Mas1e Psalms

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Description and Background

Fragments of a Psalms scroll were found in one of many rooms built into the casemate wall of the Masada fortress. Identified as locus 1039, the site lies just south of the building identified as the synagogue.

Mas1e Psalms—the first scroll text found at Masada—consists of two fragments that together contain portions of Psalms 81–5. The fragments were discovered along with coins dating to the First Jewish Revolt (66–73 C.E.). Written on parchment in the square Herodian script, the fragments have been dated paleographically to around the first half century of the Common Era. Although part of the text could easily be read, the scroll was not entirely legible until infrared photographs were taken and developed.

When these fragments were first examined by Professor Yadin, he believed them to be almost identical to the Masoretic text of the same verses. The exception he noted was a spelling variation in which the KJV Psalm 83:6 phrase the tabernacles of Edom is rendered in the scroll as the gods of Edom. Professor Shemaryahu Talmon, in a recent article that analyzes the physical characteristics of the fragments and provides a transcription and a study of their contents, suggests that this variation could be “a simple scribal mistake.” He goes on to explain that switching two letters in the first word of the phrase would change the meaning from “tents” or “tabernacles” to “gods.” But he also notes that some scholars have discussed the possibility of this being an intentional change, so the matter is still undecided.

The layout of the text is such that the column is written in two subsections. A single line of text is divided into two equal halves (referred to as hemstitches). Three large columns are preserved in the fragments. The center column is largely intact, with the columns to the right and left being torn. In his preliminary report, Yadin notes that the tearing appears to have been deliberate, suggesting that the center column, which contains Psalms 82 and 83, could have been the focus of attention.

Translation

To give the reader a feel for the material covered in these fragments, we have included the KJV translation of Psalms 82 and 83. The variation in Psalm 83:6 found in the Masada fragments appears in brackets after the Masoretic text version.

Psalm 82

1 A Psalm of Asaph. GOD standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods.

2 How long will ye judge unjustly, and accept the persons of the wicked? Selah.

3 Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy.

4 Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the hand of the wicked.
5 They know not, neither will they understand; they walk on in darkness: all the foundations of the earth are out of course.

6 I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High.

7 But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes.

8 Arise, O God, judge the earth: for thou shalt inherit all nations.

Psalm 83

1 A Song or Psalm of Asaph. KEEP not thou silence, O God: hold not thy peace, and be not still, O God.

2 For, lo, thine enemies make a tumult: and they that hate thee have lifted up the head.

3 They have taken crafty counsel against thy people, and consulted against thy hidden ones.

4 They have said, Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation; that the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance.

5 For they have consulted together with one consent: they are confederate against thee:

6 The tabernacles [gods] of Edom, and the Ishmaelites; of Moab, and the Hagarenes;

7 Gebal, and Ammon, and Amalek; the Philistines with the inhabitants of Tyre;

8 Assur also is joined with them: they have holpen the children of Lot. Selah.

9 Do unto them as unto the Midianites; as to Sisera, as to Jabin, at the brook of Kison:

10 Which perished at En-dor: they became as dung for the earth.

11 Make their nobles like Oreb, and like Zeeb: yea, all their princes as Zebah, and as Zalmunna:

12 Who said, Let us take to ourselves the houses of God in possession.

13 O my God, make them like a wheel; as the stubble before the wind.

14 As the fire burneth a wood, and as the flame setteth the mountains on fire;

15 So persecute them with thy tempest, and make them afraid with thy storm.

16 Fill their faces with shame; that they may seek thy name, O LORD.

17 Let them be confounded and troubled for ever; yea, let them be put to shame, and perish:

18 That men may know that thou, whose name alone is JEHOVAH, art the most high over all the earth.
Commentary

Psalm 81 is a song of praise to God, a lament for the blessings that Israel has lost because she did not always follow God. Psalm 82 is a call for judgment and justice against the wicked, a statement of the divine heritage of Israel, while Psalm 83 is a call for God to smite the enemies of Israel. Psalm 84, another song of praise, expresses the desire of the righteous to be with God. Psalm 85 is a song of praise for the redemption of Israel and a cry for mercy.

Note how the variant reading in 83:6 makes verse six much more explicit, for it is not just the inhabitants of those various nations who have taken counsel against Israel, but also their gods.

What these psalms meant to the Zealots at Masada or to others who may have possessed the scroll can only be surmised, but the general theme of cries for divine help and judgment against the enemies of Israel certainly fit their circumstances and attitudes.

Notes
