

Psalm 89:1-18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Psalm 89 verses 1 to 18. A mascal of Ethan the Ezraite. I will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord forever. With my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations.

For I said, steadfast love will be built up forever. In the heavens you will establish your faithfulness. You have said, I have made a covenant with my chosen one. I have sworn to David my servant. I will establish your offspring forever and build your throne for all generations. Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness in the assembly of the Holy Ones.

For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord? A God greatly to be feared in the council of the Holy Ones, and awesome above all who are around him.

O Lord of hosts, who is mighty as you are, O Lord, with your faithfulness all around you? You rule the raging of the sea. When its waves rise, you still them.

[1:04] You crushed Rahab like a carcass. You scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. The heavens are yours. The earth also is yours. The world and all that is in it, you have founded them.

The north and the south, you have created them. Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name. You have a mighty arm. Strong is your hand. High your right hand.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne. Steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. Blessed are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O Lord, in the light of your face, who exult in your name all the day, and in your righteousness are exalted.

For you are the glory of their strength. By your favour our horn is exalted. For our shield belongs to the Lord, our King to the Holy One of Israel.

Psalm 89 comes at the end of Book 3 of the Psalter. Like various other psalms that focus upon the Davidic Covenant, its position does not seem to be random. Like Psalms 2 and 72, it appears at the beginning or end of one of the books of the Psalter.

[2:12] The appearance of the Messianic Psalms at such seams of the Psalter gives weight to the suggestion that the entire Psalter is supposed to be heard in a Messianic key. After an introduction of praise to the Lord and his mighty deeds, the psalmist appeals to the Davidic Covenant, established in 2 Samuel 7, verses 4-17.

But he does so in a situation of covenantal crisis, when God seems to have cast off his anointed king. The king has been defeated, and it is not clear whether he will recover.

Various proposals have been put forward for the disruption that is in view here. The disruption in view was serious enough to cast doubt upon the continuation of the Davidic Covenant itself. This has made the exile of Jehoiachin an attractive option for many, although that identification is far from certain.

Conrad Schaefer argues for a concentric or chiasmic structure, focusing on verses 19-20. It's concerned with the covenant with David. This structure, he argues, presents David's authority as arising from God's own sovereignty.

God's sovereignty is foundational to the whole and connects the two halves of the psalm together. References to God's steadfast love and faithfulness also pervade the psalm. These attributes of God on which the Davidic Covenant rests are praised and declared to be fundamental to the Lord's cosmic rule.

[3:32] This strengthens the grounds for appeal concerning the seemingly broken covenant. The psalm opens with these two attributes. These attributes were central in the Lord's self-revelation in his theophanic appearance to Moses at Sinai in Exodus chapter 34, verses 6-7.

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands,

forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation. The faithfulness and the steadfast love of the Lord are integral to his revealed nature and the grounds for unceasing praise. The psalmist is confident that steadfast love will be built up forever and the Lord's faithfulness in the heavens.

The Lord himself cannot deny his steadfast love and faithfulness without denying himself, and consequently, as the Lord grounded the Davidic Covenant upon these attributes, the restoration and elevation of the Davidic monarchy will establish them.

In verses 3-4, he declares the oath of the Davidic Covenant. Bringing it to mind and presenting it to the Lord in a context of praise. A similar statement is found in verses 19-20.

[4 : 54] The Davidic oath is structured in a two-fold parallelism, which heightens the hearer's sense of its solemnity. Schaeffer notes that the verbs of verse 2 are repeated in reverse order in verse 4, further tying the Lord's establishment of his attributes of steadfast love and faithfulness with his establishment of the throne of David.

The Davidic Covenant is declared in 2 Samuel 7, verses 8-16. Now therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel.

And I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you.

And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place, and be disturbed no more.

And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house.

When your days are fulfilled, and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

[6 : 17] I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men. But my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you.

And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever. After recalling the Davidic covenant, the psalmist moves our attention up into the heavens and the realm of the divine council itself.

Surrounded by the heavenly beings in the heavenly throne room, the Lord will be glorified in the divine assembly. The grounds for this praise will be the wonders of the Lord, presumably those wonders by which he will have confirmed his nature through his acting to establish his promises to David, even against all of the odds.

The Lord is incomparable, set apart from any of the heavenly beings. While they might be members of the divine council, none of them is like the Lord, who is the uncreated, most high guard, mighty in all of his works, and faithful in all that he does.

From heaven, our attention is drawn to the earth again, now to reflect upon the Lord's proven power in the arena of creation. This power is seen in his power over the deep, a power manifested in the act of fashioning the world.

[7 : 36] He set boundaries for the chaotic powers of the sea. There is a likely allusion here to ancient Near Eastern combat myths of the divine slaying of the sea monster, prevailing over the forces of chaos, establishing his supremacy over all the other gods, founding the earth, and subduing opponents in rebellious forces.

This great divine victory over the forces of chaos at the world's founding is also described in places such as Job chapter 26, verses 12 to 13, which also employs the same sort of symbolism.

By his power he stilled the sea. By his understanding he shattered Rahab. By his wind the heavens were made fair. His hand pierced the fleeing serpent. However, here the myth is also alluding to an actual historical event.

Rahab is a term used for Egypt in places such as Isaiah chapter 30, verse 7, and as elsewhere in scripture, what is called the cosmogonic myth is connected with recorded history, as the victory over the sea monster and the forces of chaos is related to the story of the Red Sea crossing.

If, according to the pagan myths, the Most High God established the world and his supremacy over the powers of the cosmos through an act of conflict with the sea monster, the Lord achieved a comparable victory in history by delivering his people through the Red Sea and drowning their enemies there.

[8 : 57] This was the founding of a new world. Isaiah chapter 51, verses 9 to 10, Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord. Awake as in days of old, the generations of long ago.

Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?

In Psalm 74, verses 13 to 14, You divided the sea by your might. You broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan.

You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. Whether primeval cosmic forces and heavenly powers or mighty nations, the Lord has proven his dominion over all.

Behind all of this is the fact that the Lord has founded the entire creation, the heavens, the earth, the world, and all within it, by his hand. North and south, comprehending things in all directions, were created by the Lord.

[9 : 58] The creation responds to the voice and the power of the Lord. The great mountains joyfully praise him. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of God's throne. His rule is established upon these things.

The Lord is not a cosmic despot or tyrant, capriciously imposing an arbitrary will upon the world. Indeed, for the psalmist, steadfast love and faithfulness, the attributes of the Lord that have been at the heart of his praise and will come to ground his appeal, are here personified, as if they were servants going before the Lord's face wherever he goes.

The mountains joyfully respond to the Lord's power, and the people who do the same are blessed also. They walk in the light of the Lord's face, in the illuminating presence of his favourable gaze. As they exult in the Lord, they are exalted by the very righteousness that they praise. The section concludes by speaking of the Lord as the glory of his people's strength and the one who exalts their horn.

The nation's fate and well-being depends upon the triumph of their king, and the Lord is the one who will bring this about. Verse 18 underlines this point. Their shield belongs to the Lord, the shield being the king that the Lord has set over them.

[11 : 12] A question to consider. Where else do we see the Red Sea Crossing presented as if it were a cosmic founding event or as a parallel to events and creation?

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