

Psalm 87: Celebrating in the City!

Psalm 87 is one of the “Songs of Zion,” psalms celebrating the city of Jerusalem with Mount Zion and the Temple, built in the Davidic dynasty, as *the dwelling place of God*. It was the place on the planet where YHWH chose to be reliably present in the midst of his people. Making pilgrimages to “the city of God” with its temple worship was, to the Jews and God-fearers, what our Christian celebration of Eucharist now is to the Church—a worship experience that transcends governments, geography, race and ethnicity, even time and space.

The whole drama of God’s dealings with the people leads up to the appearance of Jesus the Messiah in Jerusalem, and to his death and victory there. The *centrality of Jerusalem*, “the City of God” explains how **Psalm 87:3** became the text of Augustine’s *The City of God*:

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

Centuries later, the same text inspired this hymn by John Newton (1725-1807):

Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God;
God, whose word cannot be broken,
formed thee for his own abode.
On the Rock of Ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation’s walls surrounded,
thou canst smile at all thy foes.

God was reliably present with his people in their worship in Jerusalem. But sadly, confidence more in a place and procedure than in God led to condemnation of false confidence in Zion by people like Jeremiah and the psalmist of Psalm 81.

However, false confidence in bad theology does not negate the truth of authentic Zion theology, with its twin conviction of YHWH’s election of the Davidic king and the election of Zion. Recall how Isaiah announced that the presence of the Holy God in the midst of the people (Immanuel, “God with us”) means both a divine judgment that purifies Zion so that it may truly be the City of God (Isa. 1:21-26) and the raising up of a faithful king to sit upon the throne of David (Isa. 7:1-17; 9:2-7). (Bernard Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, pp. 172-174)

The Message paraphrase of **Psalm 87** describes how much YHWH loves his Zion home and invites people from everywhere to be “born again” there and enjoy flourishing with him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains that the presence of God

celebrated in the “songs of Zion” is now celebrated in the church throughout the world—“the church where God always dwells with his people in word and sacrament.” (Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayerbook of the Bible*, p. 40) Orthodox theologian Patrick Reardon believes **Psalm 87** is a “meditation on the catholicity of Holy Church...the true mother of all the nations.” (Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, p. 172)

1. In *Open and Unafraid*, David Taylor emphasizes that **Psalm 87** presents symbolic representatives of the whole world. These appear in a register of nations, about whom the Lord says, “they know me.” (“Those who know me” in 4a in Hebrew is *yod’aj*, “my familiars.”)

What do you know about these geographic places? What do they have in common? What is startling about this list? (87:4)

Why do you think this is usually seen as the “pivot of the whole psalm”?

2. The *New Bible Commentary* points out that three Old Testament themes converge in **Psalm 87**: the city theme, the birth theme, and the book theme.

In what verses do you see each of these themes in the psalm?

How does your knowledge and understanding of those biblical themes deepen your understanding and appreciation for Psalm 87?

3. Compare the first and last verses of Psalm 87, verses 1 and 7.

Read Nehemiah 7:4 for an image that helps you see the movement of this psalm. Hint: A Sunday School children’s “hand” game might help too!

4. What are the “glorious things” you learn about the “City of God” from **Psalm 87?**