

Psalm 87

Zion: the Glorious City of God

Psalm 87 is the most animated of all the Zion Songs. It is important to our understanding of salvation and the Church.

1. Zion's foundation

The idea of laying a foundation entails ownership. The person who lays the foundation of a building is its source, origin, builder and owner. Zion is God's foundation. So he claims an incontestable right of ownership. Zion exists only because God created it, and has no purpose other than the one God has given it.

2. Zion's mountains

What are the holy mountains?

- The plural "mountains" may be a plural of majesty, i.e. Zion is set on the most holy mountain. But a difficulty with that is that the Hebrew doesn't say "on" – it says "among" – which suggests that the mountains are genuinely plural.
- It is also possible that the holy mountains are the mountains that the other nations regarded as holy. If that is what the Psalm means, then perhaps it is referring to God's election of Zion.
- More likely, the phrase "the holy mountains" is a way of referring to the whole of the Promised Land. A ridge of high ground runs north-south through Israel: the Bible calls this "the mountains". So Zion's holy mountains are the land of Israel. The whole land is holy. God has founded Zion in the middle of the land. Zion stands among the mountains of Israel. She is the focus of their holiness.

3. Zion's gates

Hebrew poetry doesn't use rhyme. It prefers to use parallel thoughts. It likes to say the same thing twice, but in different ways, just to add interest, or to draw out an important contrast, or to complete a thought.

That is what happens in vv. 1-2. The significance of the phrase "His foundation" is explained by the phrase "the LORD loves the gates of Zion." The reference to "the holy mountains" is explained by the line "all the dwellings of Jacob".

Why "Zion's gates", and what has this to do with the interpretation of the Psalm?

A gate can be closed in order to keep in the people who are in, and to keep out the people who are out. Or a gate can be open in order to let people in and out. A gate can be used for exclusion or for inclusion.

Is God's purpose in loving Zion's gates to ring fence the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to enclose them in an exclusive circle? Or is God's purpose in loving Zion's gates to broaden out the circle of his love?

The Psalm (the whole Bible!) makes it plain that God's love is inclusive. That's why Zion is founded "among" the holy mountains – it is a reflection of the fact that

God has set the Church "among" the nations with a mission out to the nations, with a view to bringing the nations into the household of God.

4. Zion's children

But the focus of the Psalm isn't on the outward movement of the Church's mission to the nations, but on the inward movement of disciples from the nations: "The LORD will record, when he registers the peoples: 'This one was born there.'"

The cities of the ancient near east had registers in which the names of the residents were recorded. Ps. 87 depicts God as Zion's registrar. As each child is born, God enrolls it in his book. This central idea is repeated in vv. 4, 5 and 6.

Who are these children? The aggressive, the stand-offish, the utterly foreign:

- Rahab = Egypt = the Proud One = Israel's slave driver.
- Babylon = Israel's captor.
- Philistia and Tyre = local, fiercely independent city states.
- Cush = Ethiopia = the ends of the earth.

The last phrase in verse 5 can be translated, "He himself will establish her as most high." This fits well with the message of Isaiah 2:2-3 and Micah 4:1-2.

5. Zion's springs

Verse 5 is the adoption papers of each of Zion's children. Hence the joy of v. 7. Not only have the nations received their official papers, legitimizing their status, they've also received the Spirit of adoption. This is the apex of their joy.

Compare 1 John 3:1 and Mark 13:1. The exclamation of wonder used by the disciple is exactly the same as that used by John. John Murray writes of adoption: "This is surely the apex of grace and privilege...It staggers imagination because of its amazing condescension and love...Eternity will not exhaust its marvel."

Conclusion

What are the glorious things God speaks about the Church?

- The Church is his creation, and he has given her a glorious purpose.
- To achieve this glorious purpose he has set the Church among the nations.
- The Church's glorious purpose among the nations is to draw them through the preaching of the apostolic gospel (her "gates") into the household of salvation.
- This glorious mission is to people from every ethnic background, and to the aggressive, the stand-offish and the utterly foreign.
- God has given the Church the crowning glory of being the community in which the Spirit of adoption is received and enjoyed, so that she is "the Jerusalem above [which] is free, which is the mother of us all" (Gal. 4:26).
- In a word, the Church is the mother of all the living, so that we can say that outside the Church there is no salvation.