

Psalm 68: Celebrating Victory



Psalm 68 (67) (Mode 3. 3...12 / 4...271)

This is a hymn of victory in the style of Exodus 15. The Exodus event explains many elements of the hymn and its development: the presence of God in Sinai, the departure, the advance through the wilderness, the rebellion of some who died in the desert (Numbers 14), the resistance by some kings (eg Moab and Bashan, Numbers 21). At the end of the journey they found a cultivated and irrigated land (Deuteronomy 11), which was divided up (Joshua 13-21), and in which the people settled.

Psalm 68 takes this up to the building of the temple as God's dwelling in the Holy Land (see Chronicles). It is modelled also on the victory song of Deborah, which includes the following:

'Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens poured, the clouds indeed poured water. The mountains quaked before the Lord of Sinai, before the Lord, the God of Israel'(Judges 5:4-5).

God rises up.

The enemy scatters.

As smoke is blown away,
so let them disappear.

As wax melts before the fire,

let the wicked perish at the presence of God.

‘Whenever the ark set out, Moses would say, “Arise, Lord, let your enemies be scattered, and your foes flee before you.” And whenever it came to rest, he would say, “Return, Lord of the ten thousand thousands of Israel”’(Numbers 10:35-36).

The just are filled with joy.
They exult before God.
They celebrate with jubilant song,
making music in God's honour.

Lay down a road
for the One who gallops over the plain.
The Lord is with us.
Let us all rejoice!

Father of orphans
and protector of widows
is God in the temple:
the holy habitation.

‘I delivered the poor who cried, and the orphan who had no helper. The blessing of the wretched came upon me, and I caused the widow’s heart to sing for joy’(Job 29:12-13).

God gives the desolate a home,
leads the prisoners out to freedom,
but the rebellious are banished
to dwell in a land without water.

We reflect on Jesus' healing of the leper (Mark 1:40-45) and the deranged man on the eastern side of the lake (Mark 5:1-20).

Theophanies in the desert anticipate nurturing rain
in the promised land.

God, when you went out
at the head of your people,
the earth quaked
when you marched through the desert.

The heavens poured down rain,
at the presence of the God of Israel.

You showered down a generous rain;
giving new life to your people.

It is there they found a home.

In your goodness you provided for the poor.

God as a victorious general distributes the spoils of war. The psalmist is summoning everyone to come and join in the victory celebrations!

The Lord sounds the war cry.

Great is the company of those who bear the tidings:

‘Kings, armies, they flee, they flee!’

Come, share the plunder:

silver plated doves

with wings of bright gold.

Are these the conquered military standards?

The Almighty scatters kings,
like snow on Mount Zalmon.

‘Zalmon’ means ‘black mountain’. In Judges 9:48
it is a mountain in the vicinity of Shechem.
Here it is a mountain of Bashan.

In the past God led us to victory.

In the present God will continue to save us!

O mighty mountains,
mountains of Bashan,
why do you look with envy,
at the mountain chosen by God?
It is there that the Lord
will dwell for ever.

Bashan is the fertile area of upper Transjordan east of the Sea of Galilee and mainly north of the Yarmuk river.

With chariots by the thousand,
tens of thousands of archers,
the Lord has come from Sinai
into the holy place.

You ascended the high mount,
leading captives in your train,
receiving peoples as tribute,
into your holy dwelling.

‘When he ascended on high he made captivity itself
a captive; he gave gifts to his people’(Ephesians 4:8).

Blessed be the Lord,
who daily bears us up.

God is for us our Saviour.

It is the Lord who liberates from death.

God shatters the heads of our enemies,
of those who walk in their sinful ways.

The Lord said, 'I will bring them back from Bashan,
back from the depths of the sea.

Perhaps the following two lines could be omitted from the liturgy

that you may bathe your feet in blood,
that the tongues of your dogs may have their share
of the foe.'

‘Though they dig into Sheol,
from there shall my hand take them;
though they climb up to heaven,
from there I will bring them down.

Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel,
from there I will search out and take them;
and though they hide from my sight
at the bottom of the sea,
there I will command the sea-serpent,
and it shall bite them’(Amos 9:2-3).

A solemn liturgical procession celebrating victory

They witness your cortège,
the procession of God into the sanctuary:
singers in front, musicians behind,
between them girls sounding their timbrels.

Bless God in the great congregation.

There is Benjamin, the least of them, at the head,
the princes of Judah in great numbers,
the princes of Zebulun, the princes of Naphtali.

Issue your commands, O God,
from your temple in Jerusalem.
Reveal your great strength.
as kings bring you their tribute.

Rebuke the wild animals
that live among the reeds.

Trample down those who lust for gold.
Scatter the peoples who delight in war.

Let bronze be brought from Egypt.

Let Sudan hasten to stretch out its hands to God.

A prayer that God will continue to defeat the wicked.

Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth;
sing praises to the Lord,
who rides through the ancient heavens,
causing his mighty voice to thunder.

Acknowledge the power of God who governs Israel;
whose authority is in the storm clouds.

Awesome is God in the sanctuary,
the God of Israel;
giving power and strength to the people.
Blessed be our God!