

Triennial Torah Study – 5th Year 29/11/2014



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<https://sightedmoon.com/files/TriennialCycleBeginningAviv.pdf>

Ex 17-18	Isaiah 12-14	Ps 123-128	John 6:28-71
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Is God Among Us? (Exodus 17)

By now we see a common thread running throughout the book of Exodus. It is not only Pharaoh who was “stiff-necked,” but the Israelites also. What was the difference? God was setting the Israelites apart as a special people due to the covenant that He made with Abraham (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). They had a very special opportunity because of God dealing directly with them. Yet they constantly set their hearts against God's love for them. Once again they complain and murmur against Moses, this time almost to violence. The event at Massah, meaning “Tempted,” also called Meribah, meaning “Contention,” even saw the Israelites asking the question, “Is the Lord among us or not?” (Exodus 17:7). Their attitude was outrageous. They had seen God destroy Egypt through the plagues, had been freed from Egypt by Him, had walked through the Red Sea on dry ground, had seen the Egyptians swallowed up and had bitter water made drinkable. Every day they had the daily miracle of His provision of manna. And every moment the pillar of God's presence blazed above them! Yet, like those stiff-necked Israelites, even we sometimes forget God's miraculous intervention in *our* lives—or, worse still, *choose* to forget.

Amazingly, God remains incredibly merciful with the Israelites in this situation. He does not even send a rebuke against the people. Instead, He provides for them. He has Moses strike a rock, causing water to come out of it—evidently becoming a steady source to supply all the needs of the people and their flocks.

Chapter 17 also presents us with Israel's battle against the Amalekites. Amalek was a descendent of Esau or Edom (Genesis 36). A more detailed description of this confrontation is given in Deuteronomy 25:17, which explains that, in a cowardly move, the Amalekites attacked the Israelites from the rear, taking the stragglers and the weary. God regarded this act as dishonorable and despicable. He prophesied that the Amalekites would eventually be blotted out of existence. This prophecy was carried out in part by King Saul (1 Sam. 15:18) and to a much greater degree by Simeonites in the days of Hezekiah (compare 1 Chronicles 4:41-43)— and will

likely find its ultimate fulfillment when the Edomites in general are destroyed at Christ's return (see Obadiah 18). In the confrontation with the Amalekites in Exodus 17, God chose to show His dealings with Israel through His chosen servant Moses—as long as he held aloft the “rod of God” (see verse 9). In this way, though Moses was God's chief human instrument at this time, the miraculous power of God was still the focus. As long as the rod of God was held up, Israel prevailed in their battle. Indeed, it is interesting that Moses was not able to serve God and the people on his own. Rather, he needed help—people to hold up his arms—a point made even more apparent in the next chapter.

Jethro's Advice (Exodus 18)

It's possible that Zipporah returned to her father in Midian after the confrontation with Moses over the matter of circumcising the son she bore Moses. It is recorded that Moses sent them back, but the timing of that event is not clear. There is no account of the entire family coming out of Egypt. We do find here that Jethro now brings Moses' wife and children back to him.

Jethro also gives Moses some advice in carrying out the responsibilities of a leader among a civil nation. Just as Moses had grown tired in holding God's staff up on his own in the previous chapter, so was he wearing himself out by single-handedly dealing with all the problems of the people himself. Jethro, witnessing this, recommends that an organized leadership be put into place to handle the day-to-day issues of millions of people and animals. Remember that Jethro, a leader among the Midianites, had years of experience in leading people.

Some people have argued that such a hierarchy was against God's will. However, notice that Jethro said to institute such a captain system only if God so commanded Moses (verse 23). And it is inconceivable that Moses, who talked with God every day, would have taken such far-reaching steps without consulting with Him. Furthermore, that God sanctioned this system is clear, for He *later* commands that 70 elders be chosen from among those who are already “officers” over the people (Numbers 11:16)—i.e., having been declared so through the captain system.

Like chapters 15 and 16, chapter 18 also reveals that God's laws and statutes were being taught and expounded even before their formal declaration at Mount Sinai (verse 16).

Chapter 12 is very short, but contains the beautiful scripture, “Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (verse 3)—pointing ultimately to the offering of God's Spirit to all mankind (compare 44:3; John 7:37-39).

Furthermore, Isaiah 12 is one of many passages in the Bible that exhort us to worship God with music and singing (verses 5-6). In fact, the Bible shows that one of the most important uses of music should be to worship God. Today, with modern recording and playback technology, there is more listening to music (which can be fine and good depending on the music), but regrettably there is much less singing and *making* music. And sadly, only a very small percentage of music

is sacred music—music that is reverential to God. And not all of that is even biblically accurate in lyrics, with so-called gospel or Christian music—and even many hymns—often misrepresenting God’s Word. It is as important to *sing* the truth as it is to *speak* the truth.

Finally, notice this interesting phrase in verse 2: “For Yah, the Lord, is my strength and song [or “song of strength”]; He also has become my salvation.” The same words are found in Exodus 15:2 and Psalm 118:14, which means that they occur in each of the three parts of the Old Testament: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. Often a stirring melody or rousing anthem is able to strengthen and encourage us. Yet in nothing will we experience greater strengthening than in God Himself.

Babylon, the Glory of Kingdoms (Isaiah 13:1-14:2)

Returning to the book of Isaiah, we come to “the burden against Babylon” (verse 1). The word burden paints the picture of the prophet being heavily laden with a message from God that he simply must deliver because it is too heavy to carry.

As was mentioned in the previous highlights, the Assyrians sacked Babylon in 689 B.C. Some see the prophecy of Isaiah 13 as a reference to that episode. However, in verse 17 we see the Medes, not the Assyrians, as the ones conquering Babylon. And this did not happen until much later. The Babylonians eventually conquered the Assyrians, overthrowing the Assyrian capital of Nineveh in 612 B.C. Then the Neo-Babylonian Empire ruled the Middle East until its defeat by the Medes and Persians in 539 B.C. This was the fall of ancient Babylon. And the prophecy does seem to anticipate this event, though it was written around 180 years in advance of it.

However, the passage appears to be primarily directed to a time long after that. It is heavily concerned with the Day of the Lord—a time yet future, which immediately precedes the return of Christ (verses 6, 9; compare Joel 1:15; Revelation 6:12-17). Indeed, the return of God’s people to the Promised Land in Isaiah 14:1-2 was not fulfilled by the return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity in the days of Ezra. Only a paltry 50,000 then returned (Ezra 2:64-65), and a few more later—perhaps only 15 percent or so of the Jews in Babylonia. Notice further that Isaiah 14:1-2 says “the house of Jacob” and “Israel”—referring to *all 12 tribes*, not just the Jews. And in the return from Babylonian exile, the Jews did not then take their oppressors as slaves, as this prophecy says would happen.

It seems clear, then, that while the destruction of historical Babylon is in view here, Isaiah’s prophecy at this point is referring primarily to *end-time* Babylon—which is not merely a single city or province but an economic, political, religious and military power bloc centered in Europe that will seek to rule the world (Revelation 17-18). The leading national force in this union, as explained in the highlights for Isaiah 10, will be modern Assyria—apparently the Germanic peoples of Central Europe. Surprisingly, the European Union actually uses the symbol of the Tower of Babel to represent its forming super state.

But Assyria is not the only ancient nation with a surprising identity today. Babylon itself may be found elsewhere. As explained in the previous highlights, a great many Babylonians were relocated to Syro-Phoenicia, including Samaria, even before the Chaldean Neo-Babylonian Empire. When Babylon finally fell to the Medes and Persians they set it up as their winter capital. Later, when Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire, he too set up Babylon as the capital of Asia in his Greek empire. When his successor in the region, Seleucus, took over, he declared himself the king of Babylon and made Babylon his first capital. Soon he decided to move the capital to a new location north on the Tigris River and invited those of Babylonia to relocate there. Later, he moved his capital west to Antioch in Syria. In fact, he built 30 new cities throughout his empire, most of them in Syria, and the vast majority of Mesopotamia relocated to them. Thus, though Seleucid Syria was a Greek kingdom in name and language, it was predominantly Babylonian in fact—with large numbers of Phoenicians of old Tyre and Sidon still dwelling along its Mediterranean Coast.

Great numbers of the Babylonian and Phoenician Syrians were later taken to Rome as slaves. Amazingly, in the centuries just before and after Christ, a massive change happened in the Roman population. Through wars and other socioeconomic factors, Italy's native population dwindled. Many of the local freeborn citizens who were left migrated to other parts of Rome's growing empire. At the same time, Rome brought in vast numbers of slaves, mostly from Syria. The first-century Roman satirist Juvenal wrote of them: "These dregs call themselves Greeks but how small a portion is from Greece; the River Orontes [in Syria] has long flowed into the Tiber [in Rome]" (Satire 3, line 62). Over time it became popular to free slaves in Rome—and thousands upon thousands of freed slaves, who were skilled at various trades, displaced even more of the freeborn citizenry. So, as incredible as it may seem, Italy eventually became almost entirely Syrian or—in actuality—Babylonian and Phoenician.

As for the Syrians who had *not* been taken from the Eastern Mediterranean as slaves, they gained notoriety as merchants and traders, carrying on in the tradition of the Phoenicians of old. Eventually, this lucrative pursuit would cause great numbers of them to spread throughout the entire Roman Empire—particularly through Spain, southern France, northern Italy, etc. (see Franz Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, 1911, pp. 107-109)—so much so that a great part of southern Europe is, in fact, Babylonian and Phoenician. Yet the center of modern Babylon is still Rome. So when God identifies Rome and its empire as Babylon in Revelation 17-18 (and as Phoenician Tyre in Ezekiel 27), He means what He says!

Eventually we will see modern Babylon (or Tyre) and modern Assyria fused together into the same power (as indeed has already happened in times past, such as with the Hitler-Mussolini Axis in World War II). This end-time power will conquer the modern-day Israelite nations and deport their remaining populations. The reference to the Medes coming against Babylon (Isaiah 13:17) may have an end-time fulfillment as well. They may be part of the massive force led by "the kings from the east" (Revelation 16:12) that attack the "kingdom" of "the beast" (verse 10). We will consider this further when we later read another prophecy of Babylon's fall in Isaiah 21.

Babylon will be destroyed and abandoned—apparently referring to its end-time capital, Rome (Isaiah 13:19-22). The reference to wild animals dwelling in its ruins may be dual, as we will see in our next reading.

Clearly, Isaiah 14:1-2 is referring to the same future time—when end-time Babylon falls, Yeshua returns to this earth and all Israel returns to the Promised Land. The Israelites' prophesied enslavement of the Assyrians and Babylonians, who had previously enslaved *them*, will be much different from the wretched picture of slavery our world has sadly witnessed in the past. For this coming short-term slavery, under the rule of Yeshua the Savior, will actually be to the benefit of the enslaved enemies. For at that time the Israelite slaveholders, with God's Spirit poured out on them, will be converted in their hearts and minds to the ways of Christ. The gentile slaves, then, will see kindness in action and learn the true ways of God. Once they learn and accept them, they too will be freed to live in the liberty of the truth of God. What a wonderful world God has in store for all peoples!

O Lucifer, Son of the Morning (Isaiah 14:3-27)

The prophecies against Babylon continue—specifically against the *ruler* of Babylon. It is obvious from verses 1-3 that this has a primary fulfillment in the final ruler of *end-time* Babylon, a world dictator over a resurrected Roman Empire of the last days who is called “the Beast” in the book of Revelation (see 19:19-20). The ancient kings of Babylon were forerunners of this final ruler. As ancient Babylon was conquered in one day by the Medes and Persians (as foretold by the famous miracle of the handwriting on the wall recorded in Daniel 5), so will endtime Babylon and its ruler meet sudden end at Christ's return (Revelation 18-19).

Yet the final ruler himself is portrayed in Isaiah 14 as a type of someone else. His name, in verse 12, is given as Lucifer. But actually this is a Latin name—meaning “Light-Bearer.” It is a translation of the Hebrew *Heylel*. This word, based on related Hebrew words, seems to mean “Brightness” or “Praising”—or, if the word is considered as Heyl-el, perhaps even “Brightness of God” or “Praise to God” (though such translations are not normally given because most scholars reject the angelic identity this could imply).

It also appears that Heylel was the Hebrew name for the “Day Star,” that is, the planet Venus. Some now even see in the name Helel ben Shahar (son of Dawn) a reference to a pagan deity represented by the planet Venus.

In any case, we are left with the picture of a grand star, likened to Venus, that wants to be grander than the other stars: “I will exalt my throne above the stars of God” (verse 13). To really understand the picture here we need to know a little about astronomy.

Venus is the brightest object in the sky except for the sun and moon. We now understand it to be a planet. But to the ancients it was classed as a star—simply because their words for star meant a small, shining point of light in the sky. Notice that the reference in verse 12 is “Day Star, son of

the morning.” The planet Venus is still referred to as either the morning star or the evening star—because it is visible only just before sunrise or just after sunset. Before dawn, Venus rises from the eastern horizon. But before it is able to climb into the sky (to rise above the other stars and be the highest), the light of the rising sun—the ultimate physical daystar— causes Venus to disappear in the growing light of day. After sunset, Venus appears just above the western horizon—but it sets (or is brought down to the ground) very quickly.

The individual pictured in these verses exalts himself with five “I wills” (verses 13-14). He aspires to universal domination—”to be like the Most High” (verse 14). This attitude certainly applied to the rulers of ancient Babylon, who viewed themselves as exalted above all other human rulers (compare Daniel 4:29-37)—and it likely similarly applies to the unbridled arrogance of the final end-time ruler of Babylon. But it applies most of all to the *spiritual* ruler of Babylon of all ages—the power behind the throne—Satan the devil. We are told in the book of Revelation that it is Satan, the serpent and dragon of old, who gives power and authority to the Beast (13:2). Indeed, the various “heads” of prophetic Babylon through all ages (compare Revelation 13:1; 17:3)—the succession of gentile world empires—are pictured as emerging from the devil (12:3).

That the devil is primarily meant in this passage in Isaiah 14 is also supported by the fact that Yeshua appears to refer to verse 12 when He says, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). Furthermore, “stars” represent *angels* elsewhere in prophecy (see Revelation 1:20). Indeed, “a third of the stars of heaven,” meaning angels, were cast to the earth with Satan in his revolt against God in eons past (12:4). We learn more of Satan’s rebellion in Ezekiel 28:11-17, where, again, a human ruler is first used to typify him (in fact, as we will later see, that human ruler of Tyre is none other than the same end-time Beast).

Yet it is not entirely clear whether the revolt against God pictured in Isaiah 14 refers to the ancient struggle that predated man’s existence (again, see Revelation 12:4) or the one that will occur when Satan and his demons again attempt to assault God’s heaven three and a half years before Christ’s return (see verses 7-14). Many scholars note that the language in Isaiah 14:12 is in the form of a *lament*, an expression of mourning over a great loss. This would reflect God’s grief and sense of loss over the companionship of this trusted cherub (Ezekiel 28:14) and the rebellion Satan had instigated, indicating this passage refers to that initial rebellion. However, it is also possible that the primeval satanic rebellion described here is related as a forerunner of the similar latter-day assault described in Revelation 12. The outcome is the same either way. Satan failed miserably the first time—and he will fail again at the end. For more information, request our free booklet *Is There Really a Devil?*

Lucifer, the aspiring daystar—who was brightest of the “morning stars” (see Job 38:7) and even now still appears as an “angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14)—is no match for the ultimate “Morning Star,” the “Sun of Righteousness,” Yeshua (see Revelation 22:16; Malachi 4:2), or the ultimate “Father of lights,” God the Father (see James 1:17).

One of the ironies of the passage in Isaiah 14 “is the idea that to be *like the Most High* (v. 14) is to be self-exalted, whereas it [in truth] is to be self-giving (cf. Phil. 2:5ff.). The ugliness as well as the brevity of the false glory is powerfully shown in vv. 16-21? (*The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, 1970, note on Isaiah 14:20-21). In reading what is said about the downfall of the ruler of Babylon, realize that all of it applies to both the human ruler *and* Satan—if not in fact then in type.

Verses 22-23 describe the destruction of Babylon. Interestingly, after its fall ancient Babylon did become an abandoned place of marshes as the Euphrates River gradually changed course and moved farther away from the city (a process begun when Babylon’s conqueror Cyrus of Persia removed dikes that kept the river in a particular course). Isaiah referred to it before the fact as the “Wilderness of the Sea” (Isaiah 21:1, 9). In fact, this is part of the reason that Alexander the Great’s successor Seleucus moved his capital from Babylon shortly after establishing it there (see previous highlights). Yet there will probably be a greater fulfillment of this prophecy when end-time Babylon is cast down. Perhaps such a fate will befall the *modern* capital of Babylon, apparently the city of Rome.

Revelation 20:1 tells us that Satan, and by implication his demons, will be bound for 1,000 years in a particular place—called a “pit” or “abyss”—which Leviticus 16:22 typifies as an “uninhabited land” or “wilderness.” The confinement prophesied for the demons will keep them away from the human beings living during the reign of Christ and His saints—and keep human beings away from *them*. Perhaps the mention of wild and weird animals and birds at Babylon in conjunction with its desolation (Isaiah 13:21-22) is meant to typify or even indicate demons there (see Revelation 18:2). In fact, regarding a parallel passage, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* reports that at least one scholar “attempts to render the assonance of tsiim ‘eth ‘yim (*siyyim et-iyyim*, ‘desert creatures and hyenas’) by ‘goblins and ghouls’... [Another scholar] considered them, not as animals, but probably demons of the desert” (footnote on Jeremiah 50:39).

Finally, God relates destruction to come on Assyria (verses 24-25), which, as with so many of these prophecies, seems to indicate both ancient and future punishment. End-time Assyria is largely synonymous with end-time Babylon, since they represent the same power bloc. The forces of this power will be broken in God’s land (Israel) and on God’s mountains (Jerusalem and its environs)—and this punishment will affect all nations (verse 26). This is supported by other prophetic passages (Revelation 16:14, 16; Joel 3:1-2, 12-14).

When the end-time Assyrian yoke of oppression and slavery is broken, God’s people will be free. At the same time, the power of Satan will be overthrown. God’s land and mountains (verse 25) will then be the whole earth (Revelation 11:15). And with Satan’s power broken everywhere, *all* people will at long last be free.

As a final note on the passage, it should be mentioned that the word rendered “hell” in verse 9 is the same word left untranslated in the rest of the chapter—*sheol* (see verses 11, 15). While some attempt to read into these verses a shadowy or fiery underworld, the Hebrew word *sheol*

is often translated “the grave,” which is the true meaning of the word. And in the grave human beings have no consciousness (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10). Indeed, the dead are portrayed in Scripture as “sleeping” until the resurrection (Daniel 12:2; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 2 Peter 3:4).

Plea for relief from contempt (Psalms 123)

Psalm 123, as the first song of ascents in the second set of three (of the five sets of three), is another plea in the midst of distress. As in Psalm 121, the song begins with the psalmist lifting up his eyes-in this case directly to God in heaven (123:1). Indeed, “eyes” is the keyword in this psalm, occurring four times in the first two verses. And just behind it is the thrice-repeated “mercy” or graciousness (verses 2-3)-the Hebrew word here, *chanan*, implying bending or stooping to help (Strong’s No. 2603). Thus we see where our sights are to be set for help during distressing times-the same place they must always be set-on God.

Looking to God is compared with servants looking to the hand of their masters and mistresses (verse 2). One commentator notes: “In eastern countries, masters often commanded their servants by means of hand signals [clapping for summoning and gesturing for directives], so the servants kept their eyes on the master’s hand. This is what gave them direction for their work. But the master’s hand was also the source of their provision, what they needed for their daily sustenance. Finally, the master’s hand protected them in times of danger” (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Exultant-Psalms 90-150: Praising God for His Mighty Works*, 2004, note on verse 2). As God’s servants, we are to look intently to Him for the slightest nuance of direction, for our daily bread and for help in times of need.

The psalmist pleads for God’s gracious intervention because he and his compatriots are “exceedingly filled with contempt” (verse 3). Twice he uses the words “contempt” and “exceedingly” to describe their treatment by those who are proud and at ease (verses 3-4). The NIV translates these verses as: “We have endured much contempt. We have endured much ridicule from the proud, much contempt from the arrogant.”

The exact circumstances here are not known, and we might wonder how this relates to observing God’s festivals. Certainly the very fact of following God’s ways, including observing His Sabbaths and festivals, will provoke scorn from the world. A prime example of this occurred in the time of King Hezekiah after he restored true worship and sent runners through what was left of the Northern Kingdom of Israel with an invitation for the people to come to Jerusalem to keep the Passover. “So the runners passed from city to city though the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, as far as Zebulun; but they laughed at them and mocked them.

Nevertheless some from Asher, Manasseh, and Zebulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem. Also the hand of God was on Judah to give them singleness of heart to obey the command of the king and the leaders, at the word of the Lord ” (2 Chronicles 30:10-12).

May we always look to God’s hand to direct us-and to help us when the world around us ridicules and persecutes us for obeying Him.

God on His people's side (Psalms 124)

Psalm 124, the second song of ascents of the second set of three, expresses trust in God acknowledging Him as the reason for Israel's survival. This is the second of four songs of ascents attributed to King David.

David encourages national participation in this hymn with the formula "Let Israel now say" (verse 1; compare 118:2; 129:1). The repeated opening statement "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side..." (verses 1-2) takes as a given that God *had* been on their side. Indeed, God is on the side of His people. This was historically true for Israel, just as it is for *spiritual* Israel-God's People. Being on the side of His people does not mean that God endorses everything that they do, as they stumble and sin. The sense here is of being with them, supporting them. God works with His people to guide them, help them and ultimately save them-often against antagonists who try to thwart them. In a powerful New Testament parallel, the apostle Paul remarks, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

Without God's aid, the enemies of His people, in both the physical and spiritual realm, would have swallowed them up (Psalm 124:2-3)-in the metaphoric senses of a flood running over them (verses 4-5) and of predatory wild animals devouring them (verse 6). David used such flood imagery in other psalms for threats and persecution (18:16; 32:6; 69:1-2; compare also Job 27:20; Revelation 12:15-16). And he elsewhere compares persecution to being attacked by lions (Psalms 7:1-2; 10:8-11; 57:4).

Yet God has given deliverance, seen also in the figure of a bird escaping the fowler's snare the trap of a bird trapper (compare 91:3). *The Zondervan Student Bible* comments: "Some trouble is quick-bang and it's over...but with other trouble, trying to escape only gets you more deeply entangled...if you try to undo the damage, you only make it worse. That's exactly the picture of 'the fowler's snare.' The bird that caught its neck in the noose only tightened the snare's chokehold by struggling. The bird could not get out by its own effort. But this time, says David, the snare has miraculously broken, and the bird has flown to safety. When you escape that way, there's only one person to thank: the Lord" (note on verse 7).

Indeed, the past deliverance on which the song reflects is the basis for continued trust in the help of the Almighty Creator God-the One who made heaven and earth (verse 8; compare 121:2; 134:3). This confidence is essential for our journey to God's Kingdom.

God protects and perpetuates those who trust in Him (Psalms 125)

As the third song of ascents in the second set of three, **Psalm 125** brings us again to blessing and peace in Zion. As the previous psalm expressed trust in God, so this one picks up from there in commencing with “those who trust in the Lord ” (verse 1).

These are compared with the abiding presence of Mount Zion, probably meaning all of Jerusalem as it expanded from the original City of David (see verses 1-2). As the mountain is immovable and enduring, both in natural terms and because God has declared it His eternal Holy City, so those with faith in God will themselves continue with God in His city forever. As the City of David and temple mount were surrounded by higher hills, providing a natural defense against encroaching armies, so God surrounds His covenant people with protection to preserve them (verse 2). The comparison here is all the more fitting because God’s faithful spiritual people-those of His People-are collectively referred to in various passages as Zion or Jerusalem in a spiritual sense. They will forever inhabit the heavenly Zion or New Jerusalem that will come down to the earth at the culmination of God’s plan of salvation for mankind.

The psalmist says that the “scepter of wickedness”-evil rule (compare 94:20)-would not “rest” on the allotted land of the righteous, inducing the righteous to veer in their character (125:3). God did allow evil kings to rule over Israel and Judah-both domestic and foreign-and many people in the land were corrupted by this. Yet such wicked rule did not persist. Indeed, the context here is one of “forever” (verse 2). In an ultimate sense, God would not allow the wicked to prevail over the land promised to God’s people-this referring to not only the Holy Land but to the whole world. The rule of Satan the devil and his corrupting influence over this planet will be broken at the return of Yeshua and the establishment of God’s Kingdom so that people will be drawn not to iniquity, but to the joy of righteousness and peace-conditions represented in the fall festivals.

In the meantime, though confident in God to protect and preserve His people, the psalmist still prays with a sense of urgency that God will “do good...to those who are good...who are upright” (verse 4). No one by nature is truly good, but those who are forgiven of sin and live upright lives with the help of God’s Spirit are nevertheless classified as “good.” These people follow godly ways in contrast with those who “turn aside” to follow “crooked ways.” As for those who follow wicked examples of disobedience, God will lead them away to the same consequences (verse 5)-perhaps meaning out of the Promised Land and into captivity, as referred to in the next psalm.

Psalm 125 ends with a call for peace on Israel (same verse)-the true Israel being those who faithfully continue in covenant with God. The same closing prayer ends Psalm 128, the concluding song of ascents in the next set of three.

Prayer for complete national restoration (Psalms 126)

Psalm 126, the first song of ascents in the third set of three (of the five sets of three), returns to the theme of distress in this world, as most of Israel remains in exile and the psalm speaks of sowing in tears (compare verses 4-5). Exile was a consequence of disobedience, as was hinted at in the previous psalm. However, there is also great joy for those restored to Zion another

theme repeated from the previous psalm. “Ps 125 and 126 are thematically linked and precisely balanced, each being composed (in Hebrew) of 116 syllables. Their juxtaposition was no doubt deliberate” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, note on Psalm 125).

This psalm poses a difficulty for those who would link King Hezekiah with the songs of ascents—since he lived prior to the return from Babylonian Exile apparently referred to in this psalm. However, as was noted at the outset with respect to this idea, it is possible that the psalm was originally written about what was yet to come and that the specific wording was modified following the return from captivity. In any case, the psalm as we have it appears to date from after the Exile. Even so, there is a prophetic aspect regarding the complete return from captivity in the future.

We previously read Psalm 126 in the Bible Reading Program in conjunction with Ezra 6:14-22, the account of the completion of the rebuilding of the temple following the Exile. Some of what follows is a repeat of earlier comments.

The return from captivity in Babylon had been anticipated for so long that when it came, it seemed like a dream (verse 1). Was this really happening? It was! And when the reality set in, joy was overflowing in laughter and song. The events that Judah experienced through the decrees of the Persian emperors Cyrus and Darius and the temple reconstruction all stood as a great testimony among other nations (compare verse 2). And it was a great witness to those who returned of the reality and power of their God. “The Lord has done great things for us,” they cried, “and we are filled with joy” (verse 3, NIV).

Still, all was not yet accomplished. God had “brought back the captivity of Zion” (verse 1). And yet the people pray in verse 4, “Bring back our captivity, O Lord ...” Only a small percentage of the Jews who had been exiled to Babylon had returned. And the rest of the tribes of Israel, taken away previously in the Assyrian captivity, remained scattered. Ultimately, therefore, this prayer was for the end-time work of Yeshua in bringing Israel and Judah back from around the globe.

“...As the streams in the South [the Negev]” (same verse) is a request that this happen quickly and with great force. “The wadis in the steppe south of Hebron, around Beersheba, were generally dry; but on the rare occasions when during the winter months it rained even as little as one inch, the water ran down its ‘streams’ with great rapidity and often with destructive force.... Roads and bridges [have been] destroyed by the force of these torrential streams. The ‘streams in the Negev’ are not ordinary phenomena, as much as they represent proverbially the sudden unleash of God’s blessing” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verse 4).

Verses 5-6 give us the beautiful word picture of sowing in tears yet reaping in joy. All our wearisome toil and trials in this life, including Israel’s exile, is working toward a wonderful outcome. “For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Corinthians 4:17, RSV). How well this is symbolized in God’s festivals, which celebrate in part the harvests of produce after the toil of planting and tending crops. Pentecost is alternatively referred to as the Feast of Harvest. The Feast of Tabernacles is

also known as the Feast of Ingathering-and it is to be kept with rejoicing (Deuteronomy 16:13-15). The ancient Jewish return to the Promised Land after decades of loss, heartache and shame was a source of great rejoicing. How much more joyful will it be when the people of all Israel are at last gathered again to their homeland at the establishment of God's Kingdom simultaneous with the reunion of God's *spiritual* family!

As we assemble annually to observe God's feasts, let us all go with such a mindset-as if leaving the captivity of this world to rejoice before the Almighty King who has done great things for us, knowing that all our toil and sorrow in this age will ultimately reap a joyous reward in His presence for all eternity.

Security and posterity from God (Psalms 127)

Psalm 127, the central psalm of the songs of ascents, is one of only two psalms with Solomon's name in the title (the other being Psalm 72). As the second song of ascents in the third set of three, Psalm 127 is one of trust in God-acknowledging Him as the source of security and posterity. The key word here is the thrice-repeated "vain" (verses 1-2)-showing the futility of life apart from God. "It reminded the pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem that all of life's securities and blessings are gifts from God rather than their own achievements (see Dt 28:1-14 [compare 8:10-18])" (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, note on Psalm 127).

The building of the house in verse 1 perhaps calls to mind the work that Solomon did on building God's house-the temple-as well as his own house or royal palace and other great building projects in Jerusalem and throughout the land of Israel. Yet the meaning of "house" here could also signify a family-on which the latter part of the psalm concentrates. It could even mean *nation* -a family grown large-such as the whole house of Israel or house of Judah. Moreover, God had promised David an enduring house-meaning his royal dynasty, Solomon himself being the first successor. In building a house of any sort, the idea is to provide shelter or protection, promote community or family within and ensure perpetuity. Yet without God's involvement, such building is ultimately wasted effort-for only He can give true and lasting security, belonging and permanence.

If God is not the One doing the safeguarding, as verse 1 shows in the example of city watchmen, there is no guarantee of safety. Furthermore, apart from God, working from early morning to late at night to make ends meet is an uncertain venture-the earned sustenance being accompanied by the anguish of life's worries. Conversely, God's vigilant care for His people who trust Him frees them from restlessness and allows them the blessing of peaceful slumber (verse 2; 128:2; compare Matthew 6:28-34).

God is the One who perpetuates home and family-through His overseeing care and, as related in the song's second stanza, through the miracle of childbirth. Children are, in fact, His gifts-an inheritance and blessing from Him (Psalm 127:3; compare 128:3). They build and bring joy to a family, they help with family responsibilities, they guard against loneliness and abandonment in

old age, they perpetuate and bring honor to the family name. “In ancient times, having many children was regarded as a symbol of strength. This was particularly true in an agricultural economy, since the extra hands of children increased the productivity of the farmer” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 3-5). A man with a large family enjoyed a measure of respect and recognition among his peers. When citizens met at the city gates to discuss business, such a man was not ashamed to speak his mind-even to enemies, who would think twice before acting against a person with a large family, fearing his many defenders against accusations, an increased possibility of retribution and the perceived evidence of God’s favor (verse 5).

The blessing of family, a theme carried over into the next psalm, is an important focus of the annual festivals of God, during which the songs of ascent were sung. For not only do the feasts look forward to the redemption and restoration of the family of Israel and that of all mankind (which truly is one great family), but this is all part of God’s plan of building His *spiritual* family-an eternal inheritance in which we may all share.

Blessings of those who fear God (Psalms 128)

Psalm 128, the third song of ascents in the third set of three, returns to the theme of blessing and peace in Zion-here as a continuation of the focus on the wonderful blessings of family in the previous psalm. True happiness in this regard is part of the reward of those who fear God those who have an appropriate sense of awe and respect for Him and His ways, fearing the consequences of disobeying Him (verses 1, 4).

The previous psalm spoke of laboring in vain without God and eating bread of anguish as a result (127:1-2). Here the labor of those who obey and rely on God results in eating (experiencing the fruit of one’s labors) in happiness and well-being (128:2).

As part of this blessing, the godly man’s wife is described as “a fruitful vine” (verse 3). This refers in part to her being the mother of his children, as the lines that follow and the mention of children as “the fruit of the womb” in the previous psalm imply (see 127:3). Yet it probably also more generally means that she is a source of great joy and happiness for him, as noted below. Likewise their children are likened to promising “olive shoots” (NIV). “Ever green and with the promises of both long life and productivity (of staples: wood, fruit, oil). The vine and olive tree are frequently paired in the O[ld] T[estament] (as, e.g., in Ex 23:11). Both were especially long-lived, and they produced the wine and the oil that played such a central role in the lives of the people” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, note on Psalm 128:3).

The Expositor’s Bible Commentary states: ” The imagery of vine and olive tree are reminiscent of the eras of David and Solomon (1 Kings 4:25) and the blessings associated with the messianic era (Mic 4:4; Zech 3:10) [-a period symbolized by the Feast of Tabernacles]. To sit under one’s vine and fig tree was an expression of a state of tranquility, peace, and prosperity. Even when the country faces adversity, the man who fears the Lord is insulated against adversity by wife and children as the blessings of the Lord are found under the roof of his house. The metaphor of

the fruitfulness of the vine extends, not only to the bearing of children, but also to everything the wife contributes to the welfare of family (cf. Prov 31:10-31).

“The children, who are likened to olive shoots, are strong and in due time will continue the work that their father has begun (cf. 52:8; Jer 11:16; Hos 14:6). Though the olive tree may not bear after it has been planted for forty years, it is a symbol of longevity and productivity. So are children within the household of faith! They are not like grass, which is here today but is gone tomorrow. Rather, they are olive trees that in due time bear their fruit. The blessedness of the godly man will extend to other generations. What a privilege God bestows on his children in this life that we may already taste the firstfruits of our heritage!” (note on Psalm 128:3-4).

It is noteworthy that the wife is “in the very heart of your house” (verse 3), showing that she is faithful-not like the unfaithful wife whose “feet would not stay at home” (Proverbs 7:11)-and that she is in a protected position and central to the successful functioning of the family. The children are “all around your table” for meals, implying that the family eats together in fellowship and that the children are pleased to be responsible members of the family (Psalm 128:3).

Verse 5 then remarkably states that these blessings are to come out of Zion-in connection with seeing the good of Jerusalem over the course of life. So we see that godly and truly blessed families are not just automatic with an initial commitment to follow God. Rather, this is speaking of the whole family coming together to Jerusalem to learn and grow in God’s ways, clearly relating this psalm and its great blessings to the annual pilgrimages to keep God’s feasts. Today, we can understand Zion in a spiritual sense as representative of God’s people as well as looking forward to life in God’s Kingdom.

The blessing of verse 6 concerns both the longevity of the righteous and the desire for their posterity to continue to experience the blessings of the psalm-implying their continuance in God’s ways, especially family worship and learning at His festivals. This is the key to the concluding call for peace on God’s people in the same verse-repeated from the end of Psalm 125.

John 6:28-71

What is the work of Elohim according to the Son, Yeshua? “Believe in Him whom He sent.”

The people around Yeshua at hearing this wanted a sign. They spoke of the manna in the wilderness that their fathers ate: the bread from heaven.

Yeshua corrects them in their statement saying, “Mosheh did not give you the bread out of the heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread out of the heaven.” Then Yeshua proceeds to tell them PLAINLY that He is the Bread of Life, come down from the heaven – that whoever eats of it will be raised up in the last day to everlasting life.

The Yehudim stumbled in this, discussing among themselves the fact that they knew from where Yeshua came and who His parents were.

But Yeshua explains to them the meaning very clearly that His Body is the Bread we are to eat and His blood is the drink we are to drink. By this, we remain in Him and He in us so that we are able to be raised in the last day. At this time, some of even His own taught ones and followers left Him because of these words.

These words are Spirit and Life. The flesh will not hear it. This is why no one is able to come to Him unless the Father leads them and brings them. Many left Him at that time and no longer followed. But the twelve stayed with Him even though one of them, the devil, was also chosen by Yeshua.