

Tehillim



Psalms, Chapter 3:1-9

(The following material is compiled predominantly from an anthology of Orthodox Jewish commentary, written and arranged by Rabbi Avroham Chaim Feuer from the *Artscroll Tanach Series Tehillim Volume 1*. Additional insights from a Nazarene Israelite perspective have been added by Jason Jordan. The translation of the TaNaK [Old Testament] used in this work is by Rabbi Avroham Chaim Feuer, Rabbi Nsson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz.)

Three main subjects need to be discussed before Chapter 3 of Psalms can be analysed. They are:

- The life of King David leading up to the exploits of his son Absalom
- Why events appear jumbled in the Psalms
- And an overview of Absalom himself

King David – A Quick Overview

King David was an accomplished man. By the time he was coroneted he was a skilled warrior, musician, writer and ruler. He ruled for approximately 40 years, between 110 to 970BCE. In that time he united all twelve tribes of Israel and through military conquest extended Israel's borders from Egypt to the River Euphrates. He put the Philistines to an end, conquered Jerusalem, reacquired the Ark of the Covenant and paved the way for building the Holy Temple. Despite an almost flawless reign, his life (as we have already begun to see) was plagued by strife. The Book of Psalms, Samuel 1 & 2, Kings 1 & 2 and Chronicles 1 give us the most detailed accounts of his life.

He was the youngest son of a princely family of Judah called "Jesse," whose significance is mentioned in *Isaiah 11:1-10*; ***"There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots... And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, Who shall stand as a banner to the people; For the Gentiles shall seek Him, And His resting place shall be glorious."***

King David was a direct descendent of the convert Ruth, who preferred to become a simple Israelite rather than return to her royal Moabite family. David was the youngest of seven brothers and began life as a shepherd of Bethlehem. He received an anointing to be king of Israel by the prophet Samuel. At this time the Holy Spirit fell on him. The Holy Spirit had since left Israel's present king, King Saul, making him troubled. To ease his nerves he sent for a musician to play soothing melodies. The

king's attendant summoned David. Saul was so pleased with David's music that he called upon him regularly.

After David's triumph over Goliath, Saul promised David his eldest daughter, but David fell in love with his youngest daughter, Michal. What followed was a string of wives for David until it finally ended with Bathsheba who became David's ninth wife. Over this time, David has around 19 sons (Amnon, Daniel (Chileab), Absalom, Adonijah, Shephatiah, Ithream, Shimea, Shobab, Nathan, Solomon, Ibhar, Elishama, Eliphelet, Nogah, Nepheg, Japhia, Elishama, Eliada, and Eliphelet) and additional sons to some of his 9 concubines. The taking of additional wives and concubines causes punishments of such a diverse magnitude to hit David that he receives harsh trials in steady instalment plans for the rest of his life. One of the most difficult trials of his life was the revolt of his son Absalom, mentioned in this chapter of Psalms.

Psalms and Sequential Order

Chapter 3 of Psalms describes King David's flight from his son Absalom, a tragic incident that took place when the King was sixty-five years old - near the end of his life. The placement of this chapter so near the beginning of Psalms is interesting. To add to this interest, there are incidences in David's early life that are found toward the end of Psalms. Why is this?

Like the Torah, Psalms is arranged slightly out of succession. According to the Sage, Rabbi Eleazar, "The portions of the Torah were purposely recorded without proper sequence, because had they been in order, whoever read them would have the power to revive the dead and perform miracles."

Though, on the surface, the Torah does appear to follow a general sequence, closer examination will reveal that certain events are arranged out of sync.

Like the Torah, the true order of reading the Psalms is concealed and known only to the rare few who have toiled over it sufficiently. The Torah is Elohim's blueprint for life and having the Psalms out of order, like the Torah gives man a challenge to toil over it in an effort to achieve understanding. If the Torah's core essence were spelled out clearly and unambiguously, then anyone could know the secret of producing life and manipulating nature without exerting any effort to draw close to YHWH with a lifelong commitment to studying his Word.

As in the previous chapter, when Gog and Magog were alluded to, this chapter's missequencing also alludes to the anarchy and disintegration of authority that will happen when a slave shall rise up against its master as King David's son also rose up against him. But as King David eventually prevailed over his son, the Messiah will also prevail over Israel's future enemies.

Who Was Absalom?

"A true appreciation of this Psalm is impossible without understanding the historical background of Absalom's revolt." – *Artscroll Tanak Series Tehillim Volume 1*

Absalom was the third son of King David. Absalom or Abshalom means, “Peace is my father.” **2 Samuel 14:25** describes him as the most handsome man in the kingdom.

The seed of rebellion were laid in Absalom in his reaction to the rape of his sister Tamar by King David’s eldest son Amnon. After two years, as if waiting to see if his father would punish Amnon sufficiently for his act, Absalom decided to take matters into his own hands and send his servants to murder Amnon at a feast in which he invited all his father’s sons (**2 Samuel 13**).

After this, Absalom flees and goes “...to **Talmai son of Ammihud, the king of Geshur. But King David mourned for his son every day.**” (**2 Samuel 13:37**). Three years later, Absalom is fully reinstated in his father's favour according to **2 Samuel 13:38-39**.

Absalom becomes the eldest surviving son of King David. Four years on Absalom begins to realise, after the birth of Solomon, that he would miss out on the throne and stages a revolt at Hebron. The residences of Hebron, insulted by the removal of the nation’s capital from their city to Jerusalem, easily rally to his cause.

Over the years, Absalom was able to recruit so many supporters because of the way he operated when men of Israel came to seek advice from King David. “**He would get up early and stand by the side of the road leading to the city gate. Whenever anyone came with a complaint to be placed before the king for a decision, Absalom would call out to him, ‘What town are you from?’ He would answer, ‘Your servant is from one of the tribes of Israel.’**” (**Samuel 15:2**) Then Absalom would say, “**Look, your claims are valid and proper, but there is no representative of the king to hear you.**” (**Samuel 15:3**) “**Absalom behaved in this way toward all the Israelites who came to the king asking for justice, and so he stole the hearts of the men of Israel.**” (**2 Samuel 15:6**)

Absalom didn’t believe in his heart that King David could judge the people fairly. Ever since he observed the way his father dealt with Amnon, he could not let go of his opinion that he knew better than his father. Over such a long period of time his rebellion grew and became entrenched in his heart like an impenetrable fortress.

Finally he was killed in the Battle of Ephraim Wood. His army was completely routed, and Absalom himself had become caught by his head in the boughs of an oak-tree. David had charged his men to deal gently with him, but Joab, David's commander, killed Absalom by thrusting three spears through his heart as he struggled in the branches followed by his ten armor-bearers who came around and slew him.

Despite his rebellion, King David was grief stricken at his son's death and ordered a great heap of stones to be erected where he fell.

Now that a little bit more back-story to David’s life and Absalom’s rebellion has been revealed let’s look into Psalms 3.

“A song of David, as he fled from Absalom his son. YHWH, how many are my tormentors! The great rise up against me!” (Psalms 3:1-2)

“A song of David...” Whenever the name David occurs before the phrase, ‘A song,’ divine breath came first, which gave birth to the song. But when the phrase, “A song,” precedes David’s name, David elevated himself to the level of the divine. So if a Psalms reads, “A song of David...” this means ‘divine breath descended on David, giving birth to the song.’ But if the Psalms reads, “To David, a song,” this means that ‘David ascended to the level of the divine, causing the outpouring to the song.’

In the case of the Psalm in question, divine breath did not come first because David was in some distress over his son’s revolt. But after the Psalm was forwarded to the Levites in the Temple, it was given the additional title, “A song of David,” to denote the joyous salvation that eventuated in the course of David’s grim situation. At the time, though David was depressed, he had already perceived through prayer, that his kingdom would be returned to him.

His depression was not compounded by surprise, because YHWH had already warned him what was going to happen. **2 Samuel 12:11; “I will raise up evil against you from your own house.”**

“...how many are my tormentors!” Literally, ‘How many are my opponents! Even my own son is against me!’ “Many” signifies that the majority were against him.

“The great rise up against me!” “The great” indicates that the greatest men of Israel were among this majority who had turned on David.

“The great say of my soul, ‘There is no salvation for him from Elohim.’ Selah! But You YHWH are my shield for me for my soul, and to raise up my pride.” (Psalms 3:3-4)

“The great...” This second reference to “the great” reinforces the level of influence and power of those among David’s people who sought to kill him.

“...say of my soul...” The great meditate, plan and take action against David.

“There is no salvation for him from Elohim.” This was being said because of David’s sin with a married woman. Many great men of Israel were thoroughly convinced that King David had forfeited his share in the World to Come.

“Selah!” This is a reaffirmation of the preceding statement. It means “certainty” and in this case can be interpreted as, ‘This is certain and forever binding.’ The word “Selah” is also used as musical direction, indicating special emphasis. We know this because “selah” is only used in Psalms and three times in the Book of Habakuk, which is also arranged to be sung in the same style as Tehillim.

“But You YHWH are my shield for me for my soul...” This response is infused with a truly penitent heart. King David knows that the truly repentant are worthy of a complete pardon and protection from YHWH, who is all merciful. The Sage, Radak renders, “You, HaShem, are a shield for my body in this world and a shield for my soul in the World to Come.”

“...and to raise up my pride.” Literally raise David’s head.

“With my voice I call out to YHWH, and He answers me from his holy mountain. Selah. I lay down and slept; yet I awoke, for YHWH supports me.”(Psalms 5-6)

“With my voice I call out to YHWH...” The Sage Ibn Ezra comments that David sees Elohim as a shield because he knows that to prevail, he need not enter into battle, but simply call out sincerely to YHWH with his voice and his victory will be assured.

“...He answers me from his holy mountain.” King David was so confident in YHWH, that His assistance, even before it was rendered, was viewed as though it already happened.

“I lay down and slept; yet I awoke, for YHWH supports me.” In the darkest hour of his despair, David still managed to sleep normally. In the morning he awoke in triumph because YHWH had filled him afresh with new confidence.

This also signifies King David’s habit of hanging his harp over his bed so that when the north wind blew at midnight he would awaken to study Torah and now that he did not have his harp over the place where he slept, he awoke at midnight anyway.

“I fear not the myriad of people deployed against me on every side. Rise up, YHWH, save me my Elohim! For You struck all my enemies on the cheek, You broke the teeth of the wicked. Salvation is YHWH’s upon Your people is Your blessing. Selah.” (Psalms 7-9)

“I fear not the myriad of people...” The majority of Israel followed Absalom, but because of YHWH’s support I shall not fear even the most overwhelming odds.

“...deployed against me on every side.” My enemies deliberately place themselves against me and concoct strategise for war. Their dragnet will not snare me.

“Rise up, YHWH, save me my Elohim!” Grant my request for mercy because even as a judge in Your capacity to administrator unbending strict justice, I still merit salvation.

“For You struck all my enemies on the cheek, You broke the teeth of the wicked.” Strike at their jawbone, which is used to articulate speech. Strike it and break because they have slandered me and in doing so also slandered the Most High. Teeth symbolise the breaking down of food so that it can be more easily accepted into the body. Break their teeth so that they will not have the capacity to break down nutritious food into digestible portions.

“Salvation is YHWH’s, upon Your people is Your blessing. Selah.” It is YHWH’s obligation alone to save His people. YHWH chooses to derive strength from the blessings and prayers of man. **“He rides the heavens with your [man’s] help.” (Deuteronomy 33:26)** The greater the intensity of man’s prayers the greater the opportunity to guide the destiny of the universe.