

Gretchen A. Shapiro (Alyza)
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Dr. Ronald A. Brauner, Instructor
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Psalm 83: The Nations, G-d, and Israel

A book of Psalms dating from 800-1000 C.E. was found in an Irish bog in late July, 2006. It was thought to be open to a Latin version of Psalm 83, according to an article on Yahoo News (later, Arutz-7 said it was open to Psalm 84 instead). This paper will attempt to discuss the theme presented in Psalm 83, and how it is manifested elsewhere in the book of Psalms, with reference to a few other sources. Psalm 83, contains a theme that occurs in many places in Psalms, that of the Nations, G-d, and Israel. Recent events in Israel and the world's reaction to them make this Psalm and the theme it presents especially relevant. When nations conspire against Israel, they conspire against G-d. Ultimately, they will recognize G-d, do His will, and let us live in peace. When Asaph wrote this Psalm, he was writing for his own time, but it reaches us today.

The Psalm is attributed to Asaph, a Levite who was the chief musician of David, and played the cymbals (I Chronicles 16:2-5). A count of Psalms that come up in a computer search of the book included twelve Psalms of Asaph. His descendants were singers in the Temple as well and came back with the exiles from Babylon as well (Ezra 2:41, 3:10). It is not known whether Asaph himself wrote this Psalm, one of his descendants wrote it, someone wrote it in honor of Asaph, or in the style of Asaph. It is hard to place this Psalm historically, however, it must have been somewhere between the time of David and before the rise of Babylon, which conquered Assyria. Since it deals with Assyria, it seems logical that it was written during the time when Assyria was very active in the area, from about 911 BCE to its demise in about 609 BCE (The Revell Bible Dictionary 102, 104) or after. Radak and Malbim say it is about the period of King Jehoshafat, which is when Judah “was attacked by the armies of Ammon, Moab, Aram, and Seir.” (Scherman, Zlotowitz 1041). Jehosephat, as he is known

in English, ruled Judah from 872-848 BCE, according to the non-Jewish chronology (The Revell Bible Dictionary 541).

According to II Chronicles 17, King Jehoshaphat was the son of King Asa of Judah. He had troops garrisoned all over the land, including areas of Ephraim that his father had captured. Furthermore, he was a righteous king, as it says in verse 3-4: “The L-RD was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the earlier ways of his father David, and did not worship the Baalim, but worshiped the G-d of his father and followed His commandments—unlike the behavior of Israel.”¹ He had the whole land instructed in the ways of G-d, that is in the Torah. For a time at least, (vs. 10) “A terror of the L-RD seized all the kingdoms of the lands around Judah, and they did not go to war with Jehoshaphat.” Apparently at one point (chapter 18) he married a daughter of Ahab from Israel. He visited the northern kingdom and was asked to go into battle with Ahab. I Kings 22:3 has Ahab inform Jehoshaphat that the Arameans had taken part of the land belonging to the kingdom of Israel, and desiring to take the land back. The Chronicler writes that Ahab checked with the prophets up there, all of whom agreed that it would be a success. Then he talked to Micaiah, the lone prophet who had not come with the group. At first, he says march also, but then King Ahab presses him to speak only the truth, and he responds “I saw all Israel scattered over the hills like sheep without a shepherd; and the L-RD said, ‘These have no master; let everyone return to his home in safety.’” For speaking thusly, this prophet was put into jail. Ultimately, both Ahab and Jehoshaphat listened to the other prophets and went to battle. Ahab was killed in battle, but Jehoshaphat lived and returned to Judah. Later, probably years later, we reach the time of our Psalm. More of II Chronicles

¹ All quotes from Tanakh are from JPS unless otherwise stated.

will be brought in as applicable to help understand the historical context of the psalm.

The Psalm begins with a plea from Asaph “O G-d, do not be silent; do not hold aloof; do not be quiet, O G-d! For Your enemies rage, Your foes assert themselves.” (Psalms 83:1-4). The nations of the world who attack Israel are not just our enemies, they are the enemies of G-d Himself. We see this also in Psalm 2, written by David when Philistines were attacking: “Why do nations assemble, and peoples plot vain things; kings of the earth take their stand, and regents intrigue together against the L-rd and against His anointed?” (Psalms 2:1-2). If G-d is silent, than the nations might come to believe G-d does not exist, or has no power, asking “Where, now, is their G-d?” (Psalms 115:2). Thus the Psalmist asks for

G-d’s help in a way that invites Him to also help His own cause; it is in G-d’s best interest to help His people.

Psalm 83 continues (4-5): “They plot craftily against Your people, take counsel against Your treasured ones. They say, ‘Let us wipe them out as a nation; Israel’s name will be mentioned no more.’” Others translate it as “protected” rather than treasured, and say that it is not just the Jewish people in general, but also the most protected among us, our Torah scholars and our Torah itself (Scherman, Zlotowitz 1043). Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, commenting on these verses, notes that Judaism brings a moral message to the world. Those who wish to wipe out this message have ever been adversaries of Bnai Yisrael. As Rabbi Hirsch notes, the rebellious nations want to wipe off even our name, so “the very name [Israel] and the fact of its persistent survival should no longer proclaim the ultimate and universal supremacy of G-d’s rule.” (95). At least one non-Jew,

Adolph Hitler (may his name be blotted out) said in his speeches, that he wished to rid the world of the morals and conscience that he felt came from the Jewish people (and which we as Jews would say came from G-d). Two quotes from Hitler illustrate the point: "Providence has ordained that I should be the greatest liberator of humanity. I am freeing men from the restraints of an intelligence that has taken charge; from dirty and degrading self-mortifications of a false vision called conscience and morality, and from the demands of a freedom and personal independence which only a very few can bear." and "The Ten Commandments have lost their validity...Conscience is a Jewish invention. It is a blemish like circumcision..." (Rauschnig). Anne Frank, in her diary, says "Who knows -- it might even be our religion from which the world and all peoples learn good, and for that reason and that reason alone do we now suffer." (Silinsky). Our role in the world, being a light unto the nations so that they all know that there is one G-d who demands that they act morally, is seen as the very reason that we are attacked.

The Psalm continues (6-9) "Unanimous in their counsel they have made an alliance against You—the clans of Edom and the Ishmaelites, Moab and the Hagrites, Gebal, Ammon, and Amalek, Philistia with the inhabitants of Tyre; Assyria too joins forces with them; they give support to the sons of Lot. *Selah.*" Sforno notes that from the perspective of those trying to destroy the Jewish people, our refusal to be like the other nations is seen as a stumbling block to world unity (Scherman, Zlotowitz 1043-4), something that rings true today among those who seek Israel's destruction. Much of the then known world arrays itself against Israel and thus against G-d. Edom was to the south and east of Israel. II Chronicles 20:1-4 tells us the situation as well: "After that, Moabites, Ammonites, together with some Ammonim, came against Jehoshaphat to wage war. The report

was brought to Jehoshaphat: “A great multitude is coming against you from beyond the sea, from Aram, and is now in Hazazon-tamar”—that is, Ein-gedi. Jehoshaphat was afraid; he decided to resort to the L-RD and proclaimed a fast for all Judah. Judah assembled to beseech the L-RD. They also came from all the towns of Judah to seek the L-RD.” As in verse 1 of our psalm, they asked G-d for help.

According to Soncino’s Psalms, the Hagarites lived east of Gilead (the region of Gad, Reuben, and/or Manasseh) (Cohen 273). The Anchor Bible Dictionary says they were herdsman who tended their animals east of Gilead. It farther states that they were a pre-exilic adversary of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Some members of the Hagarites had actually served David as mercenaries. Their relationship to Hagar, concubine of Abraham, is not known for certain. They may possibly be associated with the group the Greeks knew as Agraioi that lived at an oasis in North West Arabia (24). Soncino says Gebal is to the north of Edom as is Ammon (Cohen 273). The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible is more specific about the location of Gebal, placing them in Phoenicia north of Beirut and south of Tripolis.

Amalek (may their memory be blotted out) was always out for our total destruction because, as it says in Deuteronomy 25:17, they had no “fear of G-d.” Hertz says, they were “devoid of pity and fundamental humanity.” (856) One could say that they wanted to throw off the moral yoke G-d placed upon all people, the demand from G-d that people treat each other well. This is supported by Nahum Sarna, who says that fear of G-d “usually implies the consciousness of the existence of an omnipotent G[-]d who imposes certain norms of moral and ethical conduct on His earthbound subjects.” (87) Philistia, located in the area of

Gaza and a bit more, was always a thorn in our side. Tyre, in Phoenicia to the north, and the superpower of the time, Assyria, joined all of these in seeking our destruction. To add insult to injury, the leaders of the coalition were the descendants of Lot, our cousins (Cohen 273). It is unusual for these nations to cooperate in this way, especially Assyria, which refused to join in Nimrod's alliance against G-d long ago (Scherman, Zlotowitz 1044-5), but they discovered the ability to work together in order to try to destroy the Jewish people.

These nations have modern day equivalents rooted in historical Jewish thought. Some are physical descendants of these nations, some spiritual descendants, taking on the behavioral or attitudinal traits of these nations. Edom is traditionally seen to be Rome², that is the ruling mentality of the Church and Europe. This especially applies when they seek to destroy us; just as when today they cry over Jews who died in the Shoah, but will not lift their hand to save a living Jew and in fact condemn Israel for defending Jewish lives. Assyria was the superpower of the day. Its modern day analogy would be the US which often tells Israel to show restraint when the Israeli people are attacked. The US also yields to the pressure of the others, especially the Arab world, to apply pressure to Israel. Ishmael is associated with the Arabized world and Islam, segments of which currently seek to destroy the Jewish people and the Jewish state, while the world looks on and condemns the victim for self-defense.

Psalm 120 shows how hard it can be to dwell in exile in the midst of the Christian and Arab world, spiritual descendants from some of those who joined together the unlikely coalition of adversaries mentioned in our Psalm. In this Psalm, however, G-d is not silent: "...In my distress I called to the L-rd and He

² See Talmud Bavli, "Avodah Zarah" 2b where Rabbi Jonathan says Edom refers to Rome.

answered me. O L-rd, save me from treacherous lips, from a deceitful tongue!
What can you profit, what can you gain, O deceitful tongue? A warrior's sharp
arrows, with hot coals of broom-wood. Woe is me, that I live with Meshech, that I
dwell among the clans of Kedar. Too long have I dwelt with those who hate
peace. I am all peace; but when I speak, they are for war.” The ArtScroll Tehillim
translates “that I live with Meshech” as “my drawn-out sojourn” and say that
Radak says this means our long exile. They then note that others translate it as
JPS does and say that Meshech is a Christian nation, Rome and its modern
successors. Kedar is the Arab world, the rule of the descendants of Ishmael
(Danziger 277). One of the ways the enemies that surround us and come against
us is deceit, a fact Psalm 83 noted in verse 4. While this is not clear in the JPS
translation, ArtScroll translates the verse as “Against Your nation they plot
deviously.” (Scherman, Zlotowitz 1043). We have certainly seen our share of lies
and slanders through the ages and continuing to the present day. ‘Dead’ bodies
that fall off stretchers and get up and walk away, doctored photos, imagined
massacres, and children caught in a crossfire from an impossible angle come to
mind as examples of such lies. The world is only too willing to believe these and
other lies. We want only peace, but those who want to destroy us and throw off
G-d’s yoke want war and destruction of the Jewish people.

Asaph prays for relief, calling on G-d to remember previous times when
He came to our aid (Psalm 83:10-13) “Deal with them as You did with Midian,
with Sisera, with Jabin, at the brook Kishon— who were destroyed at En-dor, who
became dung for the field. Treat their great men like Oreb and Zeeb, all their
princes like Zebah and Zalmunna, who said, ‘Let us take the meadows of G-d as
our possession.’” These are victories from the time of the Judges; Sisera is from

the time of Devorah, for example. G-d should do to the coalition out to destroy us as he did to these enemies of the past. This is similar to the prayer of Jehoshaphat and the people found in II Chronicles in that both cry out to G-d for aid and remind G-d of times in the past when He acted on their behalf. It is obviously not the same prayer, as the words are different, but the purpose is the same. The verses in II Chronicles 20:5-13) read:

Jehoshaphat stood in the congregation of Judah and Jerusalem in the House of the L-RD at the front of the new court. He said, "L-RD G-d of our fathers, truly You are the G-d in heaven and You rule over the kingdoms of the nations; power and strength are Yours; none can oppose You. O our G-d, you dispossessed the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel, and You gave it to the descendants of Your friend Abraham forever. They settled in it and in it built for You a House for Your name. They said, 'Should misfortune befall us—the punishing sword, pestilence, or famine, we shall stand before this House and before You—for Your name is in this House—and we shall cry out to You in our distress, and You will listen and deliver us.' Now the people of Ammon, Moab, and the hill country of Seir, into whose [land] You did not let Israel come when they came from Egypt, but they turned aside from them and did not wipe them out, these now repay us by coming to expel us from Your possession which You gave us as ours. O our G-d, surely You will punish them, for we are powerless before this great multitude that has come against us, and do not know what to do, but our eyes are on You." All Judah stood before the L-RD with their little ones, their womenfolk, and their children.

It is very interesting that the very next verse in II Chronicles, mentions a man who, may be our psalmist or who may have inspired our psalmist to write in his honor: "Then in the midst of the congregation the spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel son of Zechariah son of Benaiah son of Jeiel son of Mattaniah the Levite, of the sons of Asaph and he said ...[in the name of G-d], 'Do not fear or be dismayed by this great multitude, for the battle is G-d's, not yours.'" (20:14-15). G-d inspired him, and the result, it appears, is not just encouragement, but also

our psalm.

Other Psalms likewise ask for G-d to defeat an enemy, or in at least one case, have another nation take revenge on an enemy whom He let take us into exile (Psalm 137:8-9) “Fair Babylon, you predator, a blessing on him who repays you in kind what you have inflicted on us; a blessing on him who seizes your babies and dashes them against the rocks!” It is not a pretty verse, but it is understandable in light of what the Babylonians had done to our children. We do not want to do it ourselves, but if another nation is as cruel as the Babylonians were to us, that is another matter. Our Psalmist asks, if G-d not destroy the attackers, then (83: 14-16) : “O my G-d, make them like thistle-down, like stubble driven by the wind. As a fire burns a forest, as flames scorch the hills, pursue them with Your tempest, terrify them with Your storm.” Asaph asks for them to be pursued and driven away, scared so that they will stop their attack and flee as quickly as a fire. Either way, they will cease to be a threat. What actually happens is recorded in II Chronicles 20-30, which tells of the hymns Jehoshaphat and his army sang while going into battle, their ambush of Ammon and Moab, how the two nations ultimately turned against each other (and possibly the others in the coalition), the taking of booty, and the praises they sang in the House of G-d afterwards.

We sought victory over them, as of old, but would have preferred if they would have fled, or better yet, (83:17-19) that G-d should, for any enemy “Cover their faces with shame so that they seek Your name, O L-rd. May they be

frustrated and terrified, disgraced and doomed forever. May they know that Your name, Yours alone, is the L-rd, supreme over all the earth.” Ultimately, we want them to repent, to turn from their rebellion against G-d and that He help them do so. “He rules forever in His might; His eyes scan the nations; let the rebellious not assert themselves.” (JPS Psalms 66:7). In the Siddur, we daven for their repentance as well in Al Kayn, right after the Aleinu “Therefore we put our hope in You, HASHEM our G-d, that we may soon see Your mighty splendor, to remove detestable idolatry from the earth, and false gods will be utterly cut off, to perfect the universe through the Almighty’s sovereignty. Then all humanity will call upon Your Name, to turn all the earth’s wicked towards You. All the world’s inhabitants will recognize and know that to You every knee should bend, every tongue should swear....” and so on (Scherman 255). Just as in the story of Rabbi Meir and his neighbors, where they were noisy and the rabbi was urged by his wife to pray for their repentance instead of their destruction, so too we pray for wickedness to be destroyed by turning the hearts of the wicked to G-d, to a moral road. As it says in Psalm 117 “Praise the L-RD, all you nations; extol Him, all you peoples, for great is His steadfast love toward us; the faithfulness of the L-RD endures forever. Hallelukah.” Only when our enemies take up G-d’s yoke of good and cast off the yoke of destruction and rebellion, will we finally have the peace for which we continually pray.

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