

Psalm 125

Peace be upon Israel!

1. Background

The psalm does not indicate its background, but there are interesting parallels with the story of the siege of Jerusalem by the army of Sennacherib in 701 BC, and the ministry of Isaiah to Hezekiah, king of Judah (see 2 Kings 18:13-19:37 and Isaiah 36-37). The word “trust” which opens the psalm is used more frequently in 2 Kings 18 and Isaiah 36 than any other passage of Scripture.

The word “trust” which opens the psalm and the word “peace” which almost closes it are important words in Isaiah’s prophecy. Isaiah emphasises the centrality of trust in God: the man who trusts in God will enjoy perfect peace (Isaiah 26:3) because the Lord is an everlasting rock (Isaiah 26:4; cf. Ps. 125:1); strength is “in quietness and in trust”, but tragically the people were unwilling (Isaiah 30:15). According to Isaiah 48:22; 57:20-21 the wicked have no peace.

Another verbal connection with Isaiah is the word in Psalm 125:5 translated “crooked ways”. This is an unusual word, which the psalm intensifies. A more basic form is found in Isaiah 27:1 to describe “Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting [or crooked] serpent” whom God will slay with his sword. Thus Isaiah 26 and 27 bring together the themes of peace for God’s trusting people and judgement for the crooked with which Psalm 125 opens and closes.

2. Translation

¹ Song of the Ascents

Those who trust in the LORD are like mount Zion,
which cannot be shaken – it abides for ever.

² Jerusalem – the mountains surround her;
and the LORD surrounds his people from now and for ever.

³ Most surely the sceptre of the wicked
shall not rest upon the allotment of the righteous,
so that the righteous will not send forth their hands to injustice.

⁴ Do good, O LORD, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts.

⁵ But [as for] those who turn aside in their crooked ways,
may the LORD lead them forth with workers of iniquity.

Peace be upon Israel!

(Notice the double reference to the LORD in vv. 1-2 and vv. 4-5. Notice also the ABBA structure of verse 3, i.e. wicked-righteous-righteous-iniquity – the dominance of the wicked is the central challenge to the peace of the righteous.)

3. Notes

I take it that the bottom line for the Psalm is its closing words: “Peace be upon Israel”. This is a benediction, taken from the priestly blessing (Num. 6:24-26). Peace is the summation of God’s blessing and keeping and smiling upon and dealing graciously with his people. He wants to grant us peace – his own peace. Remember the words of Jesus: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid... I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace” (John 14:27; 16:33).

The context of Jesus’ words is appropriate to Psalm 125. This Psalm speaks not of peace in green pastures and beside still waters, but of peace in the midst of trouble. This peace is what Walter Brueggemann calls “well-being that exists in the very midst of threats – from sword and drought... It is well-being of a material, physical, historical kind, not idyllic pie in the sky, but salvation in the midst of trees and crops and enemies, in the very places where people always have to cope with anxiety, struggle for survival, and deal with temptation.”

(a) *Peace is conditional upon trust in the LORD* (vv. 1-2)

The word translated “those who trust” connotes confidence, hope and persuasion. It is like the persuasion which Paul expresses in Romans 8:31-39. “Those who trust” is a participle – in other words, it indicates that this persuasion is an ongoing state. It could be translated “those who are trusting”.

Zion is a long ridge of land with valleys on three sides. Hills surround it, some of which are as much as 200 to 250 ft taller. Someone standing on the temple mount and looking out would have seen hills all around. The intervening valleys made Zion naturally very defensible. It’s a picture of God’s protection of his people.

(b) *Peace is challenged by the prevailing climate of worldliness* (v. 3)

“The land allotted to the righteous” – the Promised Land was assigned to the people by casting lots. This made it clear that it was the gift of God to them, that they possessed it in allegiance to him, and not in allegiance to any human king. The ideal was each man in possession of his allotment and enjoying the fruit of his labour. Peace in Israel was a thumbnail sketch of Eden restored. But it was perpetually threatened by pressure from a wicked elite who perverted justice and exploited the poor in an effort to maximize profits (e.g. Amos 2:6-7; Micah 2:1-2).

(c) *Peace will be consummate only when justice is exercised* (vv. 4-5)

Verses 4 and 5 are both prayers for justice – the reward of the good and the punishment of the bad.

“Good” is the practical, material, cultural enjoyment of peace. But “good” is also the moral quality of the people who are trusting (v. 1), righteous (v. 3), and upright of heart (v. 4). Their goodness isn’t skin-deep.

The people who are censured in verse 5 have turned to crooked ways (see above, paragraph 3 in *Background*). Their lives are twisted and crooked, like the serpent’s. They were comfortable with the prevailing worldliness. The psalm uses a pun to contrast their “turning aside” with the “unshakability” of those who trust in the LORD. Those who trust abide for ever – those who turn aside are removed.