



Psalm

Restoring Israel, the Sheep and Vineyard of the LORD

Asaph rightly understood that in a special and wonderful way, Yahweh was the Shepherd of Israel. It was He who had and would lead Joseph like a flock.

There were 4 kings of all Israel, Saul, David, Solomon and Rehoboam. While Rehoboam was king, the country became two kingdoms. The north was Israel, the south was Judah. There were 10 groups or tribes of people in the north, and 2 in the south. Ephraim and Manasseh and Simeon were tribes in the kingdom in the north. The tribes in the south were Judah and Benjamin. Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin always went together when the Jews walked from Egypt to the Promised Land. The promised Land was where they came to live. We call it Israel. But in 720 BC, Assyria beat the kingdom in the north, and took the 10 tribes away.

In this Psalm, the Psalmist prays that the tribes may become united again.

Ephraim and Manasseh were sons of Joseph. Both Joseph and Benjamin were sons of Rachel. Rachel was the wife of Jacob. His other name was Israel. The Bible uses all three names for God's people...Israel, Jacob and Joseph!

What Psalm 80 Means

Study this Psalm in three parts: each part ends 'Make us return (to you). Make your face shine (on us) and make us safe. Bible students are not sure if return means return from exile in Assyria or Babylon or return to God from the wrong things we have done. Our translation chooses the second meaning, but both could be true. Make your "Do something good for us." This is what we call "The Covenant", if God's people obey him, he will make them safe. In verse 1 Joseph means the same as Israel, God's people. Maybe the Psalmist used the name Joseph because he was the father of Ephraim and Manasseh. The words "shine

on” at the start of verse 2 are in verse 1 in the Hebrew Bible. As in verses 3, 7 and 19, “shine” here means do something good. The good thing the Psalmist wants is for all the people to be united in their own country. “Get up” in the Hebrew Bible is “wake up”.

In the second part, verses 4-7, the Psalmist asks God how long it will be before:

- God stops being angry with them.
- God stops making them cry buckets full of tears.
- God stops their enemies fighting them and laughing at them.

In verses 4 and 19 we have the name “LORD God of Sabaoth, Isaiah and Jeremiah often used this name. each part of the name means something. LORD means that he will always be alive. God means that he is powerful. Sabaoth means that he has great armies, both on earth and in heaven.

In the last part of the Psalm, the vine is a picture of God’s people. He brought them from Egypt to the Promised Land of Israel, verse 8. They lived in it from the Sea in the west to the River in the east, from the mountains in the south to Lebanon in the north, verses 9-11. They used to build walls round vines to keep them safe. But God knocked down these walls and enemies. Then the Psalmist prays that God will do something and send help to Israel, verses 14-19. “Hand” and “right hand” are Bible-pictures of God doing something in our world. The son, verse 15, and “the man” and “the son of man”, verse 17, are all names for God’s people Israel. Some Bible students think that it may be the king of Israel.

Psalm 80

Psalm 80 is a communal lament in which the worshipping community calls upon God to rescue them from trouble.

The psalm features a refrain that expresses its central theme: "Restore us, O God (of hosts); let your face shine, that we may be saved" (verses 3, 7, 19). The plea for help is based upon God's leadership in the past and the belief that God at present reigns supreme over the whole world. But the prayer is offered in the midst of trouble when God's help and salvation seem distant and unsure.

The historical circumstances that prompted the prayer in Psalm 80 are not certain. References to Joseph (verse 1) along with Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh (verse 2) may suggest the Psalm originated in northern Israel. Hence, the background of the psalm's pleas for salvation is perhaps the northern kingdom's suffering at the hand of Assyria in the late eighth century and concerns for the future of the northern tribes that persisted for two centuries more (Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom in 722 B.C.E.).

Regardless of the exact experience that gave rise to Psalm 80, the Psalm is appropriate for the people of God who suffer at any time. Read in the Advent season, Psalm 80:1-7 acknowledges the need for God's saving presence and aids the church in waiting for it. The desperate plea for mercy (verses 4-6) recognizes that forgiveness ultimately relies on God's willingness to forgive, to turn from God's anger and be gracious (see especially verse 14).

The first section of the Psalm (verses 1-2) begins and ends with petitions: "give ear" (verse 1); "stir up your might, and come to save us!" (verse 2). The petitions appeal to God on the basis of God's identity as "Shepherd of Israel" (verse 1), as one who has responsibility for the welfare of God's people.

"Shepherd" denotes God's role as caregiver and protector. The image is perhaps best known from Psalm 23 which fills out this metaphor more than any other Psalm (see especially Psalm 23:1-4). Psalm 80:1-2 shows, however, that the shepherd image is a royal metaphor. God as shepherd is one who leads and protects as a monarch. The expression "enthroned on the cherubim:" (verse 1b) indicates the royal nature of the figure of speech. The particular image of being enthroned on the cherubim probably has in mind the imaginary throne of God on the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was decorated with cherubim, mythical figures thought to surround and / or support God's throne (Exodus 25:18-22).

Such imagery has important implications for the community of faith. To call on God as Shepherd is to recognize that God lays claim to the community just as a sovereign ruler has ownership over his or her subjects. Hence, to seek the comfort of the divine Shepherd carries demands. This is not simply a feel-good understanding of who God is and what God does.

The petition for God to "shine forth" means that the people experienced God as absent despite the confident assertion of God's reign. This language is reminiscent of Old Testament theophanies. In Deuteronomy 33:2 Moses recalls that God "shone forth" on a mountain associated with the revelation of the Law.

Verse 3 (and verse 7), which contains the Psalm's refrain, continues the tone and theme of verses 1-2. "Restore" in some other contexts refers to the return from exile (Jeremiah 27:22); in still other texts it

has to do with repentance (Nehemiah 9:26); the expression may also refer to coming back to life (2 Samuel 12:23). Any or all of these meanings are possible and appropriate for Psalm 80.

The plea "let your face shine" uses a different word than "shine forth" in verse 1. Nevertheless, the implications of the two expressions are similar. Although the exact experience of seeing God's face shine is uncertain, it is clearly associated with being saved, with knowing God's blessings. Perhaps the most famous occurrence of this language is Numbers 6:22-24 in which Aaron and his sons are told to bless the people with such words. Parallel terms are "bless," "keep," "be gracious," and "give peace."

The petition in verse 3 for God's face to shine upon the people sets the stage for the complaint in verses 4-6. God is angry with the people and God does not heed their prayers. The people are experiencing the opposite of the blessings such prayers request. The expression "bread of tears" appears only here in the Old Testament (but see Psalm 42:3, "my tears have been my food"). A consideration of the Jerusalem temple, however, may clarify the reference. The temple, where one might experience the shining of God's face, contained a special bread known as the "bread of the presence" (literally, the "bread of the face;" Exodus 25:30). Instead of that bread, however, the community now is fed with the "bread of tears" (verse 5). It is perhaps not accidental that the expression "you make us the scorn of our neighbors" includes the same Hebrew word that is used in Numbers 6:25 ("make your face to shine"). The people who pray Psalm 80 are at present experiencing the opposite of the blessing pronounced in Numbers 6:22-24. That is the heart of their complaint.

The question "how long: (verse 4) is a key to understanding the situation behind Psalm 80. It is not clear that God is angry at the people's prayers (as NRSSSV translates). The verb translated "be angry" (ashneth) literally means "to smoke." "Anger" is sometimes the subject of this verb (as in Psalm 74:1b), but the expression here is unusual. An alternative translation is, "how long will you be angry during your people's prayers?"

The point seems to be that the people's prayers do not help their situation. Hence, Psalm 80:1-7 ultimately helps the church prepare for the coming of Christ by reminding believers that salvation depends completely on God. Although we come to God believing God will hear and answer, not even our prayers can bring God's favor. That is God's gift.

The Book of Psalms, in the New Interpreter's Bible by Leander E. Keck, Vol. 4: p. 999.