

# Psalms 73-76

## Psalms 73-76, Distress and Hope

### Overview

As we start Book 3, let's review the overall pattern (Figure 1, chart). Books 3 and 4 are the shortest books in the Psalter, with only 17 Psalms each.<sup>1</sup> David has only one Psalm in Book 3; the rest of it is by Levites (Asaph, Heman, Ethan, and the sons of Korah). Just as Psalms of the sons of Korah dominated the beginning of Book 2, Psalms of Asaph form the bulk of Book 3.

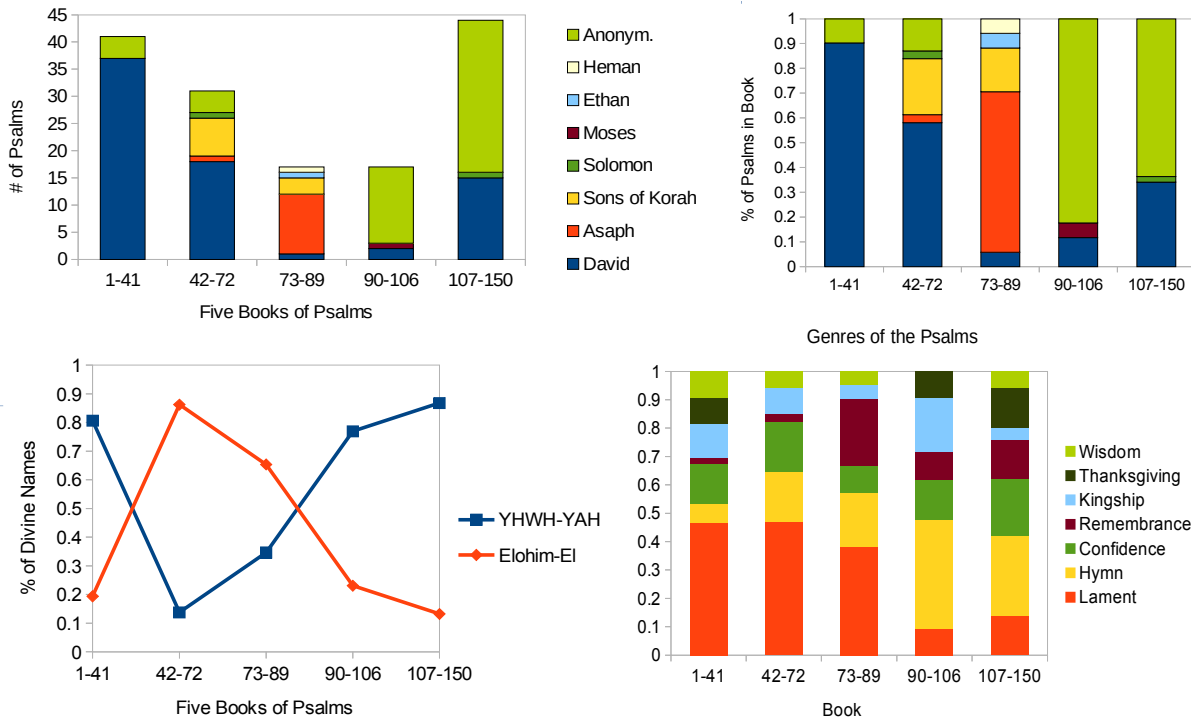


Figure 1: Characteristics of the Five Books of Psalms

Like Book 2, Book 3 favors the generic names for God, Elohim and El, over the covenant names Yahweh and Yah, focusing on Israel's interaction with the nations. In Book 2, Israel proclaims the coming Messianic kingdom to the nations, but in Book 3, the nations attack Israel because of her sin. The book has the largest proportion of Psalms of remembrance (recounting Israel's history) of any book, and numerically more (5) than any other book except Book 5 (with 7).

Like Book 2, Book 3 begins with an individual and then a group lament (compare 42-43 and 44) (Figure 2, chart). Also like Book 2, it moves next into a declaration of God's kingship, and the center (again like Book 2) frankly points out the failings of God's people. This time, we have clear prophecies of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities.

The large central section deserves further attention. At its center, and indeed the center of the entire Psalter, is Psalm 80, announcing

Psa 80:17 Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man whom thou madest strong for thyself.

This is one of the central verses for the title "son of man" that our Lord used of himself.

<sup>1</sup> Book 3 is slightly larger, with 3894 words; book 4 has 3420.

## Psalms 73-76

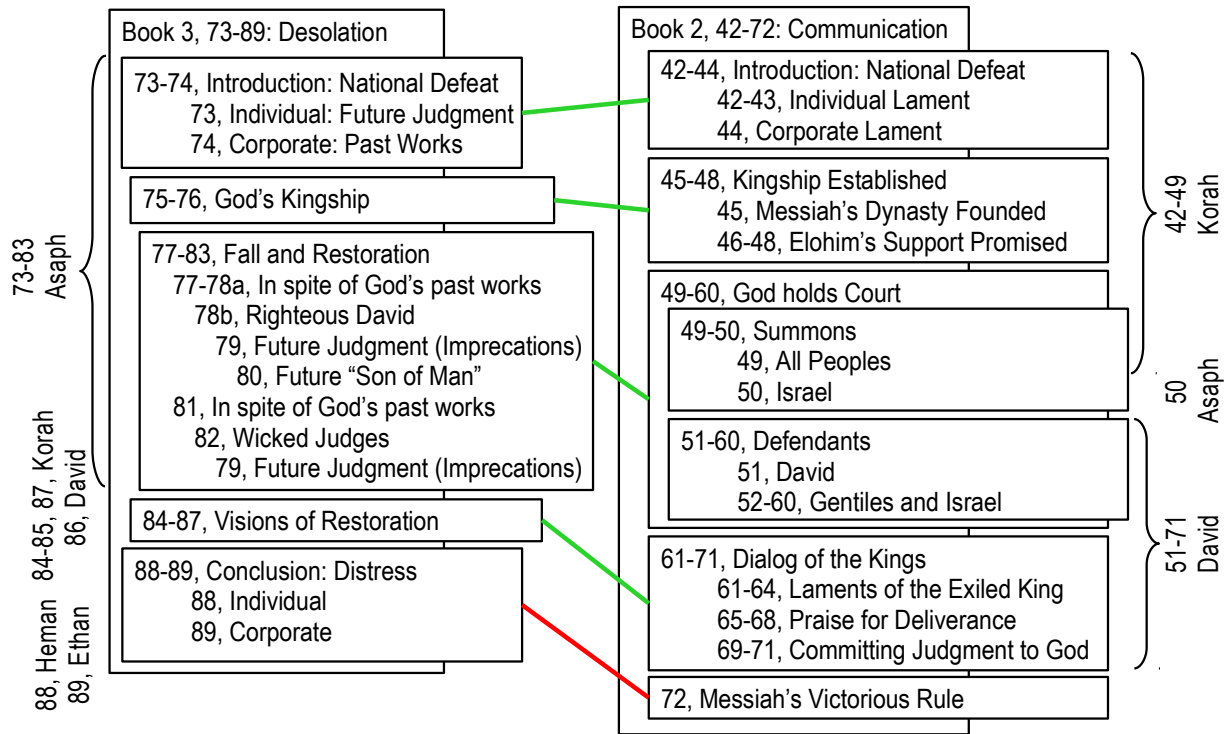


Figure 2: Structure of Books 2 and 3

After the center, the sons of Korah, with one Psalm by David, anticipate the nation's restoration in Psalms 84-87, corresponding chiastically with Psalms 75-76, and recalling the vision of restoration at the center of the dialog of the kings in Book 2, Psalms 61-71. These parallels with Book 2 lead us to expect a positive close, corresponding to Solomon's conclusion to Book 2. But this time, the book ends, as it began, with psalms of lament.

## Who is Asaph?

Twelve Psalms bear the name of Asaph. All but one of them are in this book; the other is Psalm 50, calling God's people to judgment. Book 2 also includes two Psalms by Heman and Ethan. These names appear in 1 Chronicles 15, when David appoints musicians for the temple (chart).

1Ch 15:16 And David spake to the chief of the Levites to appoint their brethren to be the singers with instruments of musick, psalteries and harps and cymbals, sounding, by lifting up the voice with joy. 17 So the Levites appointed **Heman** the son of Joel; and of his brethren, **Asaph** the son of Berechiah; and of the sons of Merari their brethren, **Ethan** the son of Kushaiah; ... 19 So the singers, Heman, Asaph, and Ethan, were appointed to sound with cymbals of brass; ... (cf. also 1 Ch 16:4,5, להזכיר, Mitchell, p. 94)

In the Psalter, Israel's hymnal, it is most natural to understand these names of these three men.

Some reject this identification because many of Asaph's Psalms make clear references to the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests, which came centuries after his lifetime.<sup>2</sup> This critique ignores an important detail recorded during the reign of Hezekiah, three centuries later:

2 For example, Kidner (p. 50) writes, "In the headings, his name evidently stands for his choir in at least some instances, since such laments as 74 and 79 tell of disasters witnessed by no contemporary of David."

## Psalms 73-76

2Ch 29:30 Moreover Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the LORD with the words of **David**, and of **Asaph the seer**.

Asaph was remembered in the time of Hezeiah as a seer, one who could foretell the future. In fact, we'll see details in his Psalms that best fit neither the Assyrians nor the Babylonians, but the Romans, who came long after the Psalter was completed. We'll understand "Asaph" to refer to the contemporary of Heman and Ethan, a contemporary of David who led Israel's worship. It is particularly fitting that the Levites, responsible for teaching the law (Deut 33:10; 2 Chr 15:3), should be the ones to describe Israel sin and its consequences.

### Psalms 73-74, Psalms of Distress

These two Psalms have very similar chiasmic structures. Both present a righteous person confronted with wickedness in the world. Both turn from the problem in the first half to the solution in the second half, and in both cases the solution lies in the mighty acts of God. But the solutions are different. In Psalm 73, the answer lies in what God *will* do with the wicked, when he casts them down. In Psalm 74, it lies in what he *has* done in the past for his people.

#### Psalm 73, Individual Distress

##### 1 A Psalm מזמור of Asaph.

This Psalm is a chiasm (Figure 3, chart),<sup>3</sup> reflecting Asaph's journey of faith, as he sees the success of the wicked in this world. He opens the first half of the Psalm by confessing the conflict between what he believes about God's goodness, and the prosperity of the wicked. Vv. 4-15 amplify this contrast, describing the prosperity of the wicked, and his discouragement in seeking to follow the Lord. The center of the Psalm, vv. 16-17, describes how his view is reversed, and that reversal is then played out in the last two sections. Vv. 18-26, corresponding to 4-15, describe the true destiny of the wicked and Asaph's new sense of security. The concluding contrast in 27-28 recognizes that it is the wicked who have a problem, while Asaph enjoys God's goodness.

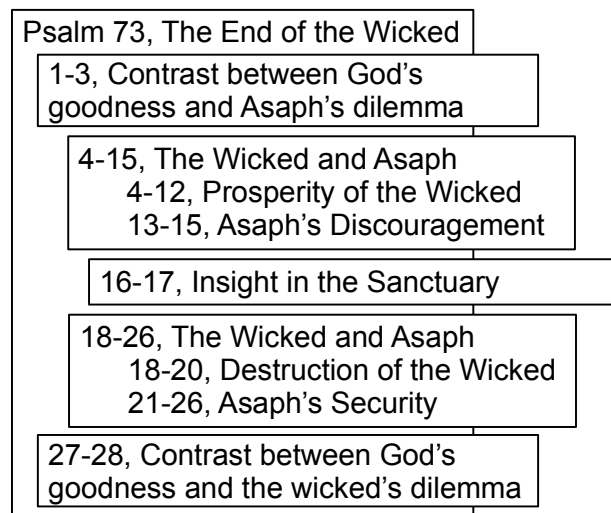


Figure 3: Structure of Psalm 73

Standing at the head of the Book of Desolation, this Psalm encourages us not to be dismayed by the apparent success of the wicked of which we are about to read.

**Truly אף God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart בר לבב**--Asaph is quoting David,<sup>4</sup>

3 This analysis draws heavily on Gregory T.K. Wong, "Psalm 73 as Ring Composition." *Biblica* 97.1 (2016) 16-40. The starts of main sections are marked with the particles אף (translated "truly, verily, surely"; vv. 1, 13, 18) and כי ("for, thus"; vv. 4, 21, 27), and the ends of sections with הנה ("behold," vv. 12, 15). See Wong for analysis of how the instances of כי in v. 3 and הנה in v. 27 are different from their structural instances.

4 These are the only instances of בר לבב in the Bible. Also, note how vv. 23-24 echo 16:7-11.

## Psalms 73-76

Psa 24:3 Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place? 4 He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart לבב בר; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.

This is the truth he has been taught to accept. But his experience is very different:

**2 But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. 3 For כי I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.**--All around, he sees wicked people who prosper.

The next two sections expand this contrast. First, we read of the prosperity of the wicked:

**4 For כי there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. 5 They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men. 6 Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment. 7 Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish. 8 They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily. 9 They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth. 10 Therefore his people return hither: and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them. 11 And they say, How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the most High? 12 Behold הנה, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches.**--They not only prosper, but afflict the righteous.

**13 Verily אך I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency. 14 For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning. 15 If I say, I will speak thus; behold הנה, I should offend against the generation of thy children.**--Here is Asaph's confusion—on the one hand, he feels that his efforts in righteousness are in vain, but on the others, he fears to offend his countrymen by speaking frankly.

**16 When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me; 17 Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end.**--He finds his answer when he comes into the sanctuary of God, focusing his attention on God rather than men, and associating with other saints rather than with the wicked. Here is a great value of assembling with God's people in the spiritual temple that he is constructing: it helps us keep the world in perspective. The principle here is the same as in Psalm 16:8: "I have set the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved."

In particular, he realizes what is their end, their destiny, which he goes on to describe:

**18 Surely אשׁ thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction. 19 How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors. 20 As a dream when one awaketh; so, O Lord, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise their image.**--Their wealth and success is only for a brief moment. Inevitably, God will visit his wrath on them, and they will be more than repaid.

**21 Thus כי my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. 22 So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee. 23 Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. 24 Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. 26 My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.**--The doubt of 13-15 is replaced with the joy of delighting in God. The four clauses of 23-24 echo 16:7-11, as v. 1 does 24:4.

## Psalms 73-76

27 For כִּי, lo הִנֵּה, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee. 28 But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all thy works.--He closes with another summary contrast. This time, he is the one who prospers, and the wicked are frustrated.

### **Psalm 74, Corporate Distress**

**1 Maschil of Asaph.**--The title means “instruction,” and probably refers to the lesson that God’s people should look to his past actions when they are discouraged at the triumph of the wicked.

Again, the poem is chiasmic (Figure 4, chart).<sup>5</sup> This time the sections are marked by shift in the verb forms, from imperatives to perfects to imperfects and imperatives, then back to perfects and imperatives. The outer members call on God to remember his people and act for their deliverance, and the center turning point echoes this call for God’s action. On either side are historical

“recollections” in the past tense. The first set, in 4-9, describe various attacks on God’s sanctuary and his people, all future from the perspective of Asaph, but seen by him as past because of his prophetic gift. The second set of recollections looks back to God’s deliverance of Israel at the time of the Exodus and wilderness wandering, and all the way back to the original creation. The movement of the Psalm is thus very similar to 73, but whereas that was a personal confession, this one focuses on the nation as a whole.

**O God, why hast thou cast us off for ever? why doth thine anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture? 2 Remember thy congregation, which thou hast purchased of old; the rod of thine inheritance, which thou hast redeemed; this mount Zion, wherein thou hast dwelt. 3 Lift up thy feet unto the perpetual desolations; even all that the enemy hath done wickedly in the sanctuary.**--After an invocation, the first section calls on God to do two things: remember his commitment to his people, and act on their behalf against the enemy.

The second section details the actions of the enemy. While some of the details fit the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, others are more appropriate to the Syrian defilement of 168 BC or the Roman conquest of AD 70.

**4 Thine enemies roar in the midst of thy congregations; they set up their ensigns for signs.**--This detail fits the Roman attack of AD 70 (chart):

And now the Romans, upon the flight of the seditious into the city, and upon the burning of the holy house itself, and of all the buildings around it, brought their ensigns to the temple and set them opposite its eastern gate; and there did they offer sacrifices to them, and there did they make Titus imperator, with the greatest acclamations of joy. (Josephus, “Jewish Wars,” 6.316)

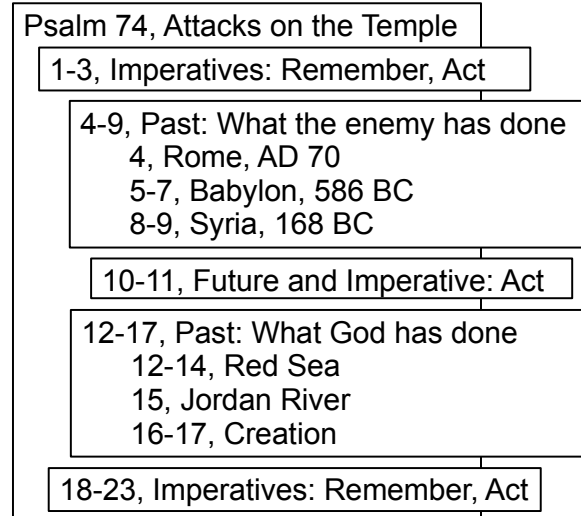


Figure 4: Structure of Psalm 74

5 I draw heavily on Graeme E. Sharrock, . Andrews University Seminary Studies 21.3 (Autumn 1983) 211-223.



## Psalms 73-76

We don't have any records of earlier enemies desecrating the temple with their ensigns, and this event is far past the end of the Psalter, confirming Asaph's ability as a seer.

**5 A man was famous according as he had lifted up axes upon the thick trees. 6 But now they break down the carved work thereof at once with axes and hammers. 7 They have cast fire into thy sanctuary, they have defiled by casting down the dwelling place of thy name to the ground.**--The burning of the temple marked both the Babylonian conquest of 586 BC (2 Kings 25:9), and the Roman destruction under Titus (Josephus, "Jewish Wars," 6.265-266).

**8 They said in their hearts, Let us destroy them together: they have burned up all the synagogues of God in the land. 9 We see not our signs: there is no more any prophet: neither is there among us any that knoweth how long.**--There certainly were prophets at the time of the Babylonian conquest, most notably Jeremiah and Ezekiel. But with Malachi, about 420 BC, prophecy ceased, and the reference here is probably to the events described in 1 Macc 54-59, the profanation of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes.

**10 O God, how long shall the adversary reproach? shall the enemy blaspheme thy name for ever? 11 Why withdrawest thou thy hand, even thy right hand? pluck it out of thy bosom.**--Chiasmic systems often exhibit a strong correspondence between the extremes and the center.<sup>6</sup> The call for God to pluck his hand from his bosom (that is, in order to act) recalls v. 3, "lift up thy feet," while v. 10 is echoed in v. 18.

Now we return to verbs in the past tense. His comfort in Psalm 73 came from what God would do in the future to the wicked, but here, he recalls what God has done for his people in the past.

**12 For God is my King of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. 13 Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength: thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. 14 Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces, and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness.**--The reference here is probably to the dividing of the Red Sea at the Exodus.

**15 Thou didst cleave the fountain and the flood: thou driedst up mighty rivers.**--Next we have God's victory over the River Jordan when the nation entered the land.

**16 The day is thine, the night also is thine: thou hast prepared the light and the sun. 17 Thou hast set all the borders of the earth: thou hast made summer and winter.**--Finally, he broadens his scope to emphasize the Lord's power over all creation.

The contrast between the actions of the enemy and those of God reflects an important principle. No matter what people may do to us, God has already demonstrated his power and love toward us, and that should encourage us that he will deliver us in his time. We see this in Romans 8. Paul recognizes the difficulties faced by believers (chart):

Rom 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

But he encourages himself and his readers by recalling God's past mighty acts:

Rom 8:31 What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? 32 He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?

6 Lund notes this as his third law (p. 41), and Mary Douglas (Thinking in Circles) considers it one of the defining characteristics of what she calls "ring construction."

## Psalms 73-76

This is exactly Asaph's argument.

Now we return to imperatives, recalling the opening and the turning point in vv. 10-11.

**18 Remember this, that the enemy hath reproached, O LORD, and that the foolish people have blasphemed thy name.**--Both verbs are repeated from v. 10.

**19 O deliver not the soul of thy turtledove unto the multitude of the wicked: forget not the congregation of thy poor for ever.**--Following the AV's translation,<sup>7</sup> this verse corresponds to v. 2 in the opening.

**20 Have respect unto the covenant: for the dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty. 21 O let not the oppressed return ashamed: let the poor and needy praise thy name. 22 Arise, O God, plead thine own cause: remember how the foolish man reproacheth thee daily.**--As in the opening and the center, he asks not only for God to remember, but also for him to act.

**23 Forget not the voice of thine enemies: the tumult of those that rise up against thee increaseth continually.**--A paraphrase of the repeated request "Remember."

**To the chief Musician, Altaschith**—"Do not destroy." The ending appears here and after Psalms 56, 57, and 58, in each case asking God to preserve his saints from the attacks they face.

## Psalms 75-76, Elohim's Kingship over the Nations

These Psalms occupy the same role in Book 3 that 45-48 did in Book 2 (Figure 2). Following individual and corporate laments over wickedness and national disaster, the compiler focuses our attention on the coming Messiah and his victorious reign.

### ***Psalm 75, Messiah's Mission***

**1 A Psalm or Song of Asaph.**--These two Psalms bear the double title "Psalm, Song." This title marked David's Psalms of restoration, Psalms 65:1; 66:1; 67:1; 68:1; and also introduces Psalms 30:1; 48:1; 75:1; 76:1; 83:1; 87:1; 88:1; 92:1; 98:1; 101:1; 108:1. All 15 Psalms are Psalms of praise, with the exception of 83 and 88, which will require special attention.

The Psalm is divided into two main parts by the shift from plural to singular pronouns after v. 1. The latter section is further subdivided by *Selah* after v. 3, and by disjunctive SV clauses in vv. 9 and 10.

These grammatical marks are confirmed by the resulting semantic symmetries (Figure 5, chart). First, the people praise God for his approaching intervention and speak of his past mighty deeds (the same future/past complementarity we saw in Psalms 73-74). Then an individual utters his intention to act in a chiasm that surrounds promised speech of warning to the wicked and praise to God with a commitment to judge righteously.

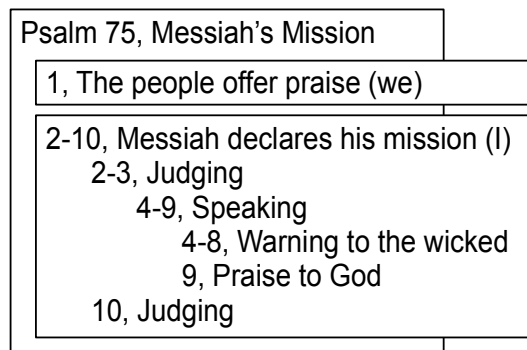


Figure 5: Structure of Psalm 75

7 Defended by Alexander, treating הָרֶמֶס as a collective "herd" as in 68:10.

## Psalms 73-76

**Unto thee, O God, do we give thanks, unto thee do we give thanks:**--In strong contrast to the complaints of Psalms 73-74, the Psalmist now leads the people in thanks to God.

**for that thy name is near**—According to the Massoretic punctuation, actually part of the first half of the verse, not the second: “and thy name is near.” Name as the character of God, cf. his revelation to Moses in Exod 34. “Thy name is near” means that he comes to his people in the full exercise of his character: compare (chart)

Isa 30:27 Behold, the name of the LORD cometh from far, burning with his anger, and the burden thereof is heavy: his lips are full of indignation, and his tongue as a devouring fire:

Note the emphasis on names and titles in the coming of the Messiah in Rev 19:11-13.

**thy wondrous works declare.**--Or “they [people] declare thy wondrous works.” This term for God’s gracious acts toward his people will come into focus in Psalm 78, where it repeatedly (vv. 4, 11, 32) refers to God’s historical acts toward his people, and again in Psalms 105-107, where we move into the fifth, triumphant book.

**2 When I shall receive the congregation**--The sudden change from plural to singular captures our attention. Who is this that breaks into the people’s thanksgiving? There are two options, which turn on our understanding of the term translated “congregation” מועד (Strong 4150). The word literally means “appointment,” and can refer to an appointed time, an appointed place, a meeting viewed as an event, or less commonly (Num 16:2), the people who gather at such a place or time. (See Notes for extended discussion.)

All modern commentators follow the LXX in translating the first clause as a reference to an appointed time and not to the congregation, e.g., ESV “at the set time that I appoint.” This makes the speaker God, who is declaring that he will set a time for bringing judgment. There are two difficulties with this interpretation. The first is that elsewhere we have references to setting a time, and this verb is never used in that sense. The second is that later, in vv. 4 and 9, “I” is clearly distinct from God, for the speaker talks about God in the third person (vv. 7-8, 9).

If we understand מועד in the less common but still attested sense of “congregation,” the speaker becomes someone to whom God has committed the care of his people. This fits very well with the figure that we have seen throughout the Psalter of the anointed king. God “gives” him dominion over those whom he rules (2:8), so it makes sense for him to speak of “receiving” the people and then exercising judgment over them. The Psalm thus becomes a vision of the Messiah, parallel to Psalm 45 (the royal wedding), which occupies the same position in Book 2, and the third person references to God reflect the Messiah’s reverence for and submission to God as he leads the people in praise.

With this understanding, the approach of God’s “name” takes the form of the Messiah stepping forth to declare his mission, warn the wicked, and lead the nation’s praise.

**I will judge uprightly.**--Recall that the task of “judging” goes far beyond our notion of the limited role of the judiciary, and includes everything that a king does. This is the task for which Solomon asked help when he assumed the throne:

1Ki 3:9 Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to **judge** this thy so great a people?

In the NT, our Lord claims that the Father has committed this task to him:



## Psalms 73-76

Joh 5:22 For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son: 23 That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him.

**3 The earth and all the inhabitants thereof are dissolved: I bear up the pillars of it.**--The clauses are not independent. The first is participial, describing the context of the second. In addition, the “I” is emphatic. Thus: “When the earth ... dissolved, it is I who bear up the pillars of it.” That is, when society appears ready to collapse and all hope has vanished, the Messianic king comes to stabilize it and make it firm.

This promise is closely related to v. 2. Society dissolves when the righteous are punished and the wicked excused. The Messianic king promises to judge righteous judgment.

The image of “the pillars of the earth,” like much of the imagery in this Psalm, comes from the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, where she is thanking God for the birth of Samuel and dedicating him to the Lord. Table 1 (chart) shows the correspondences. In addition to “the pillars<sup>8</sup> of the earth” (2 Sm 2:8), the speaker draws on Hannah’s image of the exalted horn, the exhortation to the proud to moderate their speech, God as the only one who can promote and demote, and the certain destruction that faces those who oppose the Lord.

Song of Hannah, 1 Samuel 2:1-10	Psalm 75:2-10
<p>1 My heart rejoiceth in the LORD, <b>mine horn is exalted in the LORD</b>: my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation. 2 There is none holy as the LORD: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like our God. 3 <b>Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth</b>: for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. 4 The bows of the mighty men are broken, and they that stumbled are girded with strength. 5 They that were full have hired out themselves for bread; and they that were hungry ceased: so that the barren hath born seven; and she that hath many children is waxed feeble. 6 <b>The LORD killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up.</b> 7 <b>The LORD maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up.</b> 8 He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: <b>for the pillars of the earth are the LORD'S, and he hath set the world upon them.</b> 9 He will keep the feet of his saints, and the wicked shall be silent in darkness; for by strength shall no man prevail. 10 <b>The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces</b>; out of heaven shall he thunder upon them: the LORD shall judge the ends of the earth; and he shall give strength unto his king, and <b>exalt the horn</b> of his anointed.</p>	<p>1 When I shall receive the congregation I will judge uprightly. 3 The earth and all the inhabitants thereof are dissolved: <b>I bear up the pillars of it.</b> Selah. 4 I said unto the fools, Deal not foolishly: and to the wicked, <b>Lift not up the horn:</b> 5 <b>Lift not up your horn on high: speak not with a stiff neck.</b> 6 For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. 7 <b>But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another.</b> 8 <b>For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup, and the wine is red; it is full of mixture; and he poureth out of the same: but the dregs thereof, all the wicked of the earth shall wring them out, and drink them.</b> 9 But I will declare for ever; I will sing praises to the God of Jacob. 10 <b>All the horns of the wicked also will I cut off; but the horns of the righteous shall be exalted.</b></p>

*Table 1: Parallels between Psalm 75 and the Song of Hannah*

The extensive use of a poem by an earlier saint reinforces the notion that the speaker here is the Messianic king rather than God. In particular, Hannah’s song closes with an anticipation of the

8 Hannah uses a rare term derived from a verb “to melt” and anticipating pillars made of molten metal, as in Solomon’s temple. Asaph, like Job (9:6), uses the more common  $\text{מִצְּיֹן}$ .

## Psalms 73-76

coming of the Messiah (1Sa 2:10 “the LORD shall ... exalt the horn of his anointed”), making it a good pattern for the Messiah.

**Selah.**--The Selah marks a major break. Having declared his mission, he now conveys the message that characterizes his rule.

Messiah’s rule is characterized by what he says, which he summarizes in two ways. First, in some detail, he warns evildoers of the Lord’s certain judgment.

**4 I said unto the fools, Deal not foolishly: and to the wicked, Lift not up the horn: 5 Lift not up your horn on high: speak not with a stiff neck.**--People in the Bible often speak of someone’s horn being lifted up to reflect victory, probably from their observations of the behavior of wild animals in combat. While they are fighting, their heads are down, but the victor raises his head, and thus his horns, to proclaim his triumph.

The first instance of the idiom in the Bible is at the start and conclusion of the song of Hannah (Table 1).

The four references to the horn in this Psalm (vv. 4, 5, and twice in 10) is the densest concentration in Psalms, and the first time the idiom is used of a person’s victory. We have another cluster at the end of Book 3, 89:17, 18, both times speaking of the nation’s horn being exalted רום (as here in vv. 4, 5, and 10), and four of the five remaining instances in Books 4 and 5 repeat this hopeful idiom.

**6 For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. 7 But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another.**--The ambition of the wicked is misguided. They are not the masters of their own fate. God is the one who raises up one person and puts down another. Again, the speaker is drawing on Hannah’s song, vv. 6-8.

**8 For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup, and the wine is red; it is full of mixture; and he poureth out of the same: but the dregs thereof, all the wicked of the earth shall wring them out, and drink them.**--If they refuse to heed this warning, the Lord will bring sure judgment on them. Once again, we hear echoes of Hannah’s praise, in v. 10.

The last two verses are marked off by the disjunctive structure of the first clause.

**9 But I will declare for ever; I will sing praises to the God of Jacob.**--The Messiah not only speaks to the wicked to warn them, but also leads in praising the nation’s God, a theme we have seen previously:

Psa 22:22 I will declare thy name unto my brethren: **in the midst of the congregation** will I praise thee. 23 Ye that fear the LORD, praise him; all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify him; and fear him, all ye the seed of Israel. 24 For he hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he cried unto him, he heard. 25 My praise shall be of thee **in the great congregation**: I will pay my vows before them that fear him. 26 **The meek shall eat and be satisfied**: they shall praise the LORD that seek him: your heart shall live for ever.

Psa 69:30 I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify him with thanksgiving. 31 This also shall please the LORD better than an ox or bullock that hath horns and hoofs. 32 **The humble shall see this, and be glad**: and your heart shall live that seek God.

## Psalms 73-76

Psa 71:18 Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not; until I have shewed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to every one that is to come.

**10 All the horns of the wicked also will I cut off; but the horns of the righteous shall be exalted.**--Closing out the chiasm, the Messiah defines the “upright judgment” promised in v. 2. It recalls the standard Moses gave Israel’s judges:

Deu 25:1 If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgment, that the judges may judge them; then they shall justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked.

**To the chief Musician on Neginoth**—This is the last of the seven times in Psalms that this name occurs, calling for accompaniment on stringed instruments.

### **Psalm 76, God’s Universal Judgment**

**1 A Psalm or Song of Asaph.**--The Psalm is chiasmic (Figure 6, chart), with divisions marked by shifts in whether God is described in the third person (1-3, 8b-9, 11-12), or the object of direct address (4-8a, 10). Along with this symmetrical structure is a progression from his local focus on Jerusalem (1-3) to his worldwide authority (9, 12).

#### Psalm 76, God Arises in Judgment

1-3, Praise about God’s work in Israel (“He”)  
4-8a, Praise to God for victory (“Thou”)  
8b-9, The earth fears God’s judgment (“He”)  
10, Praise to God for judgment (“Thou”)  
11-12, Command for all to praise the Lord (“He”)

*Figure 6: Structure of Psalm 76*

The LXX has an additional phrase in the heading: “a song for the Assyrian.” They, and most later commentators, understand the Psalm to describe the defeat of the army of Sennacherib before the gates of Jerusalem in 701 BC, as recorded in Isaiah 36-37 and 2 Kings 18-19. The Assyrian king subdued Lachish, in the Shephelah, and sent his representative Rabshakeh (“chief of the princes”) “with a great army” (Isa 36:2) to demand Jerusalem’s surrender. His demand boasted of Assyria’s power over the gods of other nations. Speaking in Hebrew so that the population of Jerusalem could understand him, he said,

Isa 36:18 Beware lest Hezekiah persuade you, saying, The LORD will deliver us. Hath any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? 19 Where are the gods of Hamath and Arphad? where are the gods of Sepharvaim? and have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? 20 Who are they among all the gods of these lands, that have delivered their land out of my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?

Isaiah assured Hezekiah that God would deliver them. But Rabshakeh persisted, with a letter to Hezekiah:

Isa 37:9 he sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying, 10 Thus shall ye speak to Hezekiah king of Judah, saying, Let not thy God, in whom thou trustest, deceive thee, saying, Jerusalem shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. 11 Behold, thou hast heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands by destroying them utterly; and shalt thou be delivered? 12 Have the gods of the nations delivered them which my fathers have destroyed, as Gozan, and Haran, and Rezeph, and the children of Eden which were in Telassar? 13 Where is the king of Hamath, and the king of Arphad, and the king of the city of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivah?

## Psalm 73-76

Isaiah cast the matter on the Lord:

Isa 37:14 And Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it: and Hezekiah went up unto the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD.

The Lord responded with an eloquent assurance from Isaiah, concluding,

Isa 37:33 Therefore thus saith the LORD concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shields, nor cast a bank against it. 34 By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the LORD. 35 For I will defend this city to save it for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake.

Then, after two chapters of Assyrian bluster, the Lord resolves the issue overnight.

Isa 37:36 Then the angel of the LORD went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.

That was not the end of the story.

Isa 37:37 So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh. 38 And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Armenia: and Esarhaddon his son reigned in his stead.

The Psalm begins by speaking about God, with a focus on Jerusalem.

**In Judah is God known: his name is great in Israel.**--In keeping with Sennacherib's focus on Jerusalem, the Psalm begins by recognizing God's greatness in Judah, (Jeru)Salem, and Zion.

**2 In Salem also is his tabernacle, and his dwelling place in Zion.**--The word translated "tabernacle" never has this meaning elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> but it is used at least twice to describe the covert or lair of a lion:

Psa 10:9 He [the wicked] lieth in wait secretly as a lion in his den:

Jer 25:38 He [the Lord] hath forsaken his covert, as the lion:

We should probably translate here, "His lair came to be in Salem, and his den on Zion." God is pictured as a powerful beast of prey, dwelling in Zion and ready to come out against any who oppose him. Isaiah calls Jerusalem "Ariel," "the lion of God" (29:1, 2, 7), and later develops this image:

Isa 31:4 For thus hath the LORD spoken unto me, Like as the lion and the young lion roaring on his prey, when a multitude of shepherds is called forth against him, he will not be afraid of their voice, nor abase himself for the noise of them: so shall the LORD of hosts come down to fight for mount Zion, and for the hill thereof.

**3 There brake he the arrows of the bow, the shield, and the sword, and the battle. Selah.**--In particular, this powerful God has destroyed a military threat, which certainly fits the Assyrian challenge.

**4 Thou art more glorious and excellent than the mountains of prey.**--Now the Psalmist turns from speaking about God to talking to him. While the KJV translation is technically correct, an

<sup>9</sup> The word here is דֶּבַע. A related word, מִדְּבַע, means "tent" and is used for the tabernacle.

## Psalms 73-76

alternative is more in keeping with v. 2: “Thou art glorious and excellent, from the mountains of prey.” The lion comes from his hunt, victorious over his foes.

**5 The stouthearted are spoiled, they have slept their sleep: and none of the men of might have found their hands. 6 At thy rebuke, O God of Jacob, both the chariot and horse are cast into a dead sleep.**--This description fits the judgment described in Isa 37:36, which fell on the Assyrian army during the night. They never awoke.

**7 Thou, even thou, art to be feared: and who may stand in thy sight when once thou art angry? 8 Thou didst cause judgment to be heard from heaven**—Here is the ultimate answer to Assyria’s bragging. The Lord brought them low.

**the earth feared, and was still, 9 When God arose to judgment, to save all the meek of the earth. Selah.**--The Psalm begins in Salem, but now it is the earth that fears, and all the meek of the earth whom God defends in his judgment.

**10 Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain.**--The final verb **הגיר** Strong 2296 means “to gird oneself, to put on.” The point is not that God holds back the wrath of man. Rather, he uses it to bring praise to himself, and if anything remains to be done, he girds on that wrath and moves into action.

This is the characteristic of the Assyrian threat against Jerusalem. They were angry with Hezekiah for not submitting, but in fact God put them to shame, bringing praise to himself.

**11 Vow, and pay unto the LORD your God: let all that be round about him bring presents unto him that ought to be feared.**--Now we move to the final third person praise. Throughout its history, Israel was tempted to send tribute to earthly kings. Asaph insists that only the Lord is worthy of our gifts of homage.

**12 He shall cut off the spirit of princes: he is terrible to the kings of the earth.**--Continuing the universal emphasis, the lion from Salem subdues all the rulers of the earth.

Like the events of Psalm 74, the Assyrian threat to Jerusalem came centuries after the time of Asaph. His description of it in this Psalm is another example of his gift as a seer.

**To the chief Musician, to Jeduthun**—Cf. 1 Chr 25:1; apparently, another name for Ethan, responsible for leading a choir of praise.

## Notes

### **75:2 כי אקה מועד**

AV “when I receive the congregation” understands **מועד** to describe the people who assemble, in keeping with its standard translation of **אהל מועד** as “tent of the congregation.” Modern lexicographers do not recognize this meaning, preferring “appointed time of meeting,” “appointed place of meeting” (74:4, 8), and then “assembly” as the event, rather than the participants. The usual term for the people **עדה**. But Num 16:2 seems to show that the meeting can refer by metonymy of the adjunct (Bullinger p. 587) to those in the meeting: the rebel leaders were **קראי מועד**, appointed by the meeting, that is, by those in the meeting (parallel to **נשיאי עדה** in the previous clause).



## Psalms 73-76

It is remarkable that AV chose “receive the congregation,” when both the Geneva Bible and the Bishops’ Bible, following LXX, render מועד as “time” (καιρος). One would love to know the discussions that led to this change; I suspect they hinged on the use of the verb לקח. What does it mean to “receive a set time”? One expects שים as in Ex 9:5, or יעד as in 2 Sam 20:5. But the image of a royal candidate being given a kingdom to rule is widespread (Ps 2:8; 110:1; Luke 19:12; Dan 7:14), and לקח is the natural correlative to נתן, though I haven’t found a case of לקח being used specifically in the sense of receiving a kingdom. (The image does arise in the NT, Luke 19:12, 15:

Luk 19:12 He said therefore, A certain nobleman went into a far country **to receive for himself a kingdom**, and to return. 13 And he called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds, and said unto them, Occupy till I come. ... 15 And it came to pass, that when he was returned, **having received the kingdom**,

ASV “When I shall find the set time” is the best of the temporal interpretations, preserving the passive nature of לקח. The speaker is not in control of this time, but is subject to it.

Calvin mentions the interpretation referring to the people, and Gill prefers this rendering.

If מועד here means “time,” the 1s pronouns are difficult to interpret. The one who “sets the time” must be God, so v. 2 must be a divine oracle, yet the one speaking in the first person goes on to refer to God in vv. 7-9. This language is much easier to understand if the speaker is the Messianic king whom we have so often met throughout the book. But this king does not “set the time” of judgment; rather, he “receives the kingdom” and then proceeds to discharge his duties under God’s authority.

The KJV translators clearly knew of the “time” interpretation, which both the Geneva Bible and the Bishops’ Bible follow. Their charter was to harmonize those two rival translations, and when they deviate from both, that’s usually a clue to some intense discussion and deep insight among the translators, and their rendering commends itself to us.