Prayer Amidst Despair

Psalm 120

When COVID 19 hit and the “2-week stay home” ruling came from our Governor in March of 2020, I was hopefully optimistic that it would blow over quickly. I had no issues with going all online for our church, and prayed we’d be able to reopen our doors for Easter. President Trump at the time even said we should look to Easter as the timeline for getting back to normal. I was regularly updating our people on what the church was doing via Facebook live. I continued my optimistic view even into the months of April-June, despite having to have our kids go fully virtual for school. Soon however, in the middle of June, as we re-opened our doors with the contingency of masks I began to despair. We had few people show up to services. Nearly 50% of our church was absent despite having two services where one was masks and the other no masks. This seemed to appease many. Until the middle of July when masks were to be strictly enforced.

I felt led as the leader of our church to follow Romans 13 and had every reason to believe our people would comply. The elders were split on what to do and the people began to rebel and rebuke me for this decision. The despair within my heart grew. My excitement for online Facebook live sessions waned and eventually came to a halt. I felt I was working harder than ever, but was constantly being berated, belittled, blown up online and called many names by good, long-time church folks.

People began to leave the church. We were OK on money, but slowly creeping behind. I feared we’d have to let go of our other full-time pastor. I felt alone, unseen and far from the Lord. How could people be so immature in their faith? Why couldn’t they see the bigger picture? How could masks be such a big deal? I began to eat and drink beer too often during this time. I gained significant weight after having gotten down to my goal weight. I was wandering through,

doing the motions, and felt very similarly to the Psalmist in Psalm 120. I wished the Lord would punish those who spoke ill of me. I desired for the Lord to show up in power, and convict them of their arrogant stupidity, yet I still felt far from the Lord. The Psalmist felt the same. Let us together read this Psalm. Join me in reading it.

A Song of Ascents. Psalm 120

In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me.
2 Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue.
3 What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue?
4 A warrior's sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree!
5 Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!
6 Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.
7 I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war!

This is labeled as a “Son of Ascent”, but to our commoner’s ears, this is not fully understood. Let me bring clarity before we move on. Kinder states: “This is the first of the fifteen Songs of Ascents (Ps. 120–134). They were evidently songs used by the pilgrims on their way up to the temple at Jerusalem for the feasts. Not every psalm in the group was necessarily composed for this purpose”[1]. The original composing of this Psalm did not necessarily have the idea of ascending into Jerusalem in mind but was later collected by the editors of the Psalms, likely hundreds of years after its original writing. The despair within this particular Psalm is very personal as the author uses I/me several times within these short seven verses.

As it was brought into these 15 songs, Kinder states: “It appropriately begins the series in a distant land, so that we join the pilgrims as they set out on a journey which, in broad outline, will bring us to Jerusalem in Psalm 122, and, in the last psalms of the group, to the ark, the priests and the temple servants who minister, by turns, day and night at the house of the Lord”.[2] In the context of ascending to Jerusalem, it begins the series with a sense of being far off and

[1] Kidner, D. (1975). *Psalms 73–150: An Introduction and Commentary* (Vol. 16, p. 465). InterVarsity Press.
[2] Kidner, D. (1975). *Psalms 73–150: An Introduction and Commentary* (Vol. 16, p. 465). InterVarsity Press.

desiring to return home. It can be doubly classified as a Psalm of Thanksgiving and of lament, as both ideas are featured within these seven verses. It's hard to detect thanksgiving, but vs. 1 starts off with a sigh of thanksgiving stating to the Lord: "You answered me".

In Psalm 120, I find my own words echoed, as he sought freedom from his plight, deliverance from his enemies and a desire for the Lord to intervene. Maybe you've felt that way too. I believe this Psalm gives us hope during trials and distress, for we all find ourselves in those times and are promised in Scripture that they will continue to show up (great promise, right!?). Jesus states in John 16:33 that trials will come, but He offers hope despite that. In this Psalm, we see this as a reality and the Psalmist offers the reader/listener a hope in despair and that is through prayer. How then can we have a life of prayer amidst despair? As I read and study Psalm 120, I recognize four keys to having a life of prayer amidst despair, the first of which is the key of RECOGNITION.

Recognize that the Lord hears our prayers and responds to our cries (Vs. 1)

The psalmist does not hold back his emotions within this verse or the rest of the psalm to come. He explains his past *distress*, which in the Hebrew can be translated צָרָה***: need, distress, anxiety (the opposite of deliverance, salvation).***[3] The Psalmist highlights his past distress and how the Lord both heard his cry of distress and answered him in his past distress.

This is a personal psalm directed to the Lord as he mentions "to the Lord". He personalizes the distress as his own and describes his reaching out to the Lord, yearning for help in his time of struggle. Here he utilizes a ***Terraced Pattern of parallelism*** to make his point. This pattern is where one line builds upon the other. This can be indicative of the word "and" that appears in the second cola (or line) (vs. 2). The psalmist knows however that he must turn to the

[3] Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000). In *The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament* (electronic ed., p. 1053). E.J. Brill.

Lord instead of any other person or thing. He believes that the Lord will hear his cry, otherwise, why cry out at all? He does not share what his past distress was within this line, but does develop out his current distress later, starting with vs. 2. In vs. 1, the psalmist affirms God's attentiveness to his cry by then stating the Lord answered Him in his distress. This seems to come with a sigh of relief. He was in agony and the Lord brough him out of it.

In his previous distress, he called out to the Lord. In Hebrew, the word translated as call here means: קָרָא **verb.** call, proclaim, *read aloud, read; call;*[4]. This was then, no silent plea to the Lord in the past. In his previous struggle, he turned to the Lord aloud. He strongly proclaimed his plight and the Lord answered: עָנָה answer, respond; *respond, make response;*[5]. The Lord did not remain silent and watch the Psalmist squirm within his trial, but He responded! This past response of the Lord offered hope to the Psalmist that if the Lord did it back then, he can and will do it again.

In this we see 2 things- trouble will come upon us, and most likely more than once; but the Lord hears our cries. Hubbard states: "Yahweh is the one who rescues us from distress, not the one who preserves us from distress altogether. ***Implicit here is the assumption that hardships will befall us…*** God promises rescue, not tranquility".[6]

When trouble comes, because it will, it's who and what we turn to that reveals our hearts. During COVID, I turned to food and alcohol, but should've followed the example to the Psalmist and turned to the Lord instead. I have seen the Lord meet me in my past, as I am sure you have. We can use those past answers or responses from the Lord to embolden our turning to the Lord

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[4] Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). In *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (p. 894). Clarendon Press.

[5] Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). In *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (p. 772). Clarendon Press.

[6] Hubbard, R. L. J., & Johnston, R. K. (2012). Foreword. In W. W. Gasque, R. L. Hubbard Jr., & R. K. Johnston (Eds.), *Psalms* (pp. 445–446). Baker Books.

again, during any and every *distress* we find ourselves in. Will you in your current or future distress turn to the Lord? What are you dealing with right now that you need the response of the Lord in? Be like the Psalmist, not like me. Go to the Lord in prayer. Call out to Him and see His faithfulness to answer your cry. ***Allow your despair to lead you to prayer!*** Ogilvie reminds us: "Whenever we face adversity, we also face options. We can worry. We can complain. We can seek to manipulate our situation. Or we can pray. The psalmist's distress works well for him. It drives him to his knees".[7] ***AMEN and AMEN. Point: In trouble, turn to the Lord***

As mentioned, when I read and study Psalm 120, I recognize four keys to having a life of prayer amidst despair, the second key from this passage is the key of RESPONSE.

Respond to your trial with a cry for deliverance (Vs. 2)

As mentioned, our response should be to pray. But pray for what? Here, the psalmist not only gives us the "what" of this call to prayer, but the how. When we recognize the Lord hears and answers, we need to pray from our heart, our cry should be specific, not generic.

The psalmist continues to ask for deliverance, but here he moves from the inward agony to what seems to be the outward agony of "lying lips" and a deceitful tongue. Interesting that he shifts from plural "lips" to "a tongue". It makes the reader wonder: who is he talking about? A group or a person, or both? Has there been a stirring up of lies from a single person to a group? Allen proposes a theory: "He was the victim of lying and misrepresentation, he claimed. He had suffered from slander, probably from one individual in particular"[8]. One person seemed to be stirring up lies against the Psalmist, bringing him to his knees in anxiety, frustration and a sense of hopelessness. Yet, in this, he turns to the Lord and asks for deliverance. **Deliver in the**

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[7] Williams, D., & Ogilvie, L. J. (1989). *Psalms 73–150* (Vol. 14, p. 385). Thomas Nelson Inc.
[8] Allen, L. C. (2002). *Psalms 101–150 (Revised)* (Vol. 21, p. 201). Word, Incorporated.

Hebrew is: נצל: to take away, save; to escape from, to extract, draw[9]. The Psalmist wants set free. Think of the deliverance of Israel from the bondage of slavery in Egypt and the Lord's amazing action of taking them away and out of Egypt. This may be the image the Psalmist seeks to spark in the mind of those who are reading or listening to this Psalm.

The Psalmist needs freed from this wicked and deceitful person with lips dripping with lies and a tongue spewing deceit. **Deceitful in the Hebrew is: רְמִיָּה deceit, treachery**;— always[10]. There is a sense of treachery within this word, which could give the imagery of someone who is close to him, who should not be stirring up trouble is the one doing the lying. The Hebrew word also relates to a sense of "always" where the indication would be that this person or persons are never telling the truth, but every word that comes from their mouth is full of lies. "The psalmist called upon the Lord to save him because apart from divine deliverance he was doomed to defeat".[11] He ***needed*** freedom and so he asks of the Lord directly for what he knew he needed. "The specific problem that afflicted him were the lies, unjust accusation, or criticism that threatened to consume him."[12] Without the Lord's deliverance, he would be consumed and he is making this known to the Lord in prayer.

This scenario feels very close to what I was feeling during COVID. If only I would've soaked in this Psalm during those days, I may have not gained the weight. I may not have sat in depression as long as I did. People were spewing lies and hatred my way. I was beaten down and a fearful the voice would appear causing me to wonder if I would be asked to step down from my role as Lead Pastor. Have you experienced lies against you and your character? How did you

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[9] Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000). In *The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament* (electronic ed., p. 717). E.J. Brill.
[10] Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). In *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (p. 941). Clarendon Press.
[11] Estes, D. J. (2019). *Psalms 73–150* (E. R. Clendenen, Ed.; Vol. 13, p. 445). B&H Publishing Group.
[12] Estes, D. J. (2019). *Psalms 73–150* (E. R. Clendenen, Ed.; Vol. 13, p. 445). B&H Publishing Group.

respond? Did it do to you what it did to me? When you find yourself in this space (maybe you are in it even now), cry out to the Lord who delivers. Specify your need, do not be ambiguous. Name you pain, problem and position. Although the Lord already knows it, us speaking it aloud is cathartic for the soul. If you have already recognized He hears you and remember he has answered in the past, what is there to fear?

As mentioned, when I read and study Psalm 120, I recognize four keys to having a life of prayer amidst despair, the third key from this passage is the key of RELEASE.

Release your emotions and attempts at answering your own prayer (Vs. 3-4)

The psalmist in vs. 3 shifts his focus from God to the "deceitful tongue", stating this phrase a second time, which strengthens the truth of a singular person he is addressing. He asks a rhetorical question, one in which he seems to answer in the next verse with strong hyperbolic language. Estes helps unpack this thought: "The question posed in v. 3 is addressed to the liars. It is possible that they were present literally, but it is more likely that the psalmist speaks rhetorically to them from a distance. The form of the question may allude to a curse formula that occurs about a dozen times in the Hebrew Bible, often in an oath pledging truthfulness or the fulfillment of a pledge (cf. 1 Kgs 2:23)"[13].

Within the Psalms, we see what is called an *imprecatory refrain or psalm.* This means that the Psalmist seeks the Lord's judgment on his enemies. Sometimes these imprecatory refrains are quite violent. A combing of all these structures and poetics is unique here in this psalm, there is a lot going on in the mind of the psalmist! His expression in this verse is in a "curse-type" formula. ***May God deal with those who do me harm. I will not do so, which is a common model of imprecatory psalms.*** The Psalmist is more likely stating "What more shall He

[13] Estes, D. J. (2019). *Psalms 73–150* (E. R. Clendenen, Ed.; Vol. 13, p. 445). B&H Publishing Group.

(the Lord) do to you" rather than "what more shall be done to you". Estes continues: "By this means he places his cause into the Lord's hands rather than retaliating himself or seeking assistance elsewhere. The psalmist is confident that the truthful character of the Lord is antithetical to the lying and deceit of his oppressors".[14]

The Psalmist is releasing his own desire to respond himself to these lies and the one with lying lips and a deceitful tongue and handing it over to the Lord. He speaks of what he desires the Lord will do to them however and his desire is pretty violent in verse 4. He himself would love to destroy this person and wound them greatly with an extreme amount of pain, but in the end, he leaves it to the Lord.

What I love about this is that the Psalmist is completely honest before the Lord. He allows his emotions of anger and hatred towards those who are wounding him to come out. He doesn't pretend to be nice, or a man with no ill will towards his enemies but reveals the fullness of his emotions to the Lord. We too should do this. We often hide behind pious language in our prayers and ignore what is truly going on within our own souls. Emotions are not bad, it's what we do with them that changes our trajectory. There is freedom within this prayer and after he expressed his raw, real and strong emotions, he directs the answer to his pain and struggle to the Lord, leaving it in his hands.

The psalmist seems to emphatically answer his own rhetorical question. The psalmist is wishing a harsh death (or at least extreme pain) upon the person with a deceitful tongue. He desires pain and agony to fall upon the deceitful one with sharp arrows. He not only wants the arrow to be sharp but be like the hot tip of a burning coal! This is not just fire, but something hotter as coals are hotter than flames of fire. This metaphorical language although somewhat foreign to us, would have been familiar to the original audience. This was an instrument of death

[14] Estes, D. J. (2019). *Psalms 73–150* (E. R. Clendenen, Ed.; Vol. 13, p. 445). B&H Publishing Group.

and pain. Sharp arrows could pierce even the toughest armor of the time and making them hot would make the pain of the sharp arrow that much more painful. Allen explains: "The reference to weapons in v 4 presupposes their metaphorical usage for slander, as in Pss 52:4 (2); 57:5 (4); Jer 9:2, 7 (3, 8). One may compare especially Ps 64:4, 8 (3, 7), where arrows of divine retribution are promised as a response to arrowlike words[15]" The Psalmist desires for divine arrows to overthrow and create more damage than the human arrows his enemy is hurling at him. The psalmist isn't clear what these arrows of deceit are, but we know they are causing him great agony and distress, as he will continue to build on in later verses. "The roots and stems of the white broom were used for charcoal (cf. Job 30:4). The wood's lasting heat evidently made it a good incendiary weapon (cf. Pss 7:14; 140:11 [10]; Isa 50:11)".[16] Again, he is in this trusting that the Lord will intervene on his behalf and is releasing his control over the situation.

This is a very an important theme within this psalm- giving it to the LORD and not trying to take care of our plight on our own, especially when it is others bringing about the issues at hand. The Lord is the judge, not us. Too often it is tempting to try and arrest control and it always will get off track when we do this. The prayer amidst despair must have the component of release and honesty within it. If we simply pray for the sake of praying and are not honest with our emotions or our need of the Lord, we will not walk away from that prayer trusting the Lord will intervene the way the Psalmist seems to have trusted. We will continue to feel anxious and seek to find a way on our own to battle our own way out. Release your emotions and self-reliance to the Lord. *Simply surrender.*

As mentioned, when I read and study Psalm 120, I recognize four keys to having a life of prayer amidst despair, the fourth key from this passage is the key of REST.

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[15] Allen, L. C. (2002). *Psalms 101–150 (Revised)* (Vol. 21, p. 201). Word, Incorporated.
[16] Allen, L. C. (2002). *Psalms 101–150 (Revised)* (Vol. 21, p. 201). Word, Incorporated.

Rest in the waiting and trust that the Lord will answer (Vs. 5-7)

Within this Psalm, there is a tension. The problem is shared, the prayer is offered, but no solution comes within the Psalm. In vs. 5, The psalmist again shifts the focus to himself. He uses: “woe to me!” to express a furthering of his own distress. This is an extremely strong and emphatic statement. He is not only depressed and distressed from the lying lips but feels a deep sense of woe due to his situation. He then answers here a secondary reason for his woe- he feels lost, alone, and far from home.

Estes provides commentary on the tension: “The introductory cry of v. 5 (*ʾôyâ*) is a word of doom expressing the psalmist’s feeling of distress as he awaited the Lord’s intervention. He was confident that the Lord would come to his rescue (v. 4), but when would that be?”[17]. He was in a waiting period and describing to the Lord again, how he felt. The distress of the liar was making him feel far away. He uses a hyperbolic metaphor when he talks of “sojourning in Meshech and dwelling among the tents of Kedar”. They parallel each other as opposites. Meshech and Kedar were not within the same geographic area of each other but were the farthest areas of the known world (see image in appendix). Estes explains: “He felt as though he were a sojourner without secure legal status (*gûr*) as he lived in a temporary dwelling (*šākan*) like a nomad. Meshech…and Kedar... These were remote, barbaric tribes at the edge of the known world. Because of the distance between the two tribes, they are probably not literal geographical references, but metaphorical of the barbarous liars that threatened him”. This would indicate then that he was not in these remote places, but this is how he: felt close to his foes, but far from home, bringing woe to his soul.

[17] Estes, D. J. (2019). *Psalms 73–150* (E. R. Clendenen, Ed.; Vol. 13, p. 446). B&H Publishing Group.

Within the “Songs of Ascent” this would fit perfectly within the “journey to Jerusalem” especially as the beginning of the journey and would help enforce the need to get to Jerusalem. It would also serve to remind those who have the chance to get home that there are those who do not have that luxury. This content and context are why many believe it was placed in the opening spot of these songs. “If the “songs of ascent” are associated with pilgrimages to Jerusalem, then this opening song pleads for safety on a dangerous journey”.[18]

When we are amid trials, we too feel far from home, we may feel the tension of the lack of the Lord’s answer or intervention. We may scream “WOE IS ME!” as the Psalmist did. Yet, despite this feeling, he still reminds himself (vs. 1) and the reader/listener that the Lord met him. The whole psalm must be read within the context of this hope and firm belief. We are in the waiting, but God is still alive and moving. We can rest only in the knowing that there is hope in the waiting. Rest in this waiting. Remember what He has already done. His timing is not our timing, of which the Psalmist confesses in the onset. In the terraced format of this Psalm, this becomes clear.

The Psalmist continues his lament in verse 6. He feels as if he has waited too long. He is at the end of his rope with the waiting. He expresses his angst, anxiety, and inner turmoil of being so far for so long. He uses the word “dwelling” several times in Hebrew it means: שָׁכַן “settle down, abide, dwell”.[19] He feels stuck where he is, so stuck that he feels his house is built in that place, and he sees no way out, except the release valve the Lord can offer. He wants the Lord’s peace, he wants the lying, deceit, and curses over him to cease, yet he remains in waiting. Estes states: “The psalmist complains that his painful situation has persisted for too long, and his

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[18] Walton, J. H. (2009). *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): The Minor Prophets, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Vol. 5, p. 423). Zondervan.

[19] Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). In *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (p. 1014). Clarendon Press.

patience was on empty. His desire was for peace (*šālôm*), the absence of strife and the presence of positive good will. By contrast, his enemies had no interest in what is right, true, or just; but instead, they sabotaged all prospects for peace with him"[20].

Often, we can get restless in the waiting. We find ourselves groaning aloud like the Psalmist does here. The waiting is hard. The waiting is heavy. It's OK to feel this way and express it to the Lord, but again the hope of his answer is what we can rest in within this hard waiting.

The psalmist continues the discussion focused on himself in vs. 7. He states he is "for peace". He uses military metaphors contrasting "peace" and "war". The psalms often use military metaphors to display a figure of hostile speech[21]. He longs for peace, which in Hebrew is: שָׁלוֹם (*šālôm*) and means: "completeness, soundness, welfare, peace".[22] This is an often-used word in Hebrew, and it is a complete sense of peace that leads to rest. He is longing for this rest yet cannot find it. He is among people who provide the opposite of peace, war!

This psalm does not wrap up nicely. The reader/listener is left with the question: What the happens next!? But he leaves it here, open ended. Hubbard brings some clarity: "The psalm surprisingly closes without resolution, thus leaving readers/listeners with a profound sense of dissatisfaction at living in a foreign land"[23]. The tension remains, but the hope of verse one still rings true. Despite no resolution, the psalmist prays. He trusts the Lord, thus he can rest in the waiting, no matter how uncomfortable it may be, he can rest.

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[20] Estes, D. J. (2019). *Psalms 73–150* (E. R. Clendenen, Ed.; Vol. 13, p. 446). B&H Publishing Group.
[21] See: Hubbard, R. L. J., & Johnston, R. K. (2012). Foreword. In W. W. Gasque, R. L. Hubbard Jr., & R. K. Johnston (Eds.), *Psalms* (pp. 446–447). Baker Books.
[22] Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). In *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (p. 1022). Clarendon Press.
[23] Hubbard, R. L. J., & Johnston, R. K. (2012). Foreword. In W. W. Gasque, R. L. Hubbard Jr., & R. K. Johnston (Eds.), *Psalms* (pp. 446–447). Baker Books.

This psalm rings true for all of us, whether now, in the past or in the future. To live this psalm out and attach these truths in our lives, we must adopt a posture of action and application. When trials come: *Recognize that the Lord hears our prayers and responds to our cries (Vs. 1); Respond to your trial with a cry for deliverance (Vs. 2); Release your emotions and attempts at answering your own prayer (Vs. 3-4); Rest in the waiting and trust the Lord will answer (Vs. 5-7).* Go to the Lord in prayer. Be honest in prayer. Leave it in the hands of the Lord. Find peace in HIM in the waiting, knowing that he WILL deliver you in His timing and in His way. Do not neglect prayer as I did.

Right now, I want each of you to turn to the person next to you and pray. Share your situation of trial, or your testimony of deliverance. Pray for deliverance for one another, or offer thanksgiving for the Lord's past deliverance.

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S. Gillmayr-Bucher, " 'Like Olive Shoots around Your Table': Images of Space in the Psalms of Ascent," in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms*, 489, observes, "The basic structure of the well ordered world of the psalms is centric. On the horizontal as well as the vertical axis the centre is the temple as God's dwelling place on earth. Dangerous places like the wilderness or foreign countries are located on the horizontal margins."

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APPENDIX

Red dot indicates Meshech


MAGOG
MEDIAN EMPIRE
BLACK SEA
ASSHUR
Haran
Ninevah
GOMER
Carchemish
Asshur
ELAM
BABYLONIA
Babylon
Nippur
MESHECH
LYDIA
Hamath
Byblos
Damascus
CYPRUS
ARABIA
Jerusalem
SEA
SEA
Teman