

26. Psalms 78-80

Reflecting on Psalm 78 in Jesus' Company



Albrecht Alt: Jude mit Torah

The psalmist is addressing his faith-community in Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel has been destroyed (721BC), because they ‘**broke the covenant, refused to obey God’s law and forgot God’s wonderful deeds**’ (verses 10-11). He does not want this to happen to Judah. The psalmist begins by insisting on the importance of handing on the traditions that remind us of ‘**the glorious deeds of God**’ (verse 4).

¹Listen, O my people, to my teaching; attend to the words I speak.

²I speak of what we have heard from of old,

³what we have known from our ancestors.

⁴We must not keep it from our children;

we must tell the coming generation of the glorious deeds of GOD.

**⁵GOD established a law in Israel and commanded our ancestors
to make it known to their children,**

**⁶so that future generations would know it,
and grow up to teach it to their young.**

The psalmist insists:

⁷We are to place our hope in God,
and never forget what God has done.
We must keep God's commandments.

He warns:

⁸We must not follow the example of our ancestors.
They were stubborn and rebellious,
fickle and unfaithful to God.

Closer to home, they must not behave like the northern kingdom.

⁹We should not follow the example of the people of Ephraim.
Their archers abandoned the field on the day of battle.
¹⁰They broke the covenant, refusing to obey God's law.
¹¹They forgot God's wonderful deeds.

He reminds them of the wonderful things God did for their ancestors in Egypt, at the Red Sea and in the desert.

¹²Our ancestors witnessed what God did in the land of Egypt,
¹³how the sea was divided for their escape,
and the waters were raised up like a wall. [Exodus 14:22]

¹⁴By day God led them with a cloud, by night with a glowing fire.
¹⁵God split rocks open in the wilderness, to quench their thirst.
¹⁶Streams gushed forth, flowing like a river. [Exodus 17]

Expanding on verse 8, he reminds them that, in spite of God's wonderful care of them, their ancestors rebelled against God.

¹⁷ Yet they continued to rebel.

¹⁸ Wilfully they put God to the test,
by demanding the food they craved. [Numbers 11:4-6]

¹⁹ They complained, 'Is it possible for God
to spread a table in the wilderness?'

²⁰ It was God who struck the rock and caused water to flow.
Yet they dared to ask, 'What about bread and meat?'

²¹ Hearing this, GOD was filled with rage;

God's anger flared against Israel,

²² because they had no faith in God.

They did not trust God's power to save.

God was 'filled with rage.' We must remember that the psalmist, in keeping with the mentality of the whole of the Hebrew Bible, thought of God controlling everything that happens. When terrible things happen (like the destruction of the northern kingdom), God must have planned it, and since God is just, it must be a just punishment, and reveal God's anger.

This contradicts all that Jesus revealed about God whose only response is Love. It is we human beings who are responsible for the consequences of our sin, not God. As we read these verses (and the subsequent ones that picture God as an angry Warrior Warlord), we should listen to Jesus as he says: 'It was said to you, but I say' (Matthew 5:43-44).

The response of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son is God's response to sin.

The psalmist reminds them of God's astonishing patience and loving care.

²³In spite of this, God commanded the skies,
and opened the doors of heaven,

²⁴raining down manna for them to eat,
giving them bread from heaven.

²⁵Mortal human beings ate the bread of angels.
God sent them food in abundance. [Exodus 16]

²⁶A wind blew from heaven, scattering meat like driven dust.

²⁷God gave them winged birds, as many as the sands of the sea.

²⁸They fell in the middle of the camp, all around the tents.

²⁹The people ate and were satisfied,
for God gave them what they craved.

The psalmist sees God running out of patience and punishing their ancestors to cause them to change their ways. Any signs of repentance were insincere: ‘**their heart was not steadfast towards God; they were not true to the covenant**’ (verse 37). They kept on sinning, forcing God to punish them. He reminds them of what happened when ‘**God’s anger flared against Israel**’ (verse 21).

³⁰But before they had satisfied their craving,
while the food was still in their mouths,
³¹God slew the strongest among them,
struck down the flower of Israel.

³²Despite this they kept on sinning,
blind to God’s wonderful deeds.

³³So God cut their lives short;
their days ended like a breath.

³⁴Surely now they would begin to pray.

Surely now they would repent and seek God in earnest.

³⁵They would remember that God is their rock,
the Most High God is their redeemer.

³⁶They spoke fine words to God,
but their lives belied their words.

³⁷Their hearts were not steadfast toward God.
They were not true to the covenant.

The psalmist reminds them of God's amazing compassion and readiness to forgive.

³⁸Yet God, who is full of compassion,
forgave their sin, and they were spared.

³⁹Again and again God did not give way to wrath,
remembering that they were but flesh,
no more than a breath of air that passes, never to return.

He speaks again of the rebellion of their ancestors, who failed to remember all that God had done for them. Hence the psalmist's determination to see that his contemporaries do not forget, and make sure they hand the memory on to their children (verses 1-6).

4^oHow often they rebelled in the wilderness,
and caused God pain in the desert! [Numbers 16:41; 20:24]

4¹They tested God again and again,
and provoked the Holy One of Israel.

4²They did not remember God's deeds:
when God redeemed them from the foe.

He recalls the plagues of Egypt, God's glorious deeds for his chosen people, revealing God 'raging with fury' (verse 49) against those who were oppressing Israel

43God displayed signs in Egypt,
and worked miracles in the fields of Zoan: {Exodus 7-12}
44turning rivers to blood,
so that the Egyptians could not drink of their streams;
45sending among them swarms of flies, and frogs to molest them;
46giving their crops to the caterpillar,
and the fruit of their labour to the locust;
47destroyed their vines by hail, and their sycamores by frost;
48hurling down hail on their cattle, and lightning bolts on their flocks.
49Seething, raging with fury, God let loose strife and destruction.
50These were messengers of doom,
for they were not spared even from death.
God abandoned them to the plague.
51and slew all the firstborn in Egypt.

The psalmist reminds his people that, in spite of their ancestors' repeated infidelity, God remained faithful, and brought them into the Promised land. The picture painted by the psalmist is traditional. It is important to know that archeology has established that Israel was formed in Canaan not by mass ethnic cleansing, but by the conversion of the inhabitants of the highlands to GOD.

⁵²Then God led his people in safety,
guiding them through the wilderness like a flock.

⁵³They were not afraid,
for the sea had overwhelmed their enemies. [Exodus 15:5, 10]

⁵⁴God led them to the holy land,
to the mountain won by God's arm. [Exodus 19]

⁵⁵God dislodged the nations, giving Israel their land,
settling the tribes in their tents.

The ancestors continued to be unfaithful.

⁵⁶Still they rebelled against the Most High,
testing their God, refusing to obey.

⁵⁷They turned away and were faithless like their ancestors,
like a bow on which the archer cannot rely.

⁵⁸They built shrines in high places,
and worshipped images they had carved. [Judges 10:6-7]

The psalmist recalls the destruction of the temple at Shiloh in the northern kingdom (see 1 Samuel 4 and Jeremiah 7:14).

⁵⁹God saw and was enraged, and utterly rejected Israel.

⁶⁰God deserted the shrine in Shiloh,
and no longer dwelt with the people.

⁶¹God abandoned the ark,
letting it fall into the hands of the enemy.

The destruction of Shiloh prepared the way for God's rejection of Israel, with the capture of Samaria in 721BC.

⁶²Stirred with anger, God condemned Israel to the sword.

⁶³Fire devoured their young men.

There were no marriage songs for the maidens.

⁶⁴Their priests fell by the sword,

and their widows made no lamentation.

⁶⁵It was as though God* awoke from sleep,
shouting like a warrior affected by wine.

⁶⁶God attacked them like foes, heaping shame upon them.

⁶⁷God rejected Joseph, and turned his gaze from Ephraim.

God rejected Israel (Joseph). God has 'chosen the tribe of Judah', and 'looked with love on Mount Zion' where God has chosen to dwell in the sanctuary. The psalmist wants Judah to learn from what happened to their ancient ancestors and what has happened to Israel.

⁶⁸choosing the tribe of Judah, looking with love on Mount Zion.

⁶⁹There God built his sanctuary, exalted like the heavens,
securely established like the earth.

⁷⁰God chose David as servant,
and called him from tending the flocks.

⁷¹He was chosen to shepherd Jacob,
God's treasured possession.

⁷²He acted with an upright heart;
with a discerning mind he led them.

The psalm is rich in expressions for sin. When we sin we are being ‘stubborn, rebellious, fickle and unfaithful’ (verse 8). We ‘refuse to obey God’s law’ (verse 10). We are ‘unbelieving’ (verses 8). Our ‘hearts are not steadfast toward God. We are not true to the covenant’ (verse 37). We ‘fail to trust God’s power to save’ (verse 22). We ‘put God to the test’ (verses 18, 41 and 56). Our lives ‘belie our words’ (verse 36). We ‘cause God pain’ (verse 40).

As we read this psalm with Jesus we are reminded that, like the people of Judah, we must learn to ‘set our hopes in God, and never forget what God has done, but keep God’s commandments’ (verse 7).

Reflecting on Psalm 79 in Jesus' Company



The Holy Land has been devastated by an invading army. The psalmist pleads with God to defend God's honour by intervening to save the people and punish the invaders. A likely setting for this psalm is the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army in 587BC. This is not a psalm that Jesus could pray. Firstly, the psalmist sees the devastation of Jerusalem as proof of God's anger (verse 5). Secondly, it is a plea for God to 'avenge the blood of your servants' (verse 10).

Psalm 79 is not used in the Lectionary. It is found in the Prayer of the Church for the Prayer during the Day Thursday Week 3, but the most extreme sentiments of revenge (verses 6-7 and 12) are omitted. As disciples of Jesus we join the psalmist in turning to God when faced with a catastrophe, but hopefully with better sentiments.

¹O God, the nations invade your land.

They defile your holy temple, and destroy Jerusalem.

²They expose the bodies of your servants to the birds of the air,
the flesh of your faithful to scavengers.

The 'faithful' are the ḥasidim: those who are faithful to God's covenant. Verses two and three are quoted in 1Maccabees 7:17 in relation to the destruction brought about by the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, in 168BC.

³They pour out blood like water all around Jerusalem,
and there is no one to bury the dead.

⁴We are a taunt to our neighbours,
mocked and derided by those around us.

⁵How long, O GOD? Will you be angry forever?

Will your jealous wrath continue to burn like fire?

Verses 6-7 are not in the liturgy

*6Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you,
on the kingdoms that do not call on your name.
7For they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his habitation.*

⁸Do not hold against us the guilt of our ancestors.

Let your tender compassion come speedily to meet us,
for we are brought very low.

⁹Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name.

Deliver us, and forgive our sins.

‘Forgive’ in verse nine translates the Hebrew kipper. The image is of the high priest on the Feast of Yom Kippur, seeking forgiveness for the people before the mercy-seat of GOD in the inner sanctuary.

¹⁰Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?'

Let us see you punishing them,
avenging the blood of your servants.

¹¹Let the groans of the prisoners come before you.

According to your great power preserve those doomed to die.

¹²*Repay our neighbours seven times for the way they taunted you, O God*!*

Verse 12 is not in the liturgy There is a sharp contrast here with Jesus' insistence on forgiving 'seventy times seven times' (Matthew 18:22).

¹³We your people, the flock of your pasture,
will give you endless thanks.

From generation to generation
we will continue to praise you.

Praying Psalm 80 with Jesus



¹Listen, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead the flock of Joseph.
Shine forth from your cherubim throne,
²upon Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might! Come now and save us!

³*Restore us, O God; let your face shine on us and we will be saved.*

(Refrain, see verses 7 and 19)

⁴Mighty GOD, how long will you frown on your people's plea?

⁵For food you give us weeping,
an abundance of tears for our drink.

⁶You make us the taunt of our neighbours
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.

⁷*Restore us, O God; let your face shine on us and we will be saved.*

(Refrain, see verses 3 and 19)

⁸You brought a vine out of Egypt.

To plant it you drove out the nations.

⁹Before it you cleared the ground.

It took root and spread through the land.

¹⁰The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches.

¹¹It sent out its branches to the sea,
its shoots even to the Euphrates.

¹²Why then have you broken down its walls?
It is plucked by all who pass by.

¹³It is ravaged by the boar from the forest,
devoured by the beasts of the field.

¹⁴Turn again, O mighty God, we implore,
look down from heaven, and see.

¹⁵Visit this vine and protect it,
the vine your right hand has planted.

¹⁶They have burned it with fire and destroyed it.
May they perish at the frown of your face.

¹⁷Let your right hand be upon the one you have chosen,
the one you have given your strength.

¹⁸And we will never again forsake you.
Give us life that we may call on your name.

¹⁹*Restore us, O mighty GOD; let your face shine on us and we will be saved.*

(Refrain, see verses 3 and 7)

Psalm 80 was composed at a time of national military disaster in the northern kingdom. ‘Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh’ (verse 2) are the northern tribes that occupy the high country of Samaria. The occasion may have been the collapse of Samaria (721BC), though there are also echoes of the Philistine victories over Saul. Note mention of the Ark (‘God’s cherubim throne’, verse 1) and God’s ‘right hand’ (verse 17). Saul, Israel’s first king, was of the tribe of Benjamin (= son of the right hand).

In keeping with the common assumption, the disaster is interpreted by the psalmist as a sign of God’s punishment (verses 4-6 and verses 12-13). The psalmist is pleading with God not to forsake the people (verses 14-15). ‘Then we will never again forsake you’ (verse 18). He also wants the enemies to ‘perish at the frown of God’s face’ (verse 16). Jesus wants us to love our enemies, and would want us to offer a different prayer (see Matthew 5:44).

¹Listen, O Shepherd of Israel

God is called 'Shepherd of Israel', used as a title for God only here in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Praying the psalm with Jesus, we think of him as 'the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep' (John 10:11).

³Restore us, O God; let your face shine on us and we will be saved.

This functions as a refrain (see verses seven and nineteen). Is the psalmist praying that the kingdom will be restored, or that the people may be restored from exile? Or is he praying that God will bring about repentance? The psalmist is praying that God will look favourably on the nation.

let your face shine on us and we will be saved.

God's face shines upon us through the eyes of Jesus. 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). 'He is the reflection of God's glory' (Hebrews 1:3). 'While Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white' (Luke 9:29). 'It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6).

The psalmist sees the nation's '**tears**' (verse 5) as the consequence of God's will to punish them so that they will repent. 'My tears have been my food by day and by night, as they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?' (Psalm 42:3). 'I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink' (Psalm 102:9).

⁸You brought a vine out of Egypt.
To plant it you drove out the nations.

Israel is likened to a vine planted by God. Compare the following from Exodus: ‘You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O GOD, that you made your abode, the sanctuary that your hands have established’ (Exodus 15:1).

We think of Jesus: ‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower’ (John 15:1).

Though archeology has shown otherwise, the biblical account portrays God as driving out the people of Canaan to make way for God’s chosen people.

¹Listen, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead the flock of Joseph.
Shine forth from your cherubim throne,
²upon Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might! Come now and save us!

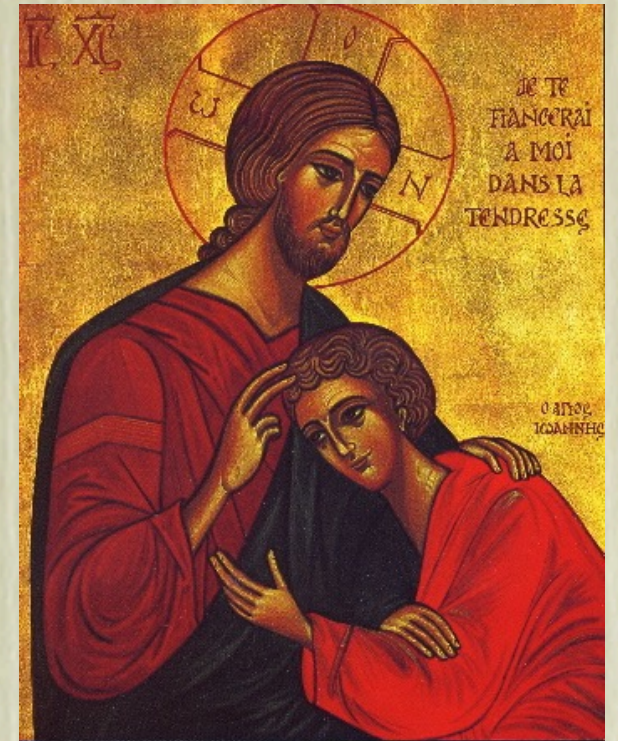
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Give us life that we may call on your name.

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