

Psalm 68 brings the symphony of praise that began in Psalm 65 to a rousing crescendo. These four psalms (Pss 65-68) form an interlude of joy offsetting the intensity of David's deliverance psalms. From Mount Zion all four psalms share a global eschatological perspective calling the nations to worship. Psalm 65 celebrates the grand sweep of redemption and creation. Psalm 66 invites the world to come and see what God has done. Psalm 67 offers a sweeping benediction, the blessing of God for the people of God, "so that all the ends of the earth will fear him" (Ps 67:7). Psalm 67 accompanies Jesus' great commission the way a symphony orchestra enriches the performance of a tenor soloist. Psalm 68 inspires the apostle Paul's grasp of Christ's triumph over the cosmic powers and Christ's empowerment of the church through the gifts of the Spirit. These two psalms are linked in our understanding of salvation: commission and mission, the gifts of the Spirit and the consummation of the age. They come together in resounding praise.

The apostle Paul found in Psalm 68 a paradigm that runs through salvation history. Like an artist painting a full-length mural, the psalmist captures glimpses of divine triumph in images and references that are "distinctively unspecific" but strikingly evocative of powerful moments in Israel's history.¹ We can imagine Moses and Miriam's celebration of the Exodus (Exod 15) or Moses climbing up Mount Sinai to receive the word of the Lord (Exod 19) or the Song of Deborah reciting the victories of the Lord (Judges 5) or David dancing before the Lord with all his might as the ark of the Lord entered Zion, the city of David (2 Sam 6). "This rushing cataract of a psalm – one of the most boisterous and exhilarating in the Psalter" has God marching to Zion in the tradition of the Exodus, the wilderness conquest, and the procession of the ark of the Lord. But the apostle saw even more in the redemptive and eschatological trajectory of Psalm 68. He saw the glorious march of God to Zion in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The triumph celebrated in Psalm 68 culminates in the "incomparably great power" that "raised Christ from the dead and seated him at [the Father's] right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (Eph 1:19-21).

The Triumphal Procession

*May God arise, may his enemies be scattered;
may his foes flee before him.
May you blow them away like smoke –
as wax melts before the fire,
may the wicked perish before God.
But may the righteous be glad and rejoice before God;
may they be happy and joyful.*

*Sing to God, sing in praise to his name,
extol him who rides on the clouds;
rejoice before him – his name is the Lord.*

¹ Goldingay, Psalms, 310.

*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,
is God in his holy dwelling.
God sets the lonely in families,
he leads out the prisoners with singing;
but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.*

Psalm 68:1-6

The psalmist's opening manifesto draws on the ancient words of Moses. Whenever the ark of the covenant set out, Moses said, "Rise up, Lord! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you." And whenever it was set down, Moses said, "Return, Lord, to the countless thousands of Israel" (Numbers 10:35-36). The ark represented the presence of the Lord going before the people (1 Sam 4:3), scattering Israel's enemies like a puff of smoke or a blob of wax melting in a fire.² The psalmist understood that the ark-led wilderness trek conveyed typological or paradigmatic significance. The events surrounding Israel's conquest of the land of Canaan pointed forward to the climactic defeat of evil and the ultimate joy and happiness of the righteous. It was never a matter of being a small Middle Eastern nation on the edge of Mediterranean Sea. It was always about the defeat of the evil and the rule and reign of the Lord.

To "extol him who rides on the clouds" or to "prepare the way for him who rides through the deserts" points beyond human conquest and a human king and introduces the expectation of the Lord who comes to reign over all. The prophet Isaiah may echo Psalm 68:2 when he says, "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isa 40:3). And in turn it was Isaiah's prophecy that gave shape to the ministry of John the Baptist who was the voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him" (Mark 1:3).

But in a surprising twist of description, the one who comes in triumph is not a fierce warrior but a father to orphans and a guardian to widows. He cares for the vulnerable, defends the oppressed, and leads the desolate home. The victory march is made up of family and leaves rebels stranded in the desert. "Ordinary potentates give their attention to the rich and powerful; but the Lord champions the helpless."³

Marching to Zion

*When you, God, went out before your people,
when you marched through the wilderness,
the earth shook, the heavens poured down rain,
before God, the One of Sinai,
before God, the God of Israel.
You gave abundant showers, O God;
you refreshed your weary inheritance.
Your people settled in it, and from your bounty, God,
you provided for the poor.*

² Ross, Psalms, 468; Ps 68:2 The Message.

³ Ross, Psalms, 470.

*The Lord announces the word,
 and the women who proclaim it are a mighty throng:
 “Kings and armies flee in haste;
 the women at home divide the plunder.
 Even while you sleep among the sheep pens,
 the wings of my dove are sheathed with silver,
 its feathers with shining gold.”
 When the Almighty scattered the kings in the land,
 it was like snow fallen on Mount Zalmon.
 Mount Bashan, majestic mountain,
 Mount Bashan, rugged mountain,
 why gaze in envy, you rugged mountain,
 at the mountain where God chooses to reign,
 where the Lord himself will dwell forever?
 The chariots of God are tens of thousands
 and thousands of thousands;
 The Lord has come from Sinai into his sanctuary.
 When you ascended on high,
 you took many captives;
 you received gifts from people,
 even from the rebellious – that you, Lord God,
 might dwell there.*

Psalm 68:7-18

It takes the psalmist only a few poetic lines to recall the many blessings the people of God experienced on the wilderness journey from Sinai to Zion. David’s narrational mural is an array of images telling the story of God’s victory: manna from heaven, oases in the desert, battlefield victories, and showers of blessings. The reflections invoke the sweep of God’s victorious salvation history. Kidner describes these verses as “a tumble of swift images and excited snatches of description.”⁴ Echoes of Deborah’s song can be heard in these lines (Judges 5:24) as kings flee and armies retreat. Peace prevails, measured by the spoils of war and pictures of tranquility. The enemy is on the run and the shepherd falls asleep in the sheep pen. The dove, a symbol of peace, is clothed with a new day’s sunshine of silver and gold.

When David associates the Almighty’s (Shadday) defeat of the kings with “snow” on Mount Zalmon, he may have in mind a striking “contrast of defeated armies and snow on the mountain with the victors basking peacefully in the sunshine.”⁵ Goldingay suggests that the astonishing victory is compared to the extreme rarity of snow in the hill country of Shechem.⁶ However, in keeping with echoes from the Book of Judges, this obscure reference may recall Abimelek’s genocidal attack against the people of Shechem, when he and his men went up Mount Zalmon and cut down branches. They piled the timber against the tower and set it on fire killing about a thousand people who had taken refuge inside (Judges 9:46-49). The psalmist’s reference to snow

⁴ Kidner, Psalms, 240.

⁵ Ross, Psalms, 474.

⁶ Goldingay, Psalms, 322.

may be to the white ash that fell like snow on Mount Zalmon, a symbol of devastating defeat embedded in the imagination of Israel.

The paradox of God's sovereignty is drawn out in several ways. God's victory is effortless. When God arises his enemies scatter in defeat without a fight. The beneficiaries of his triumph are the "least of these" – orphans and widows. Women, not warriors, celebrate the spoils of war. Even the geography of victory is ironic. Instead of choosing the majestic mountains of Bashan in the north for his sanctuary, God chooses the seemingly insignificant hill of Zion in the south to dwell forever. But make no mistake God ascends from Sinai to Zion in the company of his angelic hosts numbering thousands upon thousands upon thousands.

Psalm 68 has a grip on our praying imagination because the apostle Paul used this text to explain the impact of Christ's ascension (Eph 4:7-11). The Israelites in the wilderness were a type pointing forward to the church of Christ. Psalm 68 rehearses the blessings of God when the Israelites were released from captivity. In the wilderness, God forged a new community, giving the Israelites protection, provision and most importantly, his word. The psalmist celebrates God's relational gifts: "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing. . ." (Ps 68:5-6). God also gave his people material gifts, "You gave abundant showers, O God; you refreshed your weary inheritance. Your people settled in it, and from your bounty, God, you provided for the poor" (Ps 68:9-10). But the most important gift God gave his people was his word. The psalmist declares, "The Lord announced the word, and great was the company of those who proclaimed it" (Ps 68:11). To say that God rules and reigns from Mount Sinai is to say that God's Word rules and reigns. Originally, the gifts alluded to in the psalm referred to the spoils of war, but Paul carried over the meaning of the psalm and applied it to the victory of Christ and the gifts given by Christ.

The reason Paul used this particular psalm may have been its liturgical association with Pentecost, the Jewish feast celebrating the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. The original meaning of Pentecost had now been eclipsed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. For Paul the greater significance of Psalm 68 went beyond Moses coming down from Sinai with the law to the ascended Christ giving spiritual gifts to his body. Paul's emphasis on descent and ascent, fits with the incarnation and ascension of Christ (Acts 2:33) and parallels the humiliation and exaltation of Christ described in Philippians 2. The reference to "many captives" refers to Christ's power over "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (3:10; see 1:21; 6:12).

Paul's interpretation and application of Psalm 68 illustrates the importance of reading the Old Testament in line with the redemptive trajectory of Christ and the Church. Instead of speaking to God as the psalmist does ("You ascended on high, you took many captives; you received gifts from people. . ."), Paul speaks of Christ ("When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people." Eph 4:8). And instead of God receiving the spoils of war, Christ gives gifts in the form of ministers of the word, "so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph 4:12). If we expect a word for word correspondence between David and Paul these changes are significant and alter the literal meaning. But the apostle is able to make these changes freely because the conquest of the promised land is a type of Christ's incarnation, ascension and the

outpouring of the gifts of the Spirit. The apostolic hermeneutic carries us beyond the historical-grammatical method and leads us to the true meaning and fulfillment of Psalm 68.

The King's Processional

*Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior,
who daily bears our burdens.
Our God is a God who saves;
from the Sovereign Lord comes escape from death.
Surely God will crush the heads of his enemies,
the hairy crowns of those who go on in their sins.
The Lord says, "I will bring them from Bashan;
I will bring them from the depths of the sea,
that your feet may wade in the blood of your foes,
while the tongues of your dogs have their share."
Your procession, God, has come into view,
the procession of my God and King into the sanctuary.
In front are the singers, after them the musicians;
with them are the young women playing the timbrels.
Praise God in the great congregation;
praise the Lord in the assembly of Israel.
There is the little tribe of Benjamin, leading them,
there the great throng of Judah's princes,
and there the princes of Zebulun and Naphtali.*

*Summon your power, God;
show us your strength, our God, as you have done before.
Because of your temple at Jerusalem
kings will bring you gifts.
Rebuke the beast among the reeds,
the herd of bulls among the calves of the nations.
Humbled, may the beast bring bars of silver.
Scatter the nations who delight in war.
Envoys will come from Egypt;
Cush will submit herself to God.
Sing to God, you kingdoms of earth,
sing praise to the Lord,
to him who rides across the highest heavens, the ancient heavens,
who thunders with mighty voice.
Proclaim the power of God,
whose majesty is over Israel,
whose power is in the heavens.
You, God, are awesome in your sanctuary;
the God of Israel gives power and strength to his people.*

Praise be to God!

Psalm 68:19-35

The paradox of God's salvation continues. The glory of God is found shockingly in his commitment to daily bear our burdens. Who ever heard of a god like this God? He is like no other king; like no other hero. We expect the Lord to be praised by his subjects who serve him for his power and his might, but it is he who serves his subjects. Blessed be the Lord, our Savior, "who daily bears our burdens." The Lord saves us. "From the Sovereign Lord comes escape from death." He routs the enemy, no matter how vigorous or virulent they may be, and triumphs over them. His enemies run, but they can't hide. The Lord gathers them for judgment from the heights of Mount Bashan and from the depths of the sea. Enemies are featured throughout the psalm. They scatter and flee. They vanish like a puff of smoke and melt like a blob of wax. They burn up. They are reduced to ash. The Lord is committed to the end of evil and the psalmist spares the niceties. He closes with a gory picture of bloody battlefield boots being licked by dogs. Psalm 68 is an inspirational precursor to our interpretation of the Book of Revelation. Christians who study the Psalms acquire an understanding of the images and types that are key to understanding the images used by the apostle John to describe the victory of the Lamb and the horror of judgment. The Psalms are more like the Book of Revelation than we may have realized.

The eschatological dynamic is clear. The procession of God the King lies in the future. If the catalysts for this psalm lie in Israel's past, such as when the ark of the Lord led the march through the wilderness or when King David danced with all his might as the ark ascended to its resting place on Mount Zion, this episode in salvation history is yet to take place. It will come at the end of the age and what a joyous occasion it will be. Singers, musicians, and dancers will lead the way in a triumphal procession of all the people of God. The psalmist references symbols of power – evil power; "the beast among the reeds" stands for Egypt, and the bulls refer to the leaders of nations who delight in power. They along with their people (calves) lust after tribute (silver) and war. The major powers of the time, Egypt and Ethiopia (Cush) will have no other recourse but to submit to God.

The paradox of divine strength and human weakness runs through this psalm until it crescendos at the end with a riveting focus on the awesome power of God. The kingdoms of the earth are summoned to sing praise to the Lord, who rides the heavens like a surfer rides the waves of the sea. The apostle John's vision of Christ in Revelation echoes David's praise for the Lord whose mighty voice thunders, whose majesty is over all, and who "gives power and strength to his people." In the end everything is and will be praise. "Praise be to God!"