

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. A Psalm of Asaph. A Song.

Titles can be interesting.

The Hebrew title (reflected in your translations) is not especially interesting.
But the Greek title in the LXX is “For the Assyrians” –
which has prompted some to connect this with the defeat of Sennacherib
in the days of Hezekiah.

Certainly Psalm 76 connects well with the defeat of Sennacherib.

The description of the triumph of Yahweh over his enemies in verses 4-6
fits very well the situation in the days of Hezekiah.

But Psalm 76 fits well with many of God’s triumphs over his enemies.
I would suggest that the LXX title is more of an *application* of the Psalm,
rather than its original setting.

Think of it like a sermon title:

When you see “For the Assyrians” – it immediately makes you think of the Assyrians.
Likewise, when you see my sermon title, “The Shape of the Future Found in the Past,”
it points you to the connection between what God did in the past,
and what God will do in the future.

The dominant image in Psalm 76 is the image of the lion.

The word lion is never used, but the words for “abode” and “dwelling”
are actually “lair” and “den.”

It might be helpful to turn over to the prophet Amos.

Amos 1-3 uses the image of the LORD as a prowling, roaring lion.

Amos 1:2

“The LORD roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem.”

Then Amos takes us on a stalking tour of the nations,
as the LORD prowls around the nations,
bringing judgments upon the nations,
but relentlessly stalking Judah and Israel,
until he pounces, swift and powerfully,
“Flight shall perish from the swift,
and the strong shall not retain his strength,
nor shall the mighty save his life;
he who handles the bow shall not stand,
and he who is swift of foot shall not save himself,
nor shall he who rides the horse save his life;

and he who is stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day,
declares the LORD.” (Amos 2:14-16)

And in light of that, Amos asks, “Does a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey?
Does a young lion cry out from his den, if he has taken nothing?” (3:4)

And in 3:12,

“As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear,
so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued,
with the corner of a couch and part of a bed.”

When the LORD comes forth as a mighty lion,
neither speed, nor strength, nor horses, nor courage will avail.

And note also *where* the LORD’s den is:
Zion (Amos 1:2).

1. The Lion’s Lair Is Laid in Zion (v1-3)

76:1 In Judah God is known; his name is great in Israel.

2 His abode has been established in Salem, his dwelling place in Zion.

3 There he broke the flashing arrows, the shield, the sword, and the weapons of war. Selah

Jacob had spoken of Judah as a “lion’s cub” –
and lions decorated Solomon’s throne – as well as the temple.

But it was only in the prophets that God himself was called a lion.

Isaiah 31:4 spoke of the LORD fighting like a lion on Mt Zion.

Jeremiah 50:44 spoke of the LORD coming like a lion to chase his people away.

And in Lamentations 3:10 Jeremiah spoke of the LORD as a lion lying in wait for him.

Hosea used the image three times (chs 5, 10, 13) to speak of God’s power and might.

So these words for “den” and “lair” point us toward the lion image here.

Jeremiah 25:38 refers to God leaving his lair to despoil the pastures
from one end of the earth to the other.

But Psalm 27:5 says that God will hide me in his “lair”
(referring explicitly to the beauty of the LORD revealed in his temple).

Likewise, Amos 3:4 speaks of God crying out from his “den” –

and 7 of the other 8 uses of this word in the OT speak of lion’s dens,
but Deuteronomy 33:27 speaks of the eternal God as our “den.”

So in this particular form, both words point strongly to the “lair/den” image.

It is worth pointing out, however, that both words are *very* closely related

to words used for God's heavenly dwelling,
or for the earthly tabernacle/temple.

These images come together if you think of God himself as the great lion,
who has established his den on Mount Zion,
and as the great leonine Warrior, he subdues all who would dare to attack him.

No weapon (v3) is able to withstand him.
He quenches even the fiery arrows of the evil one!

And the glory of the great leonine warrior is fleshed out in verses 4-6:

2. The Glory of God Goes Forth in Battle (v4-6)

4 Glorious are you, more majestic than the mountains of prey.

The mountains are majestic –
but they are merely the terrain in which the glorious Lion feeds on his foes.

The psalmist now walks through the camp of God's foes:

*5 The stouthearted were stripped of their spoil; they sank into sleep;
all the men of war were unable to use their hands.*

6 At your rebuke, O God of Jacob, both rider and horse lay stunned.

Once the foes of the LORD were powerful and mighty –
but now they lie stunned and helpless.

The camp of God's enemies once provoked fear in God's people –
but as the psalmist strolls through the camp,
he sees that they are paralyzed, drowsy, and feeble.

You can see why the LXX titled this "For the Assyrian" –
this certainly reminds us of what happened to Sennacherib's army,
when the angel of the LORD struck down his whole army.

It may or may not have been for that occasion,
but it would always remind Israel of that day
when the LORD himself went into battle against their foes.

Of course, with the image of the horse and rider we are brought back to Exodus 14-15
where God threw horse and rider into the sea!

The word translated "rider" here can also be translated "chariot" –
so you will see some variety in the translations.

Indeed, it would be just as easy to apply Psalm 76 to the triumph over Pharaoh's army as to his triumph over Sennacherib's army.

Because the point is the same!

All the power and might of the nations is futile against God.

But that is not the whole point.

Because we also need to see how *we* come into the story:

3. Judgment from the Heavens Helps the Humble (v7-9)

7 But you, you are to be feared!

Who can stand before you when once your anger is roused?

8 From the heavens you uttered judgment; the earth feared and was still,

9 when God arose to establish judgment, to save all the humble of the earth. Selah

The anger of the LORD – the wrath of the Leonine Warrior –
is designed to save all the humble of the earth.

There are two main themes in verses 7-9.

First, the fearsomeness of God as he utters judgment from the heavens.

Second, that God does this in order to save the humble.

Hengstenberg (p. 439) says well,

“The earth, as opposed to heaven,

comes into notice more particularly as regards the noisy uproarious part of it,
which is reduced to eternal silence in consequence of what is spoken from heaven.”

Notice how the psalmist moves from God's “lair” on Zion to the heavens.

God “pounces” from Zion –

but the origin of his judgments are not earthly.

The temple in Jerusalem is but a picture of God's heavenly throne.

And it is his heavenly throne that gives weight to his pronouncements.

This word in verse 9, translated “humble”

can be translated, poor, afflicted, humble, or meek.

We should not turn this into some abstract sense of “poor in spirit.”

The humble are regularly contrasted with the proud, the arrogant, the powerful.

But neither should we understand this as “all those who live under the poverty line.”

The Proverbs speak often of fools and sluggards ending in poverty and disaster.

As one commentator says,

The poor – the humble – are “those who lack the material wealth and power
to exercise much authority in ordinary human affairs
but who are faithful to Yahweh and see his presence.
Their deliverance and prosperity depend upon divine action.” (Tate, 200)

In other words, the idea of the “poor” (*anav*)

includes *both* the idea of material poverty (including the idea of shame & powerlessness)
and the idea of humility before God.

God does not come to the rescue of fools

who scorn him and prefer to wallow in their own misery,
but he does hear the pleas of the *poor* –
he does hear the cries of the *humble* – who turn to him for help –
and he rescues them.

If you are familiar with Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia,

you can see how Lewis portrays Aslan’s power displayed on behalf of the poor,
as the mighty lion rescues the helpless poor who hope in him,
and overthrows the powerful and cruel.

I know,

you would rather hear that God saves all the middle-class of the earth;
you would rather hear that God saves all the decent, upstanding folk of the earth.

But that is not what God says.

When he establishes judgment – when justice comes from the heavens –
the Lion of Jerusalem will save all the humble of the earth.

Now, there is a second problem here.

Because some people start developing Messianic complexes about now.
And they urge the church to go forth and save all the humble of the earth.
We, the righteous middle class, will now go and save the poor.

Remembering the parable of the good Samaritan,

we, the faithful Israel, will go in search of those poor Samaritan outcasts
who are lying in the ditch...

But, wait a second!

That’s not the way the story goes!!
It was a Jew lying in the ditch.

And it was the “poor Samaritan outcast”
who had mercy on the Jew.

We are not the ones who save “all the humble of the earth.”

You make a lousy Messiah.

You cannot save the poor.

You *are* the poor.

Jesus is the one who saves “all the humble of the earth.”

He is the one who delivers the poor and rescues them from their enemies.

Your job is to *live* as this new community of the humble
who have been saved by the Divine Warrior.

This is why Fikkert’s book about how to help the poor is so good.

He confronts our arrogance.

He challenges our claim to be rich.

It is true:

the poorest one of you has more material possessions
than all but the highest nobility for most of human history;
the simplest diet among you includes delicacies
that were reserved for the elites of a former age.

But because of sin, all our pretensions to wealth are but a sham:

As Jesus says to the church in Laodicea:

“For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing,
not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.
I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich,
and white garments so that you may clothe yourself
and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen,
and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.” (Rev. 3:17-18)

Why are we so bad at “helping the poor”?

It’s because we think we are different from them –

we think we are better –

“I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing!”

And so we march in to save the day!

We can fix things – after all, we have money, we have training,
and I’ve got a seminary degree!

But I am not the divine warrior –

and you are not the savior the poor.

Jesus is.

And *because* Jesus is the savior of the poor,
therefore we come to Jesus.
It is only when we humbly acknowledge our own poverty
that we can become the sort of community
that lives out of the riches of God's grace –
rather than the false treasures of our own wisdom.

4. Therefore, Fear Him! (v10-12)

10 Surely the wrath of man shall praise you; the remnant of wrath you will put on like a belt.

Let me unpack this just a little.

What does it mean that the “wrath of man shall praise you”?
Remember that we are dealing with the righteous judgment of God against the nations.
The Divine Warrior – the great Lion –
is coming in judgment from Zion.
And even the wrath of man will work out for God's praise.
The wrath of man is directed against the LORD
(people may think that it is directed against the church, against Jerusalem,
but in fact, all hostility towards God's people is really against God)
But the wrath of man will praise God.

God has done this over and over again.
The zeal of God's foes has repeatedly turned against them.
And God will even take the remnant of their wrath
(the leftover bits)
and put it on like a belt.

Their own wrath will be turned into a weapon (or in this case, part of God's armor).

You see this in Pharaoh at the Red Sea.
You see this in Sennacherib at Jerusalem.
You see this over and over again in history –
until you see it anew at the cross.

Because at the cross, the wrath of man praised the LORD,
as Jesus wrapped himself in the remnant of wrath –
as all the fury and wrath of man fell upon the Lord of Glory –
all to the praise and majesty of God.

We serve a God who has turned upside down all the expectations of earthly powers.
Therefore:

*11 Make your vows to the Lord your God and perform them;
let all around him bring gifts to him who is to be feared,*

You may have noticed that the end of the Psalm is dominated by the word “fear.”

“you are to be feared” (v7)

“the earth feared and was still” (v8)

“bring gifts to him is to be feared” (v11)

“who is to be feared by the kings of the earth” (v12)

Three of these four uses are the normal verb to “fear” (*yare'*),
but the third use (*mora'* in verse 11) is a noun built on the same root.

You are to pay your vows to Yahweh, your God and perform them.

Why?

Not just because he is “to be feared” (that’s a verb).

But because he is “the Fear.”

This word is only used a dozen times in the Bible –

in Deuteronomy it is often used to refer to how God brought Israel out of Egypt
with great “terrors.”

And in Isaiah 8 it is the word used to say “do not fear what they fear” –
but rather let Yahweh be “your fear”

Whom do you fear?

Be honest.

You don’t fear God, do you?

When you tell God that you’ll do something, do you do it?

Does your word to him mean more to you than your word to anyone else?

Ed Welch has written a book entitled

When People Are Big, and God is Small.

Psalm 76 challenges you to see the world in a heavenly perspective –

to see that God is big, and people are small –

after all,

he is the Fear

12 who cuts off the spirit of princes,

who is to be feared by the kings of the earth.

The wealthy and powerful of the earth must fear our Fear.

For he is the one who raises up and casts down.

He is the one who rules over death and the grave.

Notice how Psalm 76 contrasts “the heavens” and “the earth.”

Verse 8 – “from the heavens you uttered judgment”

“the earth feared and was still”

verse 9 – to save all the humble of the earth,

verse 12 – who is to be feared by the kings of the earth.

Perhaps you can understand why Paul says in Colossians 3

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above,
where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth.

For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

When Christ who is your life appears,

then you also will appear with him in glory.”

Indeed, you are supposed to be “heavenly minded” –
not “earthly minded.”

Paul says in Colossians 3:5 – “put to death therefore what is earthly in you...”

What does it mean to be heavenly minded?

It means to recognize all that Psalm 76 has been saying.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the majestic Lion who triumphs over all his foes.

He is the one who saves the poor and humble.

He is to be feared – and your whole identity and purpose is found in him.

All this comes together in Revelation 5:

Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. 2 And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” 3 And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, 4 and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. 5 And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

In Genesis 49, Jacob had spoken of Judah as a lion.

The OT doesn’t really do a whole lot with this image –

Hosea 5 says that God would be like a lion to Judah

(tearing him apart!)

but the Davidic kings do not appear to do much with this.

But in Jesus Christ, we have the Lion of Judah –

both as human son of David, and as the divine son of God –

and he has conquered.

But, of course, the way that this Lion conquers is through his death –
through his sacrificial death on the cross, as the Lamb of God.

6 And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. 8 And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 And they sang a new song, saying

*“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
10 and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”*

11 Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, 12 saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” 13 And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” 14 And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.