

Psalm 97

The King Who Comes in Triumph

Psalms 93, 97 and 99 each begin with the declaration “The LORD reigns!” Psalm 97 picks up where Psalm 96 left off – with the coming of the King – he comes with majesty; he comes to conquer; he comes with salvation for his people. So Psalm 97 is a song which celebrates the victory of the King.

In the following sections I have provided my own translation. Part 1 (v.1) is three lines which identify the King. In Part 2 (vv. 2-6) there are two parallel lines in each verse. Part 3 (vv. 7-10) comprises verses of 3 lines each; the indentation I have used is an attempt to highlight the parallel lines in each verse. Part 4 is two verses of two parallel lines each.

1. The King’s Identity (v. 1)

- ¹ The LORD reigns!
Let the earth be glad;
let the many coastlands rejoice!

Before the Psalm goes anywhere, it makes it clear who the King is and how far his reign extends. The LORD – the triune God who revealed himself to Moses and the prophets, and who reveals himself through his incarnate Son – he is King (Heb. 1:1-4), and not the pathetic little, good-for-nothing “godlings” worshipped by the nations. And the LORD’s reign isn’t confined to Israel (or, for that matter, the Church) – his rule is as extensive as the whole earth, the whole created order (1 Cor. 15:27-28).

2. The King’s Majesty (vv. 2-6)

- ² Cloud and thick darkness surround him;
righteousness and justice are the base of his throne.
- ³ Fire before him goes,
and burns up his enemies round about.
- ⁴ His lightning bolts lit up the inhabited world;
the earth saw and writhed.
- ⁵ Mountains, like wax, melted away before the LORD,
before the Lord of all the earth.
- ⁶ The heavens declared his righteousness,
and all the peoples saw his glory.

The central section (vv. 3-5) of this part of the Psalm describes the coming of the King in terms of a “theophany” (a visible manifestation of the invisible God). The language is taken from his appearance at Mount Sinai and his march through the Wilderness towards the Promised Land and the Conquest of Canaan.

The King’s majesty is terrifying – fire, storm and earthquake!

Notice the brackets on this section (vv. 2 and 6). “Clouds and thick darkness” conceal the holy presence of the LORD so as to protect people – no one can see the LORD’s face and live (Ex. 33:20). Nonetheless, the people do see his glory. Where? In the face of Jesus Christ (John 1:14,18; 2 Cor. 4:6).

So the Psalm points us towards the incarnate Son of God. When John the Baptist announced the coming of the kingdom of God, his expectation was judgement (Matt. 3:7-12) – along the lines of the content of vv. 3-5. When Jesus came bringing the kingdom of God, he came bringing grace (Matt. 4:12-17) – more in terms of vv. 2 and 6.

3. The King’s Conquest (vv. 7-10)

- ⁷ All those who serve carved images will be ashamed,
those who boast in their “no-gods” –
worship him all gods!
- ⁸ Zion heard and rejoiced,
and the daughters of Judah were glad
because of your judgements LORD.
- ⁹ For you are the LORD,
the Most High over all the earth;
you have lifted yourself up, up, up above all gods.
- ¹⁰ You who love the LORD – hate evil!
He is the One who keeps the whole person of his faithful ones;
from the hand of the wicked he delivers them.

If vv. 2-6 describe the appearance of the King’s coming, then this section describes consequence of his coming, i.e. conquest:

- (a) *The gods of the nations are exposed as empty good-for-nothings* (vv. 7,9)

The word in v. 7 translated “will be ashamed” means “to fall into disgrace through personal failure or the failure of an object of trust.” This word isn’t about the feeling of embarrassment. It is about being subjected to public humiliation – being shown to be a fraud, a cheat, a good-for-nothing.

This is an appropriate punishment for those who worship/boast in other gods. The word I have translated “no-gods” (v. 7b) means “something worthless, weak or deficient”. “No-gods” can do “no-thing” (see Ps. 115:4-8). They must be exposed for what they are – and those who propagandize on their behalf must be subjected to public disgrace.

There is no room for syncretism or pluralism – if the LORD is “Most High over all the earth”, then he and he alone is to be worshipped.

The advent of the Son of God did actually achieve this – the gods of the Greek and the Roman world fell into disrepute when the true and living God came on the conquest of grace. The empty lies of scientism and modern pluralism are also exposed only by the revelation of Jesus Christ.

(b) *The people of the LORD rejoice in his salvation* (vv. 8,10)

The King's victory also means salvation for his people – this is the meaning of the words “judgements”, “keeps” and “delivers” in vv. 8 and 10. The King's people respond to his victory with joy (v. 8) and obedience (v.10). This naturally leads to the final part of the Psalm.

4. The King's Memorial (vv. 11-12)

¹¹ Light has been sown for the righteous person,
and for those who are upright in heart, joy.

¹² Rejoice you righteous people in the LORD,
and confess his holy memorial name.

A major hurdle for faith (i.e. the joy and obedience commanded by vv. 8 and 10) is that we do not see the King's majesty, and often we do not seem to experience his victory. For example, the BBC regularly propagates evolutionary dogma with enormous confidence: this isn't the exposure of lies v. 7 encourages us to expect.

This is nothing new. Psalm 97 was probably composed during or after the Babylonian exile, when the faithful people of the LORD no longer enjoyed possession of their own land or the protection of a Davidic king reigning in Jerusalem. They were in darkness.

But Psalm 97 promises light and joy (v. 11). The metaphor “light is sown” is unique in Scripture. Does it suggest that the faithful must wait for the harvest of light? Is this the Old Testament equivalent of the mystery of the kingdom of heaven which is like a man sowing in a field (Matt. 13:24-30,36-43)? If so, then the Psalm is a call to exercise faith in the promise of God in unpromising times.

That is why the Psalm concludes with confession.

The phrase “his holy memorial name” is difficult to translate. The “memorial name” is more than just “the name” and more than just the mental remembrance of “the name”. The word I have translated “memorial name” is first used in Ex. 3:15, “The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and this is my *memorial* to all generations.”

Thus, God's “memorial name” gathers together the history of his dealings with his people – election, revelation, promise and deliverance. It is the name by which God's people remember and know and invoke the LORD. It is the name on which they call for salvation. So:

- The LORD's “memorial name” is *the King's identity* (v. 1).
- The holiness of his “memorial name” reminds us of *the King's majesty* (vv. 2-6)
- The fact that we can call on the King's “memorial name” and be saved from our enemies is a direct result of *the King's conquest* (vv. 7-10).
- And the way that we *do* call upon his “memorial name” is by confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord – which brings us back to where we started.