

Psalm 87: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 04 December 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 87, a psalm of the sons of Korah, a song. Psalm 87 is another psalm that is challenging to translate and to interpret, with uncertainties in the correct version of the text itself.

Much of the meaning of the psalm, especially in the second stanza, can hang upon such considerations. The psalm can be divided into two principal sections, verses 1-3 and verses 4-6, with verse 7 likely standing by itself.

The first stanza of the psalm speaks of Zion's unique character, setting it apart from all other places. It is the city that the Lord himself has founded, on the holy mountains, the word here is plural, singled out by him, for a special blessing and favour.

It is loved by the Lord, more than all of the, literally, tabernacles of Jacob. The use of this term highlights the choice of Zion as the Lord's own dwelling place, the site of the sanctuary, rather than any of the other potential sanctuaries or high places of the land.

The city is described in ways that brings together both its singularity, the city he founded, city of God, and its beautiful plurality, the holy mountains, the gates of Zion.

[1 : 5 0] Glorious things are spoken of this city, in history, in praise and in song, and in promise and in prophecy. Verses 4-6 are particularly difficult to translate.

It is a divine oracle, in which the Lord describes himself as if various peoples were being presented to him, and he were recording their city of origin in a register. Rahab, a name used for Egypt in places like Isaiah chapter 30 verse 7, and Babylon, the two great oppressors are there.

Philistia and Tyre, nations nearer to home, with which Israel had often had hostile dealings, are there. Even Cush or Ethiopia, which would have been seen as the very edge of the known map, is there.

All of these nations will line up for registration, and in an astonishing twist, the Lord will declare that they are sons and daughters of Zion, that Jerusalem is their true place of birth.

These nations, despite their troubled history with Israel, will one day be accounted among the people of the Lord. There are probably already God-fearers and diaspora populations in these lands.

[2 : 5 2] However, the oracle seems to speak of something more, of an elevation of those nations to the status of members of the people of Zion, as they turn to the Lord en masse and trust in him.

The hearer of these words might recall various Old Testament prophecies, such as those made concerning the blessing of all of the families of the earth at the calling of Abraham, or in Isaiah chapter 19, verses 19-25.

In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt.

When they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a saviour and defender, and deliver them. And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day, and worship with sacrifice and offering.

And they will make vows to the Lord, and perform them. And the Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them.

[3 : 50] In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.

Zechariah chapter 2 verse 11 also speaks of such a day. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you.

As does Malachi chapter 1 verse 11. For from the rising of the sun to its setting, my name will be great among the nations. And in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering.

For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. This is an elevation of the nations, but is also, in keeping with the theme of the psalm, an elevation of Zion.

Zion is being raised up as the great mother city of the whole world, as the nations are turned to the Lord. As Isaiah declares in chapter 2 verses 2 to 4.

[5 : 01] It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it.

And many people shall come and say, Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths.

For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. One after another, people from the line of all of the nations, assembled for registration, will be marked down as belonging to the children of Zion, a citizen of the city of God described in the first three verses.

Conrad Schaefer writes, The relation of birth with Zion, that is full citizenship, erases the differences of race, culture and language, religion. Philistines, Tyrians, Ethiopians are converted into brothers and sisters, family members of Israel, against whom they were previously hostile.

[6 : 15] This psalm erases even the origins marked by oppression and impurity, like those of Egypt and Babylon. Personifications of violence, brutality, injustice. Almighty God who takes the census inscribes these unlikely partners as faithful, with birthrights in the capital.

The psalm ends with scenes of a celebration, of singers and dancers, perhaps in a procession. The meaning of the expression, All my springs are in you, is not clear. Alan Ross claims that the expression might refer to the music of the songs, or perhaps the themes of the songs.

Alternatively, it might be a reference to Zion as a source of the fountains of God's grace and salvation, or as a source of life more generally. A question to consider.

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