

One of the benefits of preaching through Ezekiel alongside Book 3 of the Psalms is that you can generally see two different ways of talking about Jerusalem and the Davidic kings.

The prophets generally come at Jerusalem from the standpoint of the covenant lawsuit. Jerusalem has failed – and is no longer the holy city. Israel has failed – and is no longer “my people.” The house of David has failed and will be overthrown. Yes, God will make everything right in the end – but the point is that *you really screwed up!*

In other words, the prophets generally focus on human failure.

But the Psalms focus on God’s promise.

After all, the Psalms were the hymnbook of Israel.

These were the songs that were sung in the worship of God in the temple.

While they often refer to Israel’s failure,

there is a confidence that God will do what he has promised – that *he* will make everything right in the end.

In other words, the Psalms generally focus on divine grace and mercy.

Which is what makes Psalm 82 so interesting!

Because Psalm 82 sounds much more like the prophets than any other Psalm.

The big question in Psalm 82 is whether the “gods” are human rulers or the gods of the nations.

I’m not sure it matters.

(For what it’s worth, I’m going to argue that it’s *both*).

But before we dig down into the details of this Psalm,

I want you to see the big picture first.

Whether you say that the “gods” (the divine council) are human or divine (or both), the point is that God stands “in the midst of the gods.”

God does not stand aloof.

Our problem today is that we tend to see God standing “afar off.”

With Psalm 10, we ask,

“Why, O Lord, do you stand far away?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?”

Sometimes it seems as though God is distant.

Start with the kings of the earth.

We often think that our destiny will be decided by who gets elected next month.

Will the United States support an independent Palestinian state?

What will Iran do next?

How will China's decisions affect our economy.

And the gods of this age also preoccupy us:

the gods of materialism – the quest for bigger, better, faster stuff –

the gods of pleasure – the quest for self-fulfillment – I just want to have “fun”!

the gods of power – our never-ending quest for control

But we tend to think of God as standing aloof from all that.

He's “better” than that!

Psalm 82 puts God in the middle of all that.

God stands in the midst of the gods.

And in the midst of the gods *he* renders judgment.

As Psalm 10 concludes:

16 The Lord is king forever and ever;

the nations perish from his land.

17 O Lord, you hear the desire of the afflicted;

you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear

18 to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed,

so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more.

Psalm 10 starts from the perspective of the people on earth
who wonder what is happening in the divine council.

Psalm 82 starts from the divine council

and reveals what is going on in the heavens –

that God does not stand aloof.

He stands in the midst of the gods!

You can see a basic chiasmic structure to Psalm 82 –

beginning and ending with God as judge,

the accusation and condemnation in the middle,

with the darkness of the gods at the center.

1. God Judges in the Divine Assembly (v1)

82:1 God has taken his place in the divine council;

in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:

The divine council is frequently spoken of in scripture.

The first instance is found in Genesis 1 –
where God says, “let us make man in our image.”

The ‘gods’ are divine beings.

The scriptures speak of these beings in various terms.

There are the cherubim – the protectors and guardians of God’s holiness.

There are angels – the messengers who speak for God.

There are the “sons of God” in Job 1 –
who would appear to be divine rulers who report to God –
these may be the same as the “principalities and powers”
of Ephesians 6.

Satan himself – the accuser – could be present in the divine assembly.

This makes it clear that the heavenly beings that present themselves here
are not necessarily *good* beings.

Who are the gods in this divine council?

Their Greek names might be Zeus, Apollo and Athena.

Their Babylonian names would be Ishtar, Marduk and Shamash.

In Canaan it would be Baal, El and Asherah.

Or for that matter the Norse Thor and Odin!

You see, it’s not that the gods of the nations don’t exist.

The nations of the world have recognized that these powers are there.

But these powers were not given for people to worship.

Scripture does not give us great detail as to what these “gods” do,
or whether some of them remained faithful to God.

(It would seem likely that the discussion of Gabriel and Michael in Daniel 10 –
and their conflict with the “prince of Persia” –
suggests that Gabriel and Michael were divine beings who remained faithful).

So Psalm 82 encourages us to see the divine council
as the place where God meets with the gods of the nations.

But the gods of the nations are not portrayed as the equals of God.

Rather, they are his councilors – his agents –
they are supposed to execute justice according to his rules.

But they do not.

But at the same time,

while we should see that the divine council contains these “gods” – we should also see that the divine council includes humans as well.

Abraham participated in the divine council in Genesis 18.

Moses did so in Exodus 32-34.

The Davidic kings – and for that matter, the kings of other nations often appear in such a light.

Isaiah 14:12-17, for instance, is talking about the king of Babylon, in rather exalted terms:

*12 “How you are fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!
13 You said in your heart,
‘I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly
in the far reaches of the north;
14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.’*

The king of Babylon claims that he will take over the divine assembly.

He will sit on God’s throne!

This has often been applied to Satan –

but as the following context suggests,
it is still speaking of the king of Babylon:

*15 But you are brought down to Sheol,
to the far reaches of the pit.
16 Those who see you will stare at you
and ponder over you:
‘Is this the man who made the earth tremble,
who shook kingdoms,
17 who made the world like a desert
and overthrew its cities,
who did not let his prisoners go home?’*

The kings of the nations and the gods of the nations are closely identified.

That shouldn’t surprise us!

After all, the nations certainly spoke of their kings as divine beings!

The scriptures acknowledge that the kings of the earth do have a sort of divine status.
After all, Adam had been created as the Son of God –
the one who was to reflect God’s justice in his rule over all the earth.
So there is a sense in which the kings of the earth and the gods of the nations
gather together in the divine assembly.

In verses 2-4 we see:

2. God’s Accusation against the Gods (v2-4)

Verse two gives the indictment:

*2 “How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked? Selah*

The gods have failed to do justice.

The gods (both human and divine) were supposed to reflect God’s standards of justice.
Every king – every judge – everyone in a position to decide any case! –
is supposed to judge justly.
And when the gods – when those who stand in the place of God –
show partiality to the wicked,
then God will call them to account.

Verses 3-4 then explain what they should have been doing:

*3 Give justice to the weak and the fatherless;
maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.
4 Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”*

This is what the gods should be doing.

The rulers of the nations should be concerned for widows and orphans.

As you think about who to vote for in the upcoming election,
remember that those who get elected
will have to answer to God for how they treat the afflicted.
And therefore, if you help them get elected,
you will answer to God for how you treated the weak through them!

(This is one of the drawbacks of representative government!

You cannot say “It’s not my fault.”

The US Constitution says “we the people” are the highest authority in the universe –
therefore, *you* are gods –
and how *you* treat the weak through your elected representatives
will be judged by God.)

Now, who are the weak and afflicted?

The weak and afflicted are those who are oppressed by the rich and powerful.
In every culture there are those who know how to use the system –
how to manipulate the rules – in order to get what they want.
Those are the wicked.

The afflicted and the destitute are those who get the short end of the stick.

The just king – the impartial judge –
will make sure that what is *right* will happen.

To translate an ancient agrarian economy into modern terms:

If a wealthy bank convinces a young entrepreneur
he can afford a ridiculous mortgage,
the bank is wicked – and the young man is afflicted.

Does he bear some blame for his foolishness?

For being gullible and grasping?

Sure – but the rules of the game are set up to favor the bank.

The bank either gets a wad of cash – or the house on foreclosure!

The righteous judge will maintain the right of the destitute – the powerless.

The righteous judge will always consider who is in the driver's seat:

do the powerful use their power to further their own ambitions?

Or do they use their power to deliver the weak from the hand of the wicked?

When you go to the polls next week,

remember that you are exercising your sovereign authority –
you are gods!

And so you must think of how your vote
affects the weakest and most vulnerable among us.

When this country was founded, one of the central concerns was the problem of elections.

Holding the rulers accountable to the people was important –
but the fear was that frequent elections would result in politicians
being more concerned with staying in power,
than with doing what was right.

Of course, that same problem occurs in smaller political circles as well!

If you are in the position of judge –
if you are the one who decides a case between others –
then in that moment you enter the divine council.

Are you more concerned about doing what is right?

Or about staying in power?

How do you treat the weakest and most vulnerable people around you?

Verse 5 is at the center of the Psalm.

3. The Darkness of the Gods (v5)

*5 They have neither knowledge nor understanding,
they walk about in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.*

All the other verses are composed of couplets (two lines).

But this central stanza has three –
which puts the middle line at the center of the Psalm:

“they walk about in darkness.”

The first line in verse 5 explains why they walk in darkness:

“they have neither knowledge nor understanding.”

What does it mean that the “gods” lack knowledge and understanding?

Don’t they know what God’s standards are?

The problem is not a failure of intellect.

The problem is not that they need more information.

Our society, for some strange reason,
believes that education is the answer.
Education will illuminate the darkness!

But all the information in the world does not equal knowledge!

Proverbs tells us that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.

You don’t really *know* anything,
until you know it in relationship to the God who made it – and you!

And the third line in verse 5 explains the result:

“all the foundations of the earth are shaken.”

The world is turned upside down by gods without knowledge.
Judges who walk in darkness upset the order of the universe.

As the JPS Study Bible says, “Justice is a cornerstone of the cosmos.”

When rulers act unjustly,

the foundations of the earth are shaken.

Today, the gods of the nations still walk in darkness.
The rulers of the earth still lack knowledge and understanding.
So long as the rulers of the earth fail to acknowledge God
and so long as they fail to judge justly,
the earth will continue to be shaken.

We need a king whose knowledge and understanding brings light –
whose justice established the foundations of the earth!

In verses 6-7, God issues his condemnation of the gods:

2'. God's Condemnation of the Gods (v6-7)

*6 I said, "You are gods,
sons of the Most High, all of you;
7 nevertheless, like men you shall die,
and fall like any prince."*

This echoes Isaiah 14's condemnation of the king of Babylon.
You may be gods, but you will die like men!
Of course, this judgment cuts both ways!
The gods of the nations also will die like men!

There may be something of a jab at the pagan mythologies here.
After all, many pagan myths include the death of the gods.
Certainly the gods of the nations *act* like men.
And so Psalm 82 says they will die like men as well.

Whether you take the "gods" as divine beings or as human rulers,
the most exalted of them will "die like men."

This is a reminder that all rulers need to keep in mind.
Whether you are a ruler in politics, a manager at work,
a parent at home, or an elder in the church,
don't think for a moment that your power will last!
You will die – and you will face the Judge at the last day!

Psalm 82 concludes with a

1'. Prayer that God Will Judge (v8)

*8 Arise, O God, judge the earth;
for you shall inherit all the nations!*

Now, at the end of the Psalm,
we hear that the judgment spoken of in verses 2-7 hasn't happened yet.

Because here in verse 8, God is seated.
God hasn't stood up yet!

And so the Psalmist cries out, asking for God to stand – for God to arise
and bring judgment on the earth –
that he might overthrow “the gods”
and inherit all the nations.

Here we see one more piece of the puzzle:
God is going to inherit the nations.

This may sound strange.
God already rules over the nations!
Why does he need to “inherit” them?

There is an interesting parallel to Psalm 82 in the Ugaritic epics,
where a son insists that his father, the king, step down.

Listen to his reasoning:

“You do not judge the case of the widow,
Nor do you judge the case of the wretched.
You do not drive out the oppressor of the poor!
You do not feed the orphan before you,
Nor the widow behind you!
You have become a companion of the sick-bed,
You have become a friend of the bed of sickness!
Descend from the kingship that I might reign,
From our dominion that I might sit enthroned over it!” (quoted in Tate, p. 339).

In this case it is a son who is demanding the inheritance from his father,
but you can see a similar pattern.

Justice is defined in terms of how you make sure that the strong do not oppress the weak.
And when a king fails to protect the weak,
then he no longer deserves to reign.

The gods have proven to be failures.
And so they must be judged.

Why do you think Baal and Zeus, Woden and Marduk
are all on the scrap heap of history?
God arose and judged them –
because they did not maintain the right of the afflicted.

Why do you think that the nations of the earth collapse?
It is because the rulers of the earth – the gods of our day – oppress the weak.
They do not protect the vulnerable –
and so God arises in wrath and destroys them.

Let me just say very simply,
that if we are not known as a place where the weak and vulnerable are protected,
then God will do the same to us!

Why do I say that about the church?

Because Jesus, in John 10, applies Psalm 82 to himself.
When the Jews come after him to stone him for claiming to be God,
he replies with an interesting twist on Psalm 82
“Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, you are gods’?
If he called them gods to whom the word of God came –
and Scripture cannot be broken –
do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world,
‘You are blaspheming,’
because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?
If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me;
but if I do them, even though you do not believe me,
believe the works,
that you may know that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.”

In the context of John 10,
Jesus has just healed a man who was born blind,
thereby demonstrating his concern for the weak and the powerless.
And he points to the works that he does as witnesses to who he is.

If God had said that he would judge the gods according to their judgments,
then what will God say about the judgments of the Son?!

Jesus is the great King who does justice to the weak and fatherless –
who maintains the right of the afflicted and destitute.
When Psalm 82 cries out for God to “Arise” and “judge the earth”
it is crying out for Jesus to come.
When Psalm 82 says that God “will inherit all the nations”

it is saying that the gods of the nations need to be replaced!

Note that Asaph uses the theme of inheritance.

Whether Asaph understood this or not,
the God who would inherit all the earth,
is also the Son of David – the very human king.
God had established Adam as his son.
Adam was supposed to rule – and judge – all things on behalf of God.

But Adam handed over his dominion to the powers.
He surrendered his place in the divine council to Satan.

He had been promised the inheritance of the whole earth –
the future of eternal life.
He traded his inheritance for death.
(It's generally considered the worst bargain in human history!)

But Jesus comes as the faithful Son of the Father
who inherits all the nations as the righteous one.
He does what is good and right –
and so he replaces the gods –
and he establishes his rule.

And as the place where the rule of Jesus has been established –
we must demonstrate the justice of Jesus to those who are afflicted.