

## Psalm 63

### Historical Setting:

*The Harper Collins Study Bible* says that the reference to the wilderness may refer to either I Samuel 23:14-15 or 24:1. Here is how the JPS version translates these two passages, with some context from surrounding verses:

I Samuel 23:14ff

<sup>14</sup>David was staying <sup>a-□</sup>in the strongholds of the wilderness [of Judah];<sup>-a</sup> he stayed in the hill country, in the wilderness of Ziph. Saul searched for him constantly, but G-d did not deliver him into his hands. <sup>15</sup>David was once at Horesh in the wilderness of Ziph, when David learned that Saul had come out to seek his life. <sup>16</sup>And Saul's son Jonathan came to David at Horesh and encouraged him in [the name of] G-d. <sup>17</sup>He said to him, "Do not be afraid: the hand of my father Saul will never touch you. You are going to be king over Israel and I shall be second to you; and even my father Saul knows this is so." <sup>18</sup>And the two of them entered into a pact before the L-RD. David remained in Horesh, and Jonathan went home.<sup>1</sup>

**24**David went from there and stayed in the wildernesses of En-gedi.

<sup>2</sup>When Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told that David was in the wilderness of En-gedi. <sup>3</sup>So Saul took three thousand picked men from all Israel and went in search of David and his men <sup>a-□</sup>in the direction of the rocks of the wild goats;<sup>-a</sup> <sup>4</sup>and he came to the sheepfolds along the way. There was a cave there, and Saul went in <sup>b-□</sup>to relieve himself.<sup>-b</sup> Now David and his men were sitting in the back of the cave.

<sup>5</sup>David's men said to him, "This is the day of which the L-RD said to you, 'I will deliver your enemy into your hands; you can do with him as you please.'" <sup>c□</sup>David went and stealthily cut off the corner of Saul's cloak. <sup>6</sup>But afterward <sup>d-□</sup>David reproached himself<sup>-d</sup> for cutting off <sup>e-□</sup>the corner of Saul's cloak.<sup>-e</sup> <sup>7</sup>He said to his men, "The L-ORD forbid that

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□ <sup>a-</sup> *Meaning of Heb. uncertain*

<sup>1</sup> Jewish Publication Society, Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures : A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997, c1985). 1 Sa 23:14.

□ <sup>a-</sup> *Meaning of Heb. uncertain*

□ <sup>b-</sup> *Lit. "to cover his feet."*

□ <sup>c</sup> *Vv. 5 b-6 read well after 8a.*

□ <sup>d-</sup> *Lit. "David's heart struck him."*

□ <sup>e-</sup> *So several mss. and ancient versions; cf. v. 5. Most mss. and editions read*

I should do such a thing to my lord—the L-RD's anointed—that I should raise my hand against him; for he is the L-RD's anointed.”<sup>8</sup> David rebuked<sup>a</sup> his men and did not permit them to attack Saul.<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Hirsch has a slightly different take than the *Harper Collins Study Bible* as to how David got into the wilderness of Judah and when. He references I Samuel 22:5, during the early days of David's flight from Saul (after the incident that is the Haftorah of erev rosh chodesh where Jonathan fires the arrows to warn David). “David had fled abroad to the king of Moav and entrusted his parents to the latter's care. Gad, the prophet, however, instructed him not to remain abroad, but to dwell in the midst of the land of Judah. David obeyed this behest and dwelt in the forest of Cheretch.”

### **Theme of the Psalm:**

The *Oxford Annotated Bible* says that the Psalm is a prayer for deliverance from personal enemies.

*The New American Bible*, a Catholic Bible version, says that it is an “ardent longing for G-d.” They hold that it expresses intimate relationship between G-d and the worshiper, and that the psalmist wants the close, divine relationship in the Temple. Of course, this ignores that the Temple was built later. The Hebrew word translated as sanctuary in the Psalm is b'kodesh, meaning simply in the holy place. It does not necessarily have to be the Temple.

*The NIV Study Bible*, say the Psalm is a “confession of longing for G-d and for the security His presence offers when deadly enemies threaten.” They add that the “psalm is an implicit prayer.” Of course, they also want to link night and day, with danger and salvation, with all the Christian overtones that that salvation implies. They see the dry land as a “metaphor for his situation of need.” They also note that the enemies of the psalmist will lose their lives, as they sought his.

Now, finally a Jewish source, the *Soncino Psalms*, says that this psalm refers to a “disturbed period in David's career, his flight from Saul into the wilderness. David tells of the longing for the Sanctuary which consumed him, and the consolation he found in meditation upon G-d during his banishment from home.”

Danziger, in the *ArtScroll Tehillim*, heads the Psalm “An exiled refugee, the victim of malicious slander, parted from family, nation, and home, alone before G-d in a desolate wilderness.” He is, apparently, stressing the importance of the slander of the enemy

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“*Saul's corner.*”

<sup>2</sup> Jewish Publication Society, Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures : A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997, c1985). 1 Sa 24:1.

referenced in the final verse. It speaks to how powerful lies can be.

The *Stone Tanakh* has a brief introduction to the Psalm, that is similar, but not quite the same as the one in Danziger's book: "Though a victim of malicious slander, exiled from nation, family, and home, alone in a desolate wilderness, David never wavers in his love for G-d."

## 63 A psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah.

<sup>2</sup>G-d, You are my G-d;  
I search for You,  
my soul thirsts for You,  
my body yearns for You,  
as a parched and thirsty land that has no water.

Whether he is in the desert or a forest (as R' Hirsch has it), it is an arid or semi-arid area. But, thirst here can also be taken metaphorically as a longing. David is alone, and longs to be in G-d's presence.

<sup>3</sup>I shall behold You in the sanctuary,  
and see Your might and glory,

The sanctuary, as mentioned above, is b'kodesh. It does not necessarily have to be the Temple, but can be the ohel moed. David wishes, perhaps, to reconnect with G-d in that holy place, to see the location of the Ark, which represents G-d's presence and might.

<sup>4</sup>Truly Your faithfulness is better than life;  
my lips declare Your praise.  
<sup>5</sup>I bless You all my life;  
I lift up my hands, invoking Your name.

Rabbi Hirsch makes the point that the word for hands, kuf, indicates a hand in a partly open shape, ready to close over some object. David, he says, is asking G-d for help.

<sup>6</sup>I am sated as with a <sup>a-□</sup>rich feast,<sup>-a</sup>  
I sing praises with joyful lips

Rich feast is elsewhere translated as fat and marrow. It is a rich meal, indicating either a longing or that David is satisfied with what he has physically and/or spiritually.

<sup>7</sup>when I call You to mind upon my bed,

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□ <sup>a-</sup> *Lit.* "suet and fat."

when I think of You in the watches of the night;

Once David had a bed to sleep upon, now he is in the wilderness and he may be sleeping on far less comfortable accommodations, maybe even the ground. Still, no matter where he sleeps, he calls upon G-d.

<sup>8</sup>for You are my help,  
and in the shadow of Your wings  
I shout for joy.

<sup>9</sup>My soul is attached to You;  
Your right hand supports me.

<sup>10</sup>May those who seek to destroy my life  
enter the depths of the earth.

*Soncino Psalms*, in verse 10, translate “Those that seek my soul to destroy it, shall go into the nethermost parts of the earth,” they comment that “no malice enters into his [David’s] thoughts of what is to happen to his opponents. As G-d’s right hand upholds the righteous, His justice demands that there should be discrimination against the wicked who will accordingly feel the destructive power of that same right hand.” They are saying David is seeking justice rather than vengeance.

Rabbi Hirsch says the word translated as nethermost is the same word used to refer to a baby who is not yet fully formed. He likens it to wishing them to having the lowest social standing possible; a fall from grace and position, perhaps.

<sup>11</sup>May they be gutted by the sword;  
may they be prey to jackals.  
<sup>12</sup>But the king shall rejoice in God;  
all who swear by Him shall exult,  
when the mouth of liars is stopped.<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Hirsch disagrees with some of the commentaries above, which place David as the king mentioned in the last verse, most noting that he had already been anointed king by Samuel. Rav Hirsch comments on verse 12 with a sort of translation that adds the name of King Saul, “But as for Saul, the king, let him rejoice in G-d, and let everyone glory who acknowledges Saul’s majesty.” He further says that “David always makes a sharp distinction between Saul, whose hostility was to be attributed to his state of melancholia, and others who exploited their master’s mental illness in order to incite him against David. David wishes no ill to Saul and his followers. His only prayer is that the deceitful

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<sup>3</sup> Jewish Publication Society, *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures : A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997, c1985). Ps 63:1.

slanderers who surround Saul and exploit his illness for their own selfish ends may fall silent.”

*The New American Bible* say that one who swears by G-d is a worshiper of G-d.