

Last time we talked about how Psalm 86 can be seen “between the temple and Sheol.”

Tonight we come to God’s holy temple –

Psalm 87 is a joyful song of triumphant expectation of the coming glory of Zion.

There are two collections of the psalms of the Sons of Korah –

Psalms 42-49, and Psalms 84-85, 87-88

And as we have seen,

these two collections have some similarities.

Psalms 42 and 84 are both songs of pilgrimage and longing for the temple.

Psalms 44 and 85 are both national laments.

Tonight we will see that Psalm 48 and Psalm 87 are closely related.

Both take the City of God as their theme.

The only other Psalm that uses the phrase “city of God” is Psalm 46 –
a closely related psalm also by the Sons of Korah!

Both Psalms 48 and 87 open with a reference to the holy mountain,

both speak of a divine oracle concerning the city of God (48:8, 87:3),

and both identify that oracle as saying that God “will establish her” (48:8, 87:5).

Psalm 87 connects with other Korahite Psalms as well.

Psalm 47 (which we used as our call to worship) speaks of how the princes of the people
gather as the people of the God of Abraham.

Psalm 87 likewise speaks of the foreign nations as born in Zion.

These Psalms appear to have been written by the Sons of Korah

for the express purpose of being used in the temple liturgy of their day.

Psalm 87 is a celebration of the City of God –

the heavenly Zion – of which you are citizens,

and toward which we walk together in our pilgrimage on earth.

Psalm 87 is designed to make you long for Zion!

I’ve shown you the structure of the Psalm in the bulletin.

There is something of a chiasmic phrasing that runs through the passage,
from the “in you” at the beginning and the end,
to the “this one was born there” in verses 4 and 6,
to the “born in her” in the middle.

In this way Psalm 87 is something of the fulfillment of Psalm 45.

Psalm 45 (another Psalm of Korah)
had spoken of the glorious bride,
whose sons would be princes in all the earth –
and how all nations will praise you forever.

Psalm 87 now portrays that glorious bride as the glorious matron –
the mother who has given birth to the nations.

She is the mother-city of all the earth!

A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. A Song.

1. Speaking of Zion: Glorious Things Are *In You* (v1-3)

On the holy mount stands the city he founded;

Literally, “his foundation on the holy mountains.”

It’s a rather abrupt beginning, but verse 2 explains it:

*2 the Lord loves the gates of Zion
more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.*

We need to start here – because there is going to be a lot in this passage about Zion.
We need to start with how the LORD *loves* the gates of Zion.

God loves his city.

He loves this city – not just more than the nations,
but more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.
Zion has a special place in God’s heart.

Why?

Certainly because it is the city of David –
but if you look forward in history,
it is because this is the place he has chosen to send his son.
This is the place where all of history will come into focus –
and this is the place where *everything will change*.

*3 Glorious things of you are spoken,
O city of God. Selah*

Literally, Glorious things are spoken *in you*.

There’s nothing wrong with translating this “of you” –
except for the miserable mess it makes of the structure of the Psalm! ☺

Besides, while it is certainly true that glorious things should be said of Zion,
the point here is that these glorious things are being said *in Zion*.

Location matters.

It matters *where* you are.

Jesus, in John 4, makes the point that it is no longer about the earthly Jerusalem.
But he still insists that *where* you are matters.

Not in an earthly sense – but in a heavenly sense.

True worshippers must worship in Spirit and in Truth.

The longer I study that passage the more I begin to suspect
that Jesus is referring to the Holy Spirit and Himself.

And now, as we come to Jesus, as we come to the heavenly Zion,
we speak glorious things – not just “about” Zion – but *in Zion*.

2. This One Was Born *There*: the Nations and Zion (v4)

*4 Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon;
behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush —
“This one was born there,” they say.*

Why are these nations listed here?

Why would an Israelite hymn-writer include Rahab, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre and Cush?

Certainly it is quite possible to see an eschatological emphasis here –
but why would you say that these nations were *born* in Zion?

This is why I used Psalm 47 as the call to worship.

Psalm 47 (another Korahite Psalm)

says that “the princes of the people

gather as the people of the God of Abraham.”

God had promised Abraham that he would be “father of many nations.”

Psalm 47 developed that theme in an adoptive sense –

Psalm 87 adds a “mother Zion” theme,

laying the foundation for a NT theme of the heavenly Jerusalem
as the mother of all the faithful!

But this brings us to the particulars of verse 4.

After so much time in Ezekiel, we know Babylon well by now!

Babylon was the powerful kingdom that held sway over all the earth
during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar.

Philistia and Tyre were recently addressed in Ezekiel’s oracles against the nations.

Philistia was a long-term thorn in Israel’s side

(though many Philistines had followed David, after David slew Goliath)

Tyre had also been an ally of David and Solomon –
and in later years Tyre had been on such good terms with Ahab –
that Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal of Tyre!
That didn't work out so well!
Jezebel introduced Baal worship into Israel,
and sought to kill Elijah and the rest of Yahweh's prophets!
Cush came up this morning as an ally of Egypt.

But the curious one is Rahab.
Many ancient commentators assumed that Rahab of Jericho is included here.
But that Rahab would have little meaning in this context.

If you would understand Rahab, you need to understand some ancient mythology.
We saw this morning the reference in Ezekiel 29 to Pharaoh as a tannim –
a dragon or sea monster.
In the ancient world, there are many stories of the gods of the nations slaying the tannim –
the sea monsters – often at great peril to themselves.
Job speaks of God as the one who has destroyed the sea monsters –
though without nearly so much difficulty as the gods of the nations!

Job 9:13 says, “God will not turn back his anger; beneath him bowed the helpers of Rahab.
How then can I answer him, choosing my words with him?”

Likewise, in Job 26:11-13
“The pillars of heaven tremble and are astounded at his rebuke.
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.”
So Rahab is identified in Job as a “fleeing serpent” – a tannim whom God shattered.

Now listen to Isaiah 51:9
“Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD”
(and remember that this morning, we saw that the arm of the LORD
is contrasted regularly in scripture with the arm of Pharaoh –
who claimed to be the King with a strong arm!)
“awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago.
Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?”
This sounds like the same sort of thing in Job – a reference to some ancient battle –
but verse 10 puts an end to that speculation:
“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?
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

So for Isaiah, the defeat of Rahab refers to God's triumph over Egypt in the exodus.

Now, turn over to Isaiah, chapter 30 (read verses 1-7).

Because Egypt is useless – because Egypt cannot help in time of need,
God has called her, “Rahab who sits still.”
A sea monster – a tannim – who sits still is pretty worthless!

(Just think of “the pirates who don't do anything...”
Some of Veggie Tales humor appears really sophisticated...)

Psalm 89:10 also refers to Rahab in context that sounds mythological
until you realize that Rahab was a common picture for Egypt
and God's triumph over Pharaoh in the Exodus.

But now we have a worse problem.

If Psalm 87 had said that *Egypt* was born in Zion,
then we would all rejoice that God was bringing salvation to Egypt.
But *Rahab*?
God cut Rahab, the Tannim, in pieces!
This is Egypt at her God-forsaken worst!

Yes, even Egypt at her God-forsaken worst!

God's purpose for Zion is the reversal of all curses.

Don't you long for Zion!
Don't you long for the day when all these things will come to pass!

That is why verse 5 says:

3. Born in Her: the Most High Establishes Zion (v5)

*5 And of Zion it shall be said,
“This one and that one were born in her”;
for the Most High himself will establish her.*

The day will come when it will be said of Mother Zion
“this one and that one were born in her.”

And that day has happened!
Mother Zion has given birth to the nations!
Isaiah 66:7-8 says “before she was in labor she gave birth;
before her pain came upon her she delivered a son.

Who has heard such a thing?
Who has seen such a thing?
Shall a land be born in one day?
Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment?
For as soon as Zion was in labor she brought forth her children.”

Jerusalem has given birth to the nations.
Yes, at first it was only Jews.
But as Jesus said to the apostles,
“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,
and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

God has established Zion – as Revelation 12 says –
and he protects Mother Zion from the Dragon.

Your mother is safe!
While the Dragon rages against her children on earth
(those who keep the testimony of Jesus), he cannot assault Mother Zion.
The gates of hell cannot prevail against the church!
This does not provide any guarantees regarding any particular congregation.
(Egypt and Assyria once were bulwarks of the church!
Today their congregations are weak and feeble,
as Egypt and Iraq have been overrun by Islam).

But our security and hope are founded upon the resurrection of Jesus.
Because Jesus has been raised from the dead
and he sits at the right hand of the Father,
therefore he has established Zion.
He has made secure the foundations of the heavenly city.

And this heavenly city has now established a beachhead in this age.
The church is to be the place on earth that reflects the City of God.
Our task is to make disciples of all nations.

That starts with the Rahabs and Babylons and Tyres –
these people who were strangers and aliens –
and enemies for that matter!

God says that he will establish Zion –
and that he will include the Rahabs, the Philistines, the Cushites.
The nations will be brought into Zion,
and more than that: *born* in Zion.

2. This One Was Born *There*: the LORD Registers the People (v6)

*6 The Lord records as he registers the peoples,
“This one was born there.” Selah*

Some have suggested that Psalm 87 may simply have been referring to Jewish exiles in Egypt, Babylon, etc.

I mention that here because verse 6 could provide the strongest support for it.

If verse 6 meant the “nations” – then some would expect to see the Hebrew “goyim.” (nations, Gentiles)

But instead we have the Hebrew “amim” – “peoples.”

It’s a plausible argument that may be correct.

I don’t know whether I can get inside the head of the original author well enough to figure it out.

Certainly “amim” can refer to just Israel, but it is frequently used (especially in the plural “peoples”) to refer to the nations.

(Psalm 67 is perhaps the most famous – “let the peoples praise you”)

The most conclusive argument against it is the parallel from Psalm 47:9, “the princes of the peoples” – which undoubtedly refers to the princes of the nations.

Besides, whatever the human author may have had in his mind at the time, it is abundantly clear from the rest of scripture that *God’s* purpose here is to show that all nations are born in Zion, as God registers the peoples – as he writes them in his book.

This word “register” is the word elsewhere used for numbering or counting.

It’s an important Abrahamic word.

In Genesis 15, Abraham was told to number the stars – and that his descendents would be as innumerable as the sand of the sea.

In Genesis 41, Joseph counted up the grain until it was innumerable, “like the sand of the sea.”

(The word is often used in Leviticus for counting days, and for counting people during the census.)

Another important use is in Psalm 48 (our parallel Psalm) where it is used for counting the towers of Zion.

In Psalm 48, it was counting towers.
In Psalm 87, it is counting foreigners.

Why the difference?

Who needs to count towers, if the foreigners are all natives?!

You see,
this is the point of discipleship.

We are to make disciples of all nations.

This is how love of stranger and love of brother are related!

How?

Because God makes strangers and enemies into friends and brothers!

God's purpose in history is to bring all the peoples of the earth together in Zion.

And that is where the singers conclude in verse 7:

1. Speaking of Zion: My Springs Are *in You* (v7)

7 Singers and dancers alike say,

"All my springs are in you."

It would probably be a bit more accurate to translate this

"And the singers, as they dance, [say]

'All my springs are in you.'"

It's a different word than the word used for David "whirling" before the ark.

But the concept is similar.

The singers (among whom we should number the Sons of Korah)
are dancing for joy before the LORD.

"All my springs are in you" –
probably refers to Zion.

After all, the first "in you" was about Zion (the glorious things that were spoken in you)

And so here at the end,

we also hear that all my springs are in Zion.

This reminds of that earlier Korahite Psalm 46 –

the one that speaks of the River whose streams make glad the City of God.

Of course, Jerusalem has no streams!

But since Jerusalem (and especially the temple) is where God has re-established Eden,
we shouldn't be surprised to hear of the springs, streams, rivers of Zion!

There is a river in Zion!

The water of life flows forth from the temple (as Ezekiel will show us soon!).

Jesus speaks of this at the Feast of Tabernacles in John 7.

On the last, the great day of the Feast,

(when the priests had their annual water ritual:

all the people would fast all day – abstaining even from water;

at the end of the day, as all the people were parched with thirst,

they would remind the people of how Moses provided water from the rock,

and they would provide water for all the people.)

But on that last, great day of the feast,

Jesus stood up and cried out,

“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink, whoever believes in me,
as the Scripture has said,

‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

And John tells us that he said this about the Spirit, who had not yet been given,
because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37-39).

Jesus is the one from whose heart rivers of living water flow to his people.

And because Jesus is the temple, from whom flows the living water –

therefore, we who are built into a holy temple in him,

also now flow with living water.

And through the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost,

the apostles become Christ's witnesses to all Judea and Samaria,

and to the ends of the earth.

And through their ministry we continue to sing “all my springs are in Zion”

And as the holy temple, we are now called to be that Zion where the nations are born!

The bride of Psalm 45 is now the mother of Psalm 87 –

which makes sense!

A note on the tune:

Caersalem

Not only does the opening line have a “leaping” movement –

but you can sort of see the mountains of Zion on the page in the opening line

as the musical notes form a “mountain range,” as it were!