Behold, thus shall the man be blessed, who fears the Lord. In contrast to the fruitfulness of the righteous, the wicked, though they have tried to plough the back of Israel in persecution, and have tried to grow on the rooftops, are frustrated in their growth.

[4 : 24] The contrast might remind us of the very beginning of the book of Psalms. In verses 3 to 4 of Psalm 1, He is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. A question to consider.

In Psalm 129, the psalmist finds reassurance in reflecting upon the continuity that he and the people of his day have with Israel throughout its history.

Israel has suffered many forms of persecution and oppression, but the Lord has delivered and preserved them through all. How might we learn from and follow the psalmist's example in our own prayers and thinking?