

# Psalm 97

## *The Reign of God and the Righteous*

Psalm 97 belongs to the group of hymns that praise the LORD by offering an exposition of the proclamation, “The LORD reigns” (see Introduction, sec. 6.1, 3). It is a companion of Psalms 47; 93; and 95–99.

1. As in Psalms 93 and 99, the thematic proclamation is the song’s first sentence. The psalm has three parts; each develops the significance of the opening proclamation. The first part (vv. 1–5) gives a verbal portrait of “the LORD of all the earth,” taking singers and hearers imaginatively into the royal presence. The second part (vv. 6–9) describes the response to the proclamation (repeated in verse 9). Heaven is claimed as herald and all peoples as witness of a rule that has inescapable consequences for all. The third part (vv. 10–12) tells the righteous what the proclamation means for them. The motif “re-joyce/joy” links the three parts. The opening invocation calls on earth to its farthest reaches to rejoice at the proclamation of the LORD’s reign (v. 1), but the only part of earth that does rejoice on hearing the proclamation is Zion and the surrounding towns of Judah (v. 8). In the time of the psalm, only the people who know the LORD as their God can rejoice. In contrast, all who worship idols are put to shame, because all other gods are subordinate to the LORD’s kingship (vv. 7, 9). The faithful righteous receive joy (v. 11) and may rejoice (v. 12) because the LORD’s rule means protection and help against the wicked (v. 10). The introduction of the threat and problem of the wicked in the third part of the psalm means that the psalm recognizes that even the population of Zion and Judah is split in the matter of devotion to the rule of the LORD. Other motifs are distributed in the psalm to elaborate crucial emphases (earth, all, righteousness, justice).

2. Earth is the recurrent motif in the first part of the psalm as it seeks to evoke the power and majesty of “the LORD of all the earth” (vv. 1, 4, 5, and repeated in v. 9). The imagery of the description is largely drawn from the theophany of the divine warrior who as the storm-god in the religions of Canaan and Mesopotamia defeated his opponents to gain kingship over other gods and the cosmos (see the comment on Pss. 18:7–15 and 89:5–14). The psalmist used features from that tradition to claim and proclaim Israel’s God as the awesome ruler of the earth. His person is hidden in the mystery of clouds and thick darkness; irresistible fire proceeds him; lightning and thunder mani-

fest his power (50:3, 6; 77:16, 18). At the sight, earth trembles and mountains dissolve. Israel used this dramatic and poetic language of its culture to affirm what we speak about with conceptual abstract terms like omnipotence, the absolute unqualified sovereignty of God. In Israel's polytheistic world, the language had the advantage of serving as a polemic against other gods (vv. 7, 9; see 95:3; 96:4–5) and in Israel's creative use of it, led to the monotheistic reduction of other gods to idols (v. 7; see 115:3–8; Isa. 42:17).

3. Among the descriptive features used to evoke the LORD's rule, only the word pair "righteousness/justice" occurs in all three parts of the psalm, an indication of its importance in the psalm's understanding of the kingship of the LORD. A king's throne was the central symbol of his kingship, and, by implication, its base represented that on which his rule was founded. The foundation of the LORD's throne, says the psalm, is not built of attributes of pure power but of qualities of ethical conduct. In naming righteousness and justice as the symbolic base of the LORD's throne (v. 2; 89:14), the psalm puts the focus on the attributes that lay at the center of the prophetic understanding of the LORD's reign. The LORD's reign is power devoted to righteousness and justice. Righteousness is the rightness that makes for life and *shalom*; justice is found in decisions and actions according to righteousness. Both, in the vocabulary of the psalms and the prophets, are qualities and events belonging to the LORD's reign. The righteousness proclaimed by the heavens (v. 6) is the LORD's identity and character as divine judge (50:6), who through his judgments (v. 8) acts to maintain and reveal his rule by intervening in the history of his people (see the comment on Ps. 98:1–3). The psalm is very near the vocabulary and message of the exilic Isaiah here (Isa. 40:5, 9–10; 42:17; 52:7–10). The faithful righteous are those who are right in relation to the LORD's reign because they reject evil, whatever diminishes life and *shalom*. The righteousness of God is light and joy for them because they find help and protection from the wicked in the judgments of the LORD. The real message of the psalm is heard at this point in its third part. The psalm's proclamation of God's reign offers the righteous hope in their opposition to evil. When the kingdom of God is proclaimed, the righteous take courage. A connection that is important for the interpretation of many other psalms is made here, because the opposition between the righteous and the wicked, so frequent a feature in them, is clearly related to faith that "the LORD reigns."