

BETWEEN MEMORY AND ANTICIPATION

An Exploration of Psalm 126

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תהלים קכו שיר המעלות

בשוב ה' את־שיבת ציון היינו כחלמים:
אז ימלא שחוק פינו ולשוננו רנה
אז יאמרו בגוים הגדיל ה' לעשות עם־אלה:
הגדיל ה' לעשות עמנו היינו שמחים:
שובה ה' את־[שביטנו] כמפיקים בנגב:
הזרעים בדמעה ברנה יקצרו:
הלוח ילך ובכה נשא מִשַׁךְ־הַזֶּרַע
בא־יבא ברנה נשא אֶלְמִתֵּיו:

Psalm 126

A song of ascents.

*When God restored the fortunes of Zion—we were like those who dream—
our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues, with songs of joy.
Then they said among the nations, “God has done great things for them!”
God has done great things for us and we rejoiced.
Restore our fortunes, God, like watercourses in the Negeb.
They who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy.
Though he goes along weeping, carrying the seed-bag,
he shall come back with songs of joy, carrying his sheaves.*

On Shabbat, Rosh Hodesh, and holidays, it is customary to recite Psalm 126. “When God restored the fortunes of Zion,” we declare, “we were like those who dream” (Psalm 126:1). Living one day a week in a world already redeemed—a world, in other words, that is entirely Shabbat—we chant the psalm that best expresses the wonder of restoration and the exultation of return.¹

There is some debate over how to interpret the opening phrase of this psalm. Although some translators take these words to refer to the future (“When God restores the fortunes of Zion, we **will be** like those who dream”), I follow the majority of

modern translators in understanding them as speaking about a past redemption, most likely the return from captivity in Babylon; hence, “When God restored the fortunes of Zion, we **were** like those who dream.”²

After two more verses that describe the delight of being restored to the Land, and thereby to new hope and possibility, verse 4 seems to change course. “Restore our fortunes, God,” we pray. What had been an accomplished reality in verses 1-3 now becomes an urgent plea instead. The opening phrase from verse 1, “to restore the fortunes,”³ now becomes

a petition for the future instead of a celebration of the past.

There are, I think, two very different ways to hear and experience this transition. Some scholars suggest that the prayer is for completion of a process that has already begun. The people have indeed been permitted to return, and consequently there is laughter and joy in the land (verses 2-3), but there are also difficult realities of day-to-day existence to confront. The promises of the prophets have been fulfilled, but only in a limited way. Partial redemption is still redemption, but the yearning for more is palpable. And so we pray.⁴

1 The practice of reciting Psalm 126 at festive times stands in stark contrast to—and in dialectical tension with—the very different practice of reciting Psalm 137 on weekdays. “By the rivers of Babylon,” we recall, “there we sat—and yet we wept as we remembered Zion.” Living in a woefully unredeemed world—a world, in other words, that is not yet Shabbat—we chant the psalm that best expresses the pain of exile. “How can we sing the Lord’s song on alien soil?” we ask; and then we vow, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither” (Psalm 137:1, 4-5). Whereas during the week, we give voice to the suffering that stems from living in an unredeemed world, on Shabbat and holidays we express the joy that comes from living—anticipatorily—in a redeemed one.

2 Tenses in the Psalms are notoriously difficult. The KJV, NIV, NRSV, and CEB translations all take the verse to be speaking of the past; the NJPS, in contrast, takes it as referring to the future. Interestingly, there are differing versions of Rashi’s interpretation of the verse. According to the Novetzky edition available at alhatorah.org, for example, Rashi takes the verse to refer to the past (“*hayinu*”); according to Vienna 220, in contrast, he takes it to refer to the future (“*nihiyeh*”).

3 I leave for another day the complex scholarly debates about whether verse 1 is best taken to refer to God restoring the fortunes of Zion or to God bringing back the captives to Zion.

4 For an interpretation of the psalm along these lines, see, for example, Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 73-150* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), pp. 235-236; and Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, volume 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), p. 910. Clifford also discusses another dimension of redemption’s partiality: although some have returned, many have not yet done so, and the psalmist prays they too will soon come back to the Land.

Read this way, the psalm gives subtle expression to the pain of waiting, but it is fundamentally hopeful and even optimistic. God will indeed finish what God has started. This may well have been how the psalm was originally intended and understood.

But there is another, very different way of hearing the text too, one that perhaps grows more resonant during times when the world seems profoundly broken and redemption seems impossibly far away.⁵ We are forced to live in the seemingly interminable gap between God's past interventions and God's future ones. And life in that gap—or chasm—is intensely painful.

Read this way, the second half of the psalm is still hopeful, but it is also plaintive and weary.

The exhaustion is real: so much waiting is asked of us, so much living in the perpetual not yet. But weariness is not equivalent to despair. God has acted in the past. Just when things seemed darkest, God brought glimmers of light. And hard as it can be for so many of us to believe, the psalm reminds us—insistently and joyfully—that God will act similarly in the future.

During the festival of Pesah, we recall—and more importantly, we re-enact—the Exodus from Egypt. Just when it seemed that the Israelites were destined to be slaves forever, God intervened to liberate them, and God brought the Egyptian empire to its knees.

We live in a very different world. The Jewish people are, for the most part, not oppressed—though there is no lack of people who hate us and wish us ill. But the world as a whole, and the country in which I write, seem unbearably broken. Redemption seems ever so far away.

Pesah and Psalm 126, however, remind us: the status quo need not be the final word. Readers will have very different perspectives on what it would mean for God to intervene, to complete what God began long ago, and I will not pretend to resolve those theological debates here. In any case, we are tasked with holding fast to one of the fundamental messages of the Exodus, that the darkest times need not go

on forever. Just as we were redeemed once, so shall we be redeemed again.

To live with God is to live in the space between the first three verses of this psalm and the last three. We remember what God has done in the past, and we long for what God will yet do in the future; we live between memory and hope. The spiritual life is, to no small extent, about embracing both “joy remembered and joy anticipated.”⁶



5 Indeed, over the course of Jewish history, as memories of redemption grew dimmer and receded into the mists of time, devout Jews no doubt experienced acute disappointment and even heartbreak. In the past, when we were subdued and downtrodden, many likely felt, God redeemed us, but now exile seems only to go on and on.

6 James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), p. 399.