

The metaphors in Psalm 80 are all over the place.

We start with a shepherd enthroned on cherubim.

God’s face “shines” (reminding us of the glory of anger “smokes,”  
and so we eat the bread of tears.

This *shepherd* then takes a vine from Egypt,  
and clears new ground and plants it.

(where are his sheep while he’s spending all this time on viticulture?)

And so we have this magnificent vine that overshadows all the earth,  
which, by the way, is also called a son.

*To the choirmaster: according to Lilies. A Testimony. Of Asaph, a Psalm.*

Since I preached on Psalms 78 and 79 just a year and a half ago (during the series on the Lord’s Prayer), we are skipping over to Psalm 80.

But for the sake of seeing how Book III of the Psalter is arranged,

I will comment here that Psalm 78 seems to have been deliberately put after Psalm 77  
in order to follow up on the Exodus theme.

Psalm 77 spoke of God’s triumph over the waters at the Red Sea,  
and how God led his people forth like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Then Psalm 78 elaborates on the Exodus,  
and retells the story of God’s faithfulness to Israel –  
in Egypt,  
in the wilderness,  
and in the Promised Land.

Psalm 78 takes us all the way to David –  
how God rejected the tent of Joseph  
(Saul was of the tribe of Benjamin, Joseph’s little brother),  
but chose the tribe of Judah,  
and selected David “to shepherd Jacob his people.” (78:71)

So, God led them like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron (Ps 77),  
God selected David to shepherd Jacob (Ps 78)  
and then:

Psalm 79 speaks of how the nations have invaded Jerusalem  
and defiled God’s holy temple.

Psalm 79 speaks of how the people of God have been devastated by their enemies because of their iniquities.

It is interesting to note that Psalm 79 also uses the sheep image – but this time, David is no longer in view – the shepherds of Israel have failed.

And when you hear the groans of your people,  
and deliver us from our enemies:

“we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever;  
from generation to generation we will recount your praise.” (79:13)

The Psalms of Asaph in Book III also have an interesting pattern with respect to the tribes of Israel.

Psalms 73-75 opened the book with general references to Israel, the sanctuary, Mount Zion, and the God of Jacob.

Psalms 76-81 then make some interesting statements about the various tribes. Psalm 76 emphasizes Judah.

The God of Jacob is *known* in Judah –  
and his lair – the den of the great Leonine Warrior –  
is in Zion – Jerusalem.

Psalm 77 talks about the redemption of “Jacob and Joseph” in the Exodus, reminding us of the importance of Joseph in particular.

Psalm 78 then says that God rejected Joseph (in rejecting Saul), and that God chose Judah and David.

But then Psalm 79 says that God has brought destruction on Jerusalem – the city of David – because of their sin.

And so we come to Psalm 80.

Psalm 80 is about the God of Joseph.

I should add that there are only 5 Psalms that refer to Joseph.

Four of them are Psalms 77, 78, 80 and 81.

Why all this back and forth between Joseph and Judah?

Remember that Israel was only a united nation for about 100 years.

During the time of the Judges, there is no evidence for a united people.

The tribes were essentially operating on their own.

Everyone did what was right in their own eyes –  
because there was no king in Israel.

But then the nation of Israel came together in the days of Samuel the prophet and Samuel anointed Saul (of the tribe of Benjamin) as king.

And after Saul came David (of the tribe of Judah).

And after David came his son Solomon.

But after Solomon's death (ca. 900 BC), the nation of Israel was divided.  
The northern kingdom of Israel was often called "Ephraim"  
because Ephraim was the largest tribe in the north.  
Both of Joseph's sons – Ephraim and Manasseh –  
were prominent in the northern kingdom of Israel.  
But Joseph's little brother – Benjamin – stayed with Judah.

The northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim) was overthrown by the Assyrians in 722 BC.  
So by the time Book III of the Psalter was written  
(mostly from the time of Judah's exile in 586 BC),  
Joseph was little more than a memory.

So why all this about the "God of Joseph"?

### **1. The Shepherd of Israel (v1-3)**

*80:1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.*

Some people think that the Joseph references are directed *against* Judah –  
but the temple imagery and the Zion imagery in Psalm 80  
(together with its placement after Psalm 80's destruction of Jerusalem)  
points in another direction.

Once upon a time, Judah tended to despise Joseph (the northern kingdom) for his rebellion.  
Once upon a time, Jerusalem looked at Samaria with disdain.  
But after the destruction of Jerusalem,  
Psalm 80 asserts that Judah and Joseph are no different.  
Their future lies in the hands of the God who called them together out of Egypt.

But it is not just the past – Asaph asserts that the Shepherd of Israel  
is the one who *leads* Joseph like a flock;  
and the one who *is* enthroned upon the cherubim.

The cherubim are the protectors of God's glory.  
We have seen in Ezekiel the importance of the cherubim  
as the guardians of God's sanctuary.  
They guarded the entrance to the garden in Eden.  
They were woven into the fabric of the tabernacle  
and engraved in the gold plating of the temple.  
The ark of the covenant and the veil of the temple  
both were covered with cherubim.

Truly, God was enthroned upon the cherubim.  
And from that cherubic throne, the glory of God shines forth!

In Deuteronomy 33:2 Moses says  
“The LORD came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us;  
he *shone forth* from Mount Paran;  
he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand.”

So even as God shone forth in the days of Moses –  
so now Asaph cries out for God to shine forth once more!

Psalms 50:2 (the one Asaphite Psalm outside of Book III)  
also speaks of God as “shining forth” from Zion.

*2 Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh,  
stir up your might  
and come to save us!*

Ephraim and Manasseh were the two sons of Joseph.  
Benjamin was his younger brother.  
These are the three tribes descended from Rachel,  
Jacob’s beloved wife.

Ephraim and Manasseh were the dominant tribes in the northern kingdom.  
Benjamin was the junior partner in the southern kingdom.

By speaking of Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh,  
Asaph can speak of a renewed Israel –  
not just a renewed Judah.

And in verse three we hear the chorus:

*3 Restore us, O God;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved!*

Restore us – bring us back –  
this is a plea to be restored from exile –  
a plea that God would cause us to return.

Let your face *shine*  
This is actually a different word for “shine” than the one in verse 1.

There are various things that “shine” in the scriptures:  
the sun in Genesis 1  
the glory of the LORD in the glory-cloud in Exodus 13  
that led Israel through the wilderness  
the seven lamps of the tabernacle in Exodus 25  
and in Psalms 19 and 119 it is the Word of God that shines.

And in Numbers 6:24-26, the Aaronic blessing declares that the LORD  
will “make his face to shine upon you.”

You can see how all this is related:  
the shining of the sun reminds us of the shining of God’s face,  
the shining glory of the LORD that led Israel through the wilderness  
then filled the tabernacle (and the temple),  
and the seven lamps of the tabernacle remind us  
of that glory cloud that filled the holy place.

And since God is the author of scripture,  
we should not be surprised to see his glory shining forth in the things he has said.

So the refrain of Psalm 80 asks God to do what he had promised in the blessing of Aaron –  
that his face might shine upon his people,  
so that we may be saved.

Notice that Asaph understands the sovereignty of God.  
He knows that it is only when God’s face shines  
that we can be saved!

And this is the problem in verses 4-7.

## **2. The Problem: You Are Angry (v4-7)**

*4 O Lord God of hosts,  
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?*

And the Psalmist chooses an interesting image here (especially given the mixture of metaphors!):  
literally, “how long will you smoke against your people’s prayers.”

In light of the shining face of God – in light of the echoes of the Exodus –  
you should see the “smoking” God in light of Exodus 19,  
when the mountain of Sinai smoked before the LORD.

Psalm 74:1 has already used this word to speak of God’s anger smoking against his people.

We asked for God's face to shine –  
we asked for the glory of the LORD that led us through the wilderness,  
but instead we got the smoke of his anger that destroyed us in the wilderness.

(This morning we saw the elders of Israel inquiring of Ezekiel –  
and God responded in a similar way!)

But notice particularly that God is smoking against his people's prayers.  
The prayers of the people – according to Leviticus 16:13 –  
“should smother the fire of God's wrath.”  
On the Day of Atonement the cloud of smoke from the incense  
was designed to appease God's anger as a sweet smell before the LORD.

But instead, the smoke of God's anger overpowers the prayers of God's people.

*5 You have fed them with the bread of tears  
and given them tears to drink in full measure.*

Why does Asaph say this?  
Because when Judah goes into exile in 586,  
Joseph has already been in exile for 140 years.  
Israel's food and drink is tears.

The exodus imagery reminds us of the manna in the wilderness –  
once you fed us with bread from heaven,  
but now you give us only the bread of tears!

*6 You make us an object of contention for our neighbors,  
and our enemies laugh among themselves.*

Our enemies take malicious joy in our situation.  
Once our enemies trembled before us as the LORD went before us.  
Now they mock us.

*7 Restore us, O God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved!*  
The refrain grows slightly in each instance.

First it was “O God”  
Now it is “O God of hosts” –  
there is no substantive difference.  
Only an increasing sense of pleading –  
a stronger sense of remembering who God is!

### 3. The Story: Glory and the Shame of the Vine (v8-13)

In verses 8-13 we see the Exodus theme made more explicit.

But the Shepherd is now planting a vineyard.

*8 You brought a vine out of Egypt;  
you drove out the nations and planted it.  
9 You cleared the ground for it;  
it took deep root and filled the land.*

So, why is a shepherd planting a vine?

In the blessing of Joseph that Jacob spoke in Genesis 49:22,  
we hear these words:

“Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring:  
his branches run over the wall.”

And in v24 we are told that

“from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel.”

So Asaph takes the imagery from Genesis of God the Shepherd planting a vine –  
and says that this is what happened in the Exodus.

Of course, in Genesis it was a fruit tree.

In Psalm 80 it is a vine.

After all, this Psalm is mixing metaphors faster than you can drink them!

The vineyard image connects more to Judah (Genesis 49:11) –  
but is especially rooted in Isaiah 5.

Isaiah spoke of how God had carefully planted his vineyard,  
and cared for it properly –  
and he looked for it to produce good grapes,  
but it produced wild grapes – it produced “stink fruit.”

In the same way, here in Psalm 80  
the Shepherd of Israel plants his vine.

And at first it looks good!

*10 The mountains were covered with its shade,  
the mighty cedars with its branches.  
11 It sent out its branches to the sea  
and its shoots to the River.*

We have been seeing similar language used in Ezekiel of the Davidic kings.  
Here it is used of Israel more generally.

Israel the vine fulfills all that God has promised.  
God had said in Deuteronomy 11:22-25  
that Israel's borders would stretch from the River (Euphrates)  
to the Sea (the Mediterranean).

In other words, Israel was becoming all that God had promised!  
(And in the days of David and Solomon this is what happened!)

But those days are long since past.  
Now the imagery changes again.  
Just as God caused the vine to take root and fill the land,  
so now it is God who has come in the assault against the vine:

*12 Why then have you broken down its walls,  
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?  
13 The boar from the forest ravages it,  
and all that move in the field feed on it.*

Throughout the Psalms God is often spoken of as a rock,  
a fortress, a wall, a hedge.

But now, Israel's walls are broken –  
and it is *God* who has broken them down.  
The reason why the boars are ravaging us –  
the reason why the nations are plundering us –  
  
is because God himself has done this.

Note that this section does not end with the refrain.  
Instead verse 14 functions as something of a transition.  
You think that you are going to get the refrain,  
Verse 8 said "O God of hosts, hashivnu"  
Verse 14 says "O God of hosts, shuvna"

The refrain uses the causative form of the verb:  
"cause to turn"  
Verse 14 uses the regular, "O God of hosts, *turn*"



#### 4. The Solution: God's Right Hand Man (v14-19)

*14 Turn again, O God of hosts!  
Look down from heaven, and see;  
have regard for this vine,*

There is a sense in which “look down from heaven and see”  
is very similar to “let your face shine.”  
But verse 14 provides something of a twist on the regular refrain –  
that launches the final stanza.

This is what Solomon had said in his prayer at the dedication of the temple –  
the last king to rule over both Joseph and Judah  
had asked God that when his people prayed toward the temple,  
then “hear from heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.”

We have already heard that God is angry with his people's prayers.  
But if God turns – if God looks down from heaven –  
if God has regard for this vine –

but why should he have regard for this vine?

Note that the Psalmist does not emphasize anything about Israel –  
but focuses on God's deeds.

Have regard for  
*15 the stock that your right hand planted,  
and for the son whom you made strong for yourself.*

Here is where the metaphors go loopy again.

Remember that this is a story of Joseph and Benjamin.  
And Benjamin means “son of my right hand”

So now the name of Benjamin is cut in two.  
the “yamin” (right hand) is found in the first part of v15 – “your right hand”  
the “ben” (son) is found in the second part of v15 – “for the son”  
(And in the Hebrew, there is only one word that separates them)

Indeed, verses 16-17 only strengthens this:

*16 They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down;  
may they perish at the rebuke of your face!*

When God's face "shines" upon us, his face will turn against our foes.

*17 But let your hand be on the man of your right hand,  
the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!*

Now the Psalmist speaks of the "ish yamin" – the man of God's right hand,  
and the "ben adam" – the son of man –

and when God's hand is on his "right hand man"  
when the Son of Man comes in the strength of the LORD,  
then there will be no turning back.

*18 Then we shall not turn back from you;  
give us life, and we will call upon your name!*

There will be no turning back – no backsliding –  
when the Man of your Right Hand comes.  
When you give us life – when *you* fulfill all your promises,  
then we will call upon your name –  
we will call upon the name of the LORD.

In Judges the name of Benjamin is punned in a less than flattering way  
(the Benjamites – the sons of my right hand – who are left handed –  
literally, who are "crippled in their right hands")  
but in Psalm 80, the puns all go in Benjamin's favor.

And when God sends his "ben" – his son –  
when God sends his "ish-yamin" – his right-hand man –  
then the refrain will finally be true:

*19 Restore us, O Lord God of hosts!  
Let your face shine, that we may be saved!*