

## **The Church of the Servant King**

### **Prophecy Series (Proph13D\_Prophecy in Job and the Psalms)**

#### **Psalm 87 – An Obscure Psalm**

On the surface, this Psalm is one of the most enigmatic passages in the Bible. When one reads this passage, it seems almost unintelligible to us today. It draws upon literary and theological imagery that is not readily apparent to the modern reader.<sup>1</sup> However, this Psalm is rich in significance once it is properly understood. It presents a picture of the city of Zion (Jerusalem) during the messianic period as a city to which peoples of all nations come.

The Psalm has three primary sections: 1) a description of God's love for the city of Zion (vv. 1-3); 2) a description of the citizens of Zion coming from all nations (vv. 4-6); 3) a celebration of God's salvation (v. 7).

#### **God's Love for Zion (vv. 1-3)**

In verse 1, there is a strong declaration of the fact that God has made His home on earth in Jerusalem. God Himself established Zion as the center of true worship. He commanded Solomon to build a temple there so that He could live among His people, the Jews, and among His nation, Israel (1 Ki 6:13). Jerusalem is holy because God dwelt there and because of the future work of the Savior and rule of the King there (1 Ki 8:14-66 cf. Matt 21:4-11; Re 21).

God's special love for Jerusalem (v. 2-3) is due to the fact that it is in Jerusalem where His name is worshipped. The "dwellings of Jacob" (v. 2) is used in contrast to the "gates of Zion." The phrase "dwellings of Jacob" suggest not merely homes scattered about the land of Israel, but fulfillment of the divine promise to the ancients that the people of Abraham through Isaac would one day enjoy the benefits of life in the land of God's blessing.<sup>2</sup> God had established Israel as a nation apart from all other nations, dwelling exclusively for Him as His people in His land. This phrase has a direct connection to God's promises to Abraham known as the Abrahamic Covenant (Ge 12:7; 15:18-21; 17:8).

The term "Zion" is used many times in the Bible in reference to the city of Jerusalem. In such passages as Isaiah 10:32; 62:11; and Zephaniah 3:14, we find the phrase "daughter of Zion." However, this is a misleading translation and the phrase should be translated "daughter Zion."<sup>3</sup> "As God has a son in the people of Israel (Exod 4:22), so He has a 'daughter' in the city of Jerusalem."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Zion is a term packed with meaning to the Jewish readers of Scripture.

Why would God love the "gates of Zion" more than "all the dwellings of Jacob?" The answer is that God loves the Gates or entry points into His city, Jerusalem, even more than He loves the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. Why? Because believers from every race, not just Jews under the Abrahamic Covenant, can enter. This is the point of verse 2.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald B. Allen, "Psalm 87, A Song Rarely Sung," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (April-June 1996): 132.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

In verse 3, we see the phrase – “glorious things are spoken of you.” The glorious things that were spoken of Zion are the assertions concerning God’s work in providing redemption to the peoples of all the nations who have come to Zion to worship Him in spirit and in truth.

### **The Citizens of Zion – From All Nations (vv. 4-6)**

In verses 4-6, the psalmist presents Yahweh making a divine visit to His city as His people were worshipping in the Temple. “The psalm records the grand notion that God Himself was, in a manner of speaking, ‘taken aback’ at the peoples who were present to worship His name.”<sup>5</sup> The speaker in verse 4 is Yahweh Himself. In Genesis 6, God makes a similar divine visitation and observes the wickedness of man that leads to the judgment of the flood. However, the divine visitation here in Psalm 87 results in an observation of righteousness (vs. wickedness) that leads to blessings. “In a lovely poetic manner this poem presents Yahweh coming to His temple to observe the congregation gathered to worship Him in Jerusalem. In the process He ‘discovered’ something to which He responded with mock incredulity and divine joy.”<sup>6</sup> Yahweh discovered a multinational congregation in the Jerusalem temple. Each of the ethnicities mentioned were at one time enemies of Israel.

Rahab (v. 4) is not the redeemed prostitute from Jericho. Rahab here is one of the Scriptural terms for a “dragon” and it is similar to the term “Leviathan” (cf. Job 9:13; 26:12; Psa 89:10; Isa 27:1; 51:9). The psalmist in this passage is using imagery in a way to “put-down” the Egyptians whom God destroyed during the Exodus climatic event of the Red Sea parting (Ex 14-15). “Since Yahweh had defeated Egypt by the use of water, the poets of the Bible liked to call old Egypt ‘that dragon’ (e.g. Isa 30:7), in a mocking, derisive contempt for a people who had dared to stand against the living God.”<sup>7</sup> Ironically, in the Messianic kingdom, the “dragon people” of Egypt will come to worship Yahweh in Zion. Some of the very Gentiles upon whom Yahweh is to shower His blessings in the Millennium will come from Israel’s former nemesis – Egypt.

Also, among the peoples mentioned who worship Yahweh are those from Babylon (v. 4). Throughout the Bible, the term “Babylon” is used to idolatrous peoples and nations who oppose God’s will and people. One reflects upon the tower of Babel in Genesis, the Babylonian empire, and the Babylon of prophecy (Re 17:1-6).

Philistia and Tyre (v. 4) are also mentioned. The ancient Philistines were the ever present enemies of Israel, particularly during the time of Saul and David. They had come to the Canaanite coastland from Crete, and ultimately from the Aegean. The Philistines are thus an instance in which Europeans enter the biblical record and for the most part they were very wicked.<sup>8</sup> Yet, here they are found worshipping Yahweh.

Tyre is most likely a reference to the Phoenicians, the most sophisticated of the ancient peoples in the land of Canaan. The Phoenicians were a warring, seafaring people. The king of Tyre has arrogance only exceeded by Satan himself in Ezekiel 28:12ff. Ethiopia may be a reference to Africa in general.

The phrase “this one was born there” refers to the city of God in verse 3. In other words, Yahweh is imputing to foreign-born believers a citizenship in Zion just as if they were born in Zion. This is an allusion to the born-again experience of the believer. These people had come to faith

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 139.

in Yahweh as proselytes and had been born in a variety of locations. Yet, Yahweh looks at them as if they were born in Jerusalem. "Here, then, is one passage in Hebrew Scripture to which Jesus may have alluded when He expected that Nicodemus knew about being 'born again' (John 3:3, 10)."<sup>9</sup>

### **A Celebration of God's Salvation (v. 7)**

God would establish Zion (v. 5), thus verifying the immutability of this promise. "What Zion was in the psalmist's day would become the place where an increasing number of peoples would come from the nations to adore the living God. This is prophetic of the coming of Jesus, of the spread of the gospel, and of His coming rule as Saviour-King (Isa 2:1-4)."<sup>10</sup>

The poets of the Bible often portrayed salvation pictorially as a spring, a fountain, a source of fresh water in an arid land. The fountains of God are not to be found in Philistia, Egypt, Tyre, Africa, or Europe. They are only found in Zion through Zion's God.

Those who acknowledge this God in faith will join the list of peoples from biblical times. They will be considered by God to have been born in Zion. This was a cause of celebration to the spiritually minded of Israel.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.