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Psalm 3

meditation 1— Introductory

Before jumping right into this third Psalm, we should offer a few introductory comments about our approach to it and the four psalms that follow it. Psalms 3-7 have traditionally been identified as belonging to the genre or form of “lament.” Some have labeled such psalms, “Complaint.” Each of these five psalms have an element of lament or complaint. However, as we will see, each contains expressions of trust in God even in the midst of complaint.

These five psalms have much in common. I will treat them almost as if they form a distinct collection within the Psalms, each psalm centered in the same or similar circumstances. As I understand them, each Psalm addresses attacks made against the Psalmist’s character. These attacks take the form of accusation of wrongdoing against the Psalmist.

In this third Psalm, we sense accusation in the Psalmist’s complaint concerning his enemies’ assertion that “He’ll get no help from ’ēlohîm”! and then his confident confession that God is “defender of my reputation and the one who restores my standing. The Psalmist complains about false attacks on his character again in Psalm 4.

“How long will you men of repute smear my reputation?
How long will you love falsehood
and seek after deception?”¹

Allusion to the false accusations of wrongdoing that his enemies level against him appear again in 5.⁸⁻¹⁰ and 7.^{3-4, 6-9}. Accusation of wrongdoing and attacks on the Psalmist’s character, then, form a common theme through these five psalms.

As I understand them, these five psalms represent prayers of complaint, and confessions of trust in God, and request for divine assistance offered during the night in what some call an “incubation” ritual. This ritual is likely conducted at the temple.² We see indications of a nighttime setting in several passages.

“I retire, sleep peacefully,
and awake, knowing that YHWH supports me.”³

“Completely at peace, I will lie down and fall fast asleep;
for only You, YHWH, allow me to rest securely.”⁴

“YHWH, You’ll hear my voice in the morning.
At first light, I’ll present myself to You and anticipate Your response...”⁵

“All night long I inundate my bed with tears.
I flood my bedchamber.”⁶

¹ Psalm 4.²

² See Psalm 3.⁴ and 5.⁷

³ Psalm 3.⁵

⁴ Psalm 4.⁸

⁵ Psalm 5.³

⁶ Psalm 6.⁶

There are other points of contact between these five Psalms including vocabulary as well as themes. Such concentration on the theme of accusation might seem strange to some. We will address this in following meditations focused on Psalm 3. But we end this meditation with another theme these five psalms share. Indeed, it is a theme that runs throughout the entire Book of Psalms no matter the situation or genre. That theme is one of trust and confidence. Trust and confidence in God. We hear expressions of trust in God and his willing and powerful assistance throughout Psalm 3 (vss. 3, 5-6, 8), in Psalm 4.^{3, 7-8}, in 5.^{7, 11}, and in 7.¹⁷ among others. Even in the darkest of the five psalms—Psalm 6, one of the seven traditional “penitential” psalms—the Psalmist expresses his trust in God and confidently confesses his expectation of divine assistance and deliverance.

“Leave me alone, all you, who would do me harm,
for YHWH has heard my weeping.
YHWH has heard my cry for help.
YHWH has accepted my prayer.
All my enemies will be disappointed and greatly dismayed.
They retreat. They are thwarted, in the blink of an eye.”⁷

Expressions of trust and confidence in God and His willing and powerful intervention in human suffering and trial is one of the Psalmists’ great legacies. But even more, God’s willing and powerful intervention in human suffering and trial is one of the great legacies of Israel’s God, the great Yahweh, God Almighty. God grant that these great legacies become part of who and what we are.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 10, 2024)

⁷ Psalm 6.⁸⁻¹⁰

My LDS faith tradition has little to do with the Psalms. Without a liturgical tradition, the Psalms are not utilized in LDS worship services—if, indeed, it can be said to have “worship services”—as they are in other Christian or Jewish services. They are not used to enhance group experiences in worshipping and praising God—if, indeed, they are inclined to praise God. The Psalms hardly register with individuals as they contemplate their relationship with God or with others—friend or foe. They are not used in public or private prayer or to strengthen either group or private prayer life. They play little, if any role in affirming or declaring group or personal beliefs or experiences—spiritual or temporal.

Everywhere I have gone and to whomsoever has lent me an ear, I have attempted to correct this unfortunate oversight—calling it an “oversight” is putting it mildly. As I have shared my own enthusiasm for the single most read and translated Book in Christian and, perhaps, human history—and one that has greatly influenced my own life and thought—I have been met with several objections to the Book.

By far the most common objection to the Book, and one that I have heard repeatedly, has to do with its alleged author, David. We cannot now go into detail concerning Psalm authorship. We will only make two points at this time. First, in my view, David’s authorship of psalms is greatly exaggerated. This exaggeration is largely explained by the fact that so many Psalms possess a superscription with the designation, “*l^eDāwid*,” “of, to, for David,” both alone and in conjunction with other terms such as “song,” “hymn,” etc.

As to this point, we should note that the superscriptions are likely secondary, added by redactors after a psalm’s composition—perhaps well after its composition. These superscriptions may or may not represent the historical reality of a psalm’s original setting. We should also note that while the prepositional prefix, *l^e*, can connote ownership that does not necessary connote authorship. The prefix may indicate that David owned a Psalm due to his being royalty and in charge of all things having to do with the temple—this was the case with all ancient Near Eastern kings. The prefix could also be read “to or for David,” indicating that it was dedicated to David or whatever king sat on the thrown at any given time.

Whatever one decides on such matters, the reader may still wonder, “Why would David’s authorship be an issue for LDS readers?” This brings us to our second observation. The pessimistic attitudes and ideals that many LDS readers bring to David and his eternal destiny far outpace what is certain about David—which is, in fact, very little. Much more humility is in order when it comes to LDS speculation concerning the possibility of David’s full forgiveness and its assigning him an inferior place in the eternal realms.

The second most common LDS objection to the psalms is found in more mundane: the Book is, many complain, too repetitive—this from a group of people who attend a weekly sacrament “meeting” whose format has not changed one iota in at least three-quarters of a century! We will see, I hope, that what passes as repetition has much originality and subtle points of difference and enhancement. In my experience, the third most common LDS objection to the psalms is exemplified for the first time in this third psalm. As several have put it, “David [there he is again] is such a wimp. All he does is complain. He seems, almost, paranoid.”

Well!

The Psalmists—for there are certainly many—do complain a great deal. Indeed, “lament” is how scholars have categorized many a psalm, including this one. While the Psalmists complain or lament about much that they experience, one complaint appears more, far, far more than any other. While God is the principal figure of the Book, and it is He who is nearly always addressed—for much of the Book is prayer—there is

another oft discussed and addressed character or class: the enemy. Enemies are everywhere, appearing over and over again. It would be fair to say that “the enemy,” often identified and associated with “the malevolently immoral,” “wrongdoers,” and the “contemptuously antisocial” that we met in Psalm 1 is one of the elemental themes of the Psalms.

While no one has explicitly articulated it to me, the common complaint that there is a great deal of complaining and “paranoia” in the Psalms, suggests that this focus on enemies is, for many, one of the Book’s “problems.” “Who has so many enemies who are so persistent that they must complain about them so often?”

Well, then, we will need to address this matter of enemies and enmity. We will have many opportunities to do so in immediate and many a following meditation. For now, we will only admit, I guess, to having entered the world of the Psalmists’ paranoia. There are enemies. And they are numerous. They are flesh and blood, and they are disembodied. And enmity is everywhere. Pervasive. Just have a look at the near constant state “wars and rumors of wars.” Or, closer to home and less dramatic, have a look at the U.S. House of Representatives of this early 21st century. Consider the fact that there was even “war in heaven” before the great human enterprise was undertaken. Talk about enmity.

Based upon theological propositions and my own observation of the world around me I see no reason to question the Psalmist view that human (and non-human) enmity is pervasive and dominant. Yes, the Psalmists seem to be onto something when they not only present a world of enmity but also present a God who is the only rescue from such a world.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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meditation 3— psalm 3.¹⁻³

YHWH! How my adversaries have multiplied!
How numerous are those that rise against me!

How many are those who say of me:
“He’ll get no help from ’ēlohîm”!

But You, YHWH, are my battle shield,
defender of my reputation and the one who restores my standing (author’s translation).

In the end, the Book of Psalms is about God. He is the central figure. We learn as much about Him and His character in the Psalms as anywhere in scripture. The Psalmists, for they are many, along with those who would adopt their words, sentiments, attitudes, and actions toward and about God are the second subject of the Book. Through their prayers, we learn as much about ourselves and our relationship with God as anywhere in scripture. Based upon my decades of reading, praying, and meditating upon the Psalms, the enemy, identified by several Hebrew words, is the third most present and important figure in the Book.

We note, here, that the Book of Psalms began, not with a description of or appeal to God, but with a description of and warning about those who opposed God and His directions for a fulfilling life—those it called, “the malevolently immoral,” “wrongdoers,” and “contemptuously anti-social” (1.¹⁻²). Psalm 2 began, not with a description of or appeal to God, but with a description of those who opposed God and His right to world rule—directly or indirectly (2.¹⁻³). Now, in Psalm 3, the Psalmist begins with the theme of opposition yet again. Just as there are those who opposed God, His directions, and His rule, there are those who oppose those devoted to God. Opposition and enmity are omnipresent. This reality, it will turn out, is one of the principal themes of Psalms. Before examining the text of Psalm 3, we should begin to address the omnipresence of opposition to God and all things and people godly, the omnipresence of enmity, and the omnipresence of enemies in the Psalms.

The near omnipresence of enemies in the Psalms is, for some, off-putting. To some, it comes off as self-absorbed, pessimistic, and paranoid. It feels unrepresentative of their daily life. They forget, or ignore the fact that Jesus counseled about enemies and was, Himself, a victim of their violence. While I have not thought of many of the countless individuals who have entered my life as “enemies,” I have sensed some who felt enmity toward me and toward whom I felt some greater or lesser enmity. Indeed, any honest look at the world around us proves that the existence of enmity between individuals and groups is pervasive, being, almost, the rule rather than the exception in individual and international relations.

Call me self-absorbed, pessimistic, and paranoid if you will, but the MAGA years have been a painful revelation that I do, in fact, have enemies—and of course they feel the same in reverse, as I am viewed a danger to them. There are people who would do me harm. They would, for example, sacrifice me and millions of others rather than place a thin piece of cloth over their mouth and nose, or experience the tiny pin prick of a vaccination needle in their fleshy upper arm. They would take away my right to vote. The list of harms they would bring to me is long. Here is not the place to catalogue them.

But these enemies of whom I speak are mere flesh and blood. As Jesus witnessed, such enemies can only threaten the life of my body. They are to be feared less than those who possess the desire and power to do

spiritual harm and “kill the soul.”¹ These are beings of flesh and blood and beings disembodied. We cannot see the disembodied enemies, but they are numerous. According to LDS theology, God had a third more spiritual offspring than the billions upon billions who have or will ever occupy mother earth. They occupy a different dimension but exert some influence in ours. I do not pretend to understand all this. I can’t even say that I take it all literally. But, I am persuaded to at least consider the possibility that there are numerous forces that are hostile to God and hostile to me and hostile to you too in that measureless cosmos we see when we look out into the night sky or through a space telescope. Maybe you feel the same. Maybe not.

When we think of such cosmic enemies, we most often think of their attempts to tempt and their encouragement to deviate from just and godly principles. Perhaps they do so, but it seems that we do pretty well on our own without much encouragement. The Psalmist doesn’t give much press to this aspect of the enemy. More often he focuses, as he does in this psalm, on the enemy’s accusatory and demeaning impulses.

While in its private musings, the religious mind is often insecure, in its public offerings it can often seem confident and self-righteous, possessing a rather exaggerated opinion of itself and its capacities. In both private and public expression, it can be unreasonably demanding of self and others. At the same time, it often possesses an exaggerated view of God’s thin skinned-ness and liability to feel dishonored and angry. Taking advantage of this fertile ground, the enemy, responsible or not for encouraging our deviations, accuses us of unworthiness and god-forsakenness. Probably, in this regard we are as much our own enemy as any external enemies.

We meet such accusatory enemies over and over again in the Psalms.

“When my enemies speak out against me,
and those scrutinizing me plot together,
asserting: ‘God has forsaken him.
Pursue and seize him for he has no one to rescue him...’”²

“He has anticipated that YHWH would deliver him.
He should deliver him, then, seeing that He takes such pleasure in him.”³

This accusatory spirit is universal and everywhere present. Even Jesus felt the sting of feeling forsaken by God and used the Psalmist’s words to express the pain and wonder of it.⁴ But the Psalmists know that God is of a different and more powerful spirit than the accusing enemy. He knows what the Revelator saw in vision; that God is a defender of the accused and will bring deliverance from the accuser’s tyranny.

“Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.”⁵

“But You, YHWH, are my battle shield,
defender of my reputation and the one who restores my standing.”

¹ See Matthew 10.²⁸

² Psalm. ¹⁰⁻¹¹; author’s translation

³ Psalm 22. ⁸; author’s translation

⁴ See Psalm 22.¹

⁵ Revelation.¹⁰

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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meditation 4— psalm 3.¹⁻³

YHWH! How my adversaries have multiplied!
How numerous are those that rise against me!

How many are those who say of me:
“He’ll get no help from ’ēlohîm”!

But You, YHWH, are my battle shield,
defender of my reputation and the one who restores my standing (author’s translation).

Israel’s “prayer book” began with two introductory psalms that were not prayers. But with Psalm 3, we entered the world of pray. And as is so often the case in the Psalms, this world of prayer is inhabited by enemies. If there were once but a few enemies, they have multiplied until now they are many. These enemies make an assertion or, as we understand it, an accusation.

“How many are those who say of me:
‘He’ll get no help from ’ēlohîm’”!

This could, I suppose, be read as an assertion of atheism—the Psalmist will get no help from God because God does not exist. But modern style atheism seems to have been extraordinarily rare in the ancient world. This statement of divine inaction does not seem to fit the context.

On the other hand, this statement of divine inaction might be indicative of a lack of trust in God rather than blatant atheism—He does not involve Himself in human affairs, including those of the Psalmist. Here and there, the Psalmist speaks of this type of unbelief. As I understand it, in the very next Psalm, we witness a disputation between the Psalmist and his accusing enemies. When the Psalmist counsels restraint in their opposition to him and for trust in God with a question, they respond with a skeptical,

“Who will show us any good?”

The Psalmist responds with his countering faith that God is present and active in human affairs.

“Oh, cast the light of Your presence upon us, YHWH!”

Elsewhere, the Psalmist enemies assert,

“God pays no attention.
He’s absent. He sees nothing, ever.”¹

We could go on. Suffice it to say that the Psalmist often finds himself confronted by those who profess an uninvolved God. Though the Psalmist can be perplexed by God inaction, in the end, he does not buy it, but maintains God’s active participation in his and all other human affairs.

Indeed, in this Psalm, the Psalmist quickly responds to the charge of God’s absence in his life.

¹ Psalm 10.¹¹, author’s translation

“But You, YHWH, are my battle shield,
defender of my reputation and the one who restores my standing.”

The nature of the Psalmist’s response hints at the real reason for his enemies’ assertion that “He’ll get no help from ’ēlohîm”! It isn’t that they believe that there is no God or that God is habitually and generally inactive in human affairs. Rather, they assert that God is specifically inactive in the Psalmist’s life.

With his expressed faith that God defends his reputation and restores his standing, the Psalmist allows us to see that it is his reputation and standing in the community and, even more significantly, before God that is under assault. The Psalmist’s enemies suggest that there is something flawed about him that will cause God to be inactive in his life.

As we have indicated in our introductory meditations on this psalm, Psalms 3-7 have much in common. They seem to address a similar situation. That situation is false accusations of wrongdoing against the Psalmist. This charge of divine absence in the Psalmist’s life is the opening salvo in a long barrage of attacks.

As we will see, in the end, the Psalmist will adamantly maintain his innocence in the face of the specific charges brought against him. But in this and the accompanying four Psalms in this series of laments/complaints, as throughout the Book of Psalms, the Psalmist maintains his faith in God’s willing, anxious, and beneficial interest and involvement in the Psalmist personal life, in the life of those who trust Him, and, indeed, in human affairs universally.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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meditation 5— psalm 3.⁴⁻⁶

- ⁴I'll publicly and loudly appeal to YHWH,
and He will answer me from His temple preeminent.
- ⁵I will retire, sleep peacefully,
and awake, knowing that YHWH supports me.
- ⁶I will not fear though a force of ten thousand
is arrayed against me on every side (author's translation).

As we have discussed in our previous meditations on Psalm 3, “the enemy” is a common, even dominate theme of the Book of Psalms. This concentration on enemies is not mere pessimism or paranoia. Enmity between individuals, groups, and nations is pervasive on every corner of the planet. There is a reason why the very first recorded human even after “the fall” was the murder of one brother by another—a murder that flowed from envy, greed, and the enmity they engendered.¹ This first story serves to warn us about our violent human nature and our inclination to enmity and violence.

But as “war in heaven” reminds us, enmity is not limited to this planet. The cosmos may be a far more dangerous place than our romanticized views of “eternal life” and “heaven” may account for. Enemies, rather mortal or not, may or may not turn physically violent. But they always evidence violence by the attacks they level against character. The enemy always possesses a sophisticated repertoire of negative propaganda about their enemies/victims.

In this third Psalm, the enemy attacks the character of the Psalmist, as discussed in previous meditations. The charge the Psalmist's enemies level, “He'll get no help from 'ēlohîm,” is intended less as a statement about God, and more as character assassination against the Psalmist. It is less about God's unwillingness or inability to help and more about the Psalmist's unsuitability to receive divine assistance. The Psalmists are not bombarded by such character defamation once or twice. Such denigrating voices are shockingly numerous.

“How my adversaries have multiplied!
How numerous are those that rise against me!”

In response to such character assassination, the Psalmist went to the temple where he very publicly made his needs known to God and where he seems to have received some time of assurance, for he very shortly confessed,

“I will not fear though a force of ten thousand
is arrayed against me on every side” (vs. 6).

This can be read, of course, as poetic exaggeration. We can determine that no one is surrounded by ten thousand enemies. Yet, as we have suggested, the world and the cosmos are littered with forces hostile to each other. There is no telling how many enemies, mortal or otherwise, are arrayed against us on a daily basis. But with God as our comrade in arms, we need not fear.

No doubt, we have all had sleepless nights when worries kept us awake while our minds spun intricate

¹ See Genesis 4.¹⁻⁸ & Moses 5.¹⁶⁻³³

and fearsome webs of personal demise. Such worries, too, can be viewed as enemies—enemies of our peace. But, again, we can and should take comfort and find strength in the Psalmist’s experience. Because of the Psalmist’s trust in God and His willingness and capacity to help in times of distress, the Psalmist could “retire, sleep peacefully and awake [refreshed].”

I doubt that there is a single reader of that sentence that has not and will not again yearn for such peace in the face of anxious self-doubt—whether self-induced or a consequence of other’s opinions and claims. It is the Psalmist’s testimony that God can and will come to our defense as either we ourselves or others cast doubt on our character and God’s willingness and ability to work in our lives because of our unworthiness. I, for one, am grateful for the Psalmist’s testimony. I have relied on it many times. You can too. God is faithful.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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meditation 6— psalm 3.⁷⁻⁸

⁷Arise, then, YHWH;
deliver me, my God
by hitting all my enemies in the mouth—
shattering the teeth of the malevolently immoral.

⁸This victory is YHWH's doing.
Your blessing ne upon Your people (author's translation).

This psalm began with the Psalmist's complaint that numerous enemies assaulted him by verbally maligning his character. In their assault, the enemies asserted that they had no credible claim on God for relief from the assault (vs. 1-2). Notwithstanding such consistent and insistent claims, the Psalmist faithfully went to the temple to publicly ask the Lord for relief from his enemies' onslaught. There, he received assurance of God's help (vs. 3-4). This assurance brought such peace of mind that the Psalmist was able to put aside worry and sleep peacefully and restfully (vs 5-6).

Having gratefully received this assurance, the Psalmist now asks the Lord to act according to the promise. He asks that God

“hit all my enemies in the mouth—
shattering the teeth of the malevolently immoral.”

We were introduced to the “malevolently immoral” in the very first verse of Psalm 1, where they are portrayed as in opposition to God and His life-inducing principles. There, they seek to waylay and deceive others to their way of thinking and behaving. Here, they oppose the Psalmist, a devotee of God through false accusation.

We might be put off by the violent imagery that the Psalmist uses in his request that God resist his enemies' attacks. The image of a blow to the mouth resulting in broken teeth is unquestionably graphic and violent. We should keep in mind that we are dealing with poetry. We need not understand the Psalmist to be asking God to act in a literal and physically violent manner. Since the enemies' threat comes from their mouths in the form of verbal assaults on the Psalmist's character, it is only logical that the Psalmist would focus on putting a stop to their mouthiness. It wouldn't make poetic sense, would it, to ask that God break the enemies' *legs*? So, the Psalmist's request is simply a poetic way of saying, “Put a stop to their verbal assaults.”

“But,” one might object, “couldn't the Psalmist have made his request using less violent imagery?” I suppose he could have. He might have asked the Lord to put his hand over their mouth. I guess he could have asked God to wash their mouth out with soap. I am being facetious, of course, but still the question remains, “Why use such violent imagery?” Here is one thought.

We have already discussed the pervasive presence of enemies, in the Psalms. These enemies are often committed to defamation, and belittling. They are intense, committed, and enduring in their contempt. “They hate,” the Psalmist complains elsewhere, “with cruel hatred.”¹ They “breathe out cruelty.”² The

¹ Psalm 25.¹⁹

² Psalm 27.¹²

Psalmist likens the enemies' intensity and cruelty in wicked defamation to lions. They are like "a young lion lurking in secret places" "that would swallow me up."³

"My soul is among lions:
and I lie even among them that are set on fire,
even the sons of men, whose teeth are spears and arrows,
and their tongue a sharp sword."⁴

So committed are the Psalmists' enemies to defamation; so ingrained is their wicked belittling; so habitual is the spirit of accusation that no gentle correction is likely to convince them to change their ways. It will require an act of God to stop them. What Jeremiah found to be true of Judah in his day, is likely what the Psalmist (and the Lord) found to be true of these enemies.

"Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil."⁵

"Are they ashamed by the abhorrent things they do?
They are not ashamed at all, nor feel humiliation.
For this reason, they will fall right along with others who fall."⁶

The Psalmist's aggressive imagery, therefore, serves to remind us that the enemies' ways are deeply engrained and unlikely to be reformed easily. Deep sin cannot be removed through a light touch. Light cleaning will not remove the stains that have sat for so long. Reform sometimes requires a heavy hand. It requires a dramatic act. In this, we might think of the unnamed Lamanite king who, having been taught by Aaron, prayed, "What shall I do that I may have... this wicked spirit *rooted* out of my breast."⁷ "Rooting out" is highly disruptive, the soil often left torn and tattered.

The Psalmist could hope that he could be released from the enemies' assault through their easy reform. But he is a realist. He knows that their wickedness is deeply rooted. His enemies' reform will require a dramatic divine act. If reform is to be had, it will be a painful transformation. Hopefully, it is not so late that they cannot be reclaimed, their wickedness persisting until they are brought to a bitter end.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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³ Psalm 17.¹²

⁴ Psalm 57.³⁻⁴

⁵ Jeremiah 13.²³

⁶ Jeremiah 6.¹⁵

⁷ Alma 22.¹⁵