

560 Like a bottle in the smoke

The ongoing miseries between Israel and her various enemies are often portrayed in the world media as a clash between Israel the mighty Goliath on the one hand, and plucky little David, the “Palestinians”, on the other (I Samuel 17.38-54). Until recently, that comparison may well have been true in a military sense, but this time things are rather different.

Israel still has awesome military power, but politically she is seen by her enemies to be deeply divided internally, and hence distracted and weakened in terms of prepared defences. Alongside this perceived Israeli weakness are the marked military improvements, in terms of weaponry, training and preparations, by such groups as Hamas and Hizbollah, mainly courtesy of Israel’s most virulent and vocal enemy, Iran, now close to having nuclear capability.

The vile 7th October Hamas raid into Israel has thus put Israel in a very awkward position in terms of response. Hamas is thoroughly prepared for a massive Israeli over-reaction, with their fighters, weapons and around 200 hostages scattered within civilian areas and tunnels in Gaza. However the Israelis respond, world opinion, along with parts of Israeli opinion, will howl against them, with some justification, for causing thousands more civilian casualties and mass destruction in Gaza – providing a very handy propaganda coup for Hamas. Israel has been caught thoroughly off guard, which has never happened before, and, not for the first time, might now be seen more accurately as the David figure, despite all its fabulous weaponry, against the great, confident Goliath of its various enemies, driven on by their Qur’an-taught, virulent hatred of the Jews.

The Psalms, the “Jewish Prayer Book”, will be being much sought out in these dangerous times, with Psalm 119 being a good example of old, heartfelt prayers. We can concentrate this time on “Caph”, verses 81-88 of this acrostic psalm, showing that the Jews are no strangers to hostility: 81 “My soul fainteth for thy salvation: [but] I hope in thy word. 82 Mine eyes fail for thy word, saying, When wilt thou comfort me? 83 For I am become like a bottle in the smoke; yet do I not forget thy statutes ... 84 How many [are] the days of thy servant? when wilt thou execute judgment on them that persecute me? 85 The proud have digged pits for me, which [are] not after thy law. 86 All thy commandments are faithful: they persecute me wrongfully: help thou me. 87 They had almost consumed me upon earth; but I forsook not thy

precepts. 88 Quicken me after thy lovingkindness; so shall I keep the testimony of thy mouth” (KJV).

By the Holy Spirit through this anguished psalmist we are given in these verses a classic prayer which is balanced between a longing for the Lord’s gracious response and action, and a determination to “hang on in there” in terms of faithfulness and obedience to God’s Word, in the face of deep injustices.

That “bottle in the smoke” is intriguing! (v.83). We see from the Concordance that the Hebrew word translated in the KJV as “bottle” simply means a “wineskin”. This wineskin over time has become blackened, wrinkly and shrivelled, sitting as it does in the smoky atmosphere of the living quarters, so is only fit by now to be chucked out. This is how the psalmist is feeling – worthless and spent and useless, as he cries out to the Lord for His response.

Yet all the time, counter-balancing his desperation, is his resolve to hold on - to the Lord’s salvation, to His word, His comfort, His statutes, His judgments, His commandments, His help, His precepts, His life-givingness, His testimony. Do we not see a parallel here with Jesus’ own anguish in Gethsemane? – “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou [wilt]” (Matthew 26.39).

No doubt the longing of these two prayers, from the Psalms and Matthew, we are familiar with at times in our own experience. Under the New Covenant of grace, we now cry out to God the Father, through the Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, for His action! And we go on crying out, while yet divinely enabled “to hang on in there” even when we ourselves, and our prayers, may seem to be as worthless as those “bottles in the smoke”. But by God’s grace in Christ, we, and they, are not worthless! (egs., Matthew 10.29-31; 6.5-8 / Ephesians 3.20-21).

Many Israelis, only a few of whom, to date, accept Jesus as their Messiah, will be lifting such prayers in these dangerous days. We join with them in prayer, for the Lord’s mercies of restraint, wisdom and resolution of all these miseries and hatreds. We long for the day when that “peace of Jerusalem” will be fully established in Christ, before whom all Jews, Muslims, atheists and all the rest of us will bow on bended knee, and confess that “Jesus Christ [is] Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Psalm 122 / Philippians 2). What a day! What a truth! By God’s grace and timing in Christ, it shall be.

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