

Do the Psalms Really Apply to Me?
A Study of “Enemies” in Israelite Song
By Joel Martin (2/25/06)

Often when the clouds of doubt and trouble pass over my soul, I turn to the Psalms to find the hope of Christ in the character of God. In the Psalms, I see men relate with God in the most open and candid way and I see God answer back with words of comfort and truth. However, when I approach the Psalms, I often feel that the enemies that are described in the Psalms and God’s response to those enemies have nothing to do with me. In other words, David’s enemies were tangible men with swords and his literal life was on the line. They are not like my enemies...the intangible doubt, fear, troubled relationships, sexual sin and lust, inability to comprehend the fullness of God and retain in my mind all aspects of His character, and the inability to simultaneously express all appropriate affections towards God (love, fear, rejoicing, contrition over sin, zeal, meekness). Therefore, do the words “In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried to my God for help; He heard my voice out of His temple, and my cry for help before came into His ears. Then the earth shook and quaked, and the foundations of the mountains were trembling and were shaken, because He was angry” apply to me when David spoke them after the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul? My intangible enemies are not really as dangerous as David’s enemies and do not warrant God’s attention, do they? David did not have these enemies did he? All his enemies were external, not internal like mine.

Oh, praise be to God for His precious saint Hannah and her song. For it is here that I learn that biblical enemies extend beyond men with swords seeking to literally take my life. Hannah’s song is found in 1 Samuel 2. Before we delve into the song itself, let us take a look at the context. Hannah is the wife of Elkanah, who has a second wife, Peninnah. Though Hannah is the favorite of Elkanah, Hannah was barren while Peninnah had children. Peninnah, “her rival, however, would provoke her bitterly to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb.” (1 Sam 1:6). As a result of her situation, Hannah was greatly distressed (1:10), was under affliction (1:11), was oppressed in spirit (1:15), considered herself a worthless woman (1:16), and spoke out of great concern and provocation (1:16). In the midst of such distress, she prayed to the Lord and He answered her prayer and she bore a son, Samuel, who she consecrated to the Lord.

Because of her great joy in God’s blessing, Hannah then sings her song. In the very first verse, Hannah says that her mouth speaks boldly against her enemies and that she rejoices in her salvation. The entire song has a militant tone to it... “The bows of the mighty are shattered”, “The Lord kills and makes alive”, “Those who contend with the Lord shall be shattered, against them He will thunder in the heavens”, “He will give strength to His king and will exalt the horn of His anointed one.” Hannah is praising the Lord for a rout of her enemies and a great salvation and victory. Yet recall the context! Her enemy is Peninnah, her rival with children, not a warrior clad in the finest armor and ready to strike. Her enemy is her barrenness, not a never-ending flow of enemy soldiers. Her enemy is her oppressed spirit, her great concern, and her provocation, not her being held siege by a great foreign enemy army. Hannah feels free to use the term “enemy” and use militant language to describe what we might term a more every-day internal

battle. For Hannah there is no blood-shed, no physical death yet she is encouraged by and sings a militant song.

Though the context of Hannah's song help us to determine that "enemy" can be more broadly applied, the internal structure of the psalm also helps us see the correspondence between God's actions in the more external military terms and the internal personal struggles. For sentences like "Even the barren gives birth to seven, but she who has many children languishes", "He raises the poor from the dust. He lifts the needy from the ash heap," and "The Lord makes poor and rich, He brings low and He also exalts" are interspersed with sentences like "He brings down to Sheol and raises up," "Those who contend with the Lord will be shattered," and "The bows of the mighty are shattered." God's great joy in reversal, i.e. bring low the high and raising up the low, applies to mothers, the poor, and the great warrior. In other words, God's passion for destroying the enemies of his people extends to both their external enemies seeking to take their life and their personal enemies arising from difficult situations.

So when I am struggling with all my internal battles, can I turn to the militant psalms of David and apply them to my situation? Absolutely! Hannah's song indicates that the Hebrew term 'oyebim' (enemies) can be applied beyond its natural military scope. We now have authority from Scripture itself to interpret David's physical enemies and God's response to those enemies as applying to our internal struggles. Therefore, in regards to my doubts, I can say "Turn to me and be gracious to me, For I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart are enlarged; Bring me out of my distress. Look upon my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins. Look upon my enemies, for they are many, and they hate me with violent hatred. Guard my soul and deliver me. Do not let me be ashamed, for I take refuge in You." (Psalm 25:16-20). Even though for David his enemies were people with swords and spears, Hannah has taught us that I can apply this hope of crying out to God to my enemies of doubt that are just as real and as potent. Praise be to God and Christ Jesus that He wages war on all our enemies... "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual force of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Eph 6:12).