

OpenTheo

December 23rd: Psalms 127 & 128 & Revelation 15

December 22, 2020



Alastair Roberts

The true source of our blessings. The (new) Song of Moses.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Psalm 127, a song of a sense, of Solomon. Psalm 127 is one of two Psalms attributed to Solomon. It is a wisdom psalm, and might not have seemed out of place in the Book of Proverbs.

It has two parts. It begins with building a house in verses 1-2, and then follows that with building a family in verses 3-5. The house and the household are naturally connected.

As Conrad Schaefer observes, the first is connected with the term vein, repeated three times, and the second with the term sons, here translated children, and the synonym for sons, fruit of the womb. The great endeavours of life depend for their success upon the Lord's favour. The labour of the land and the labour of the womb both rely upon the Lord.

Without the blessing of the Lord our labours are futile, and we will not know the joy, confidence, and strength that comes with their success. Sons especially, like the walls of

a city, give strength and protection to the family, and extend its dominion. When trouble comes, our strength may seem to come purely from our own efforts, from the walls that surround our cities, from the sons that we have raised in our homes.

However, ultimately, it all comes from the Lord. This recognition is the antidote to anxiety and the desperation that drives the labours of those without such assurance that comes from dependence, especially when they are faced with the threats and assaults of their enemies. It can be so easy to think that our defence depends upon the high walls and watchmen of our cities, and upon the number and might of our sons, but it really all depends upon the Lord.

The weakest can be defended by Him, and the strongest can be overcome. An appreciation of this allows us to enjoy rest, to sleep, without the fears that drive the anxious. This might remind us of our Lord's teaching in Matthew chapter 6, verses 25-34.

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or What shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your Heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.

Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. Or as the Psalmist puts it, It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil, for he gives to his beloved sleep. Psalm 128, A Song of Ascents Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways.

You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands. You shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house.

Your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord. The Lord bless you from Zion.

May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life. May you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel.

Psalm 128 takes up many of the themes of Psalm 127. Like Psalm 127, it is a song of ascent sung by pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem for the pilgrim feasts of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, or Tabernacles. It is another wisdom psalm.

Its first four verses are a beatitude statement, and the concluding two like a priestly blessing. Its focus upon the man as husband and father should be considered in relation to the fact that attendance at the pilgrim feasts was a duty for males in a way that it was not for women. From the fear of the Lord and the observance of His ways flows the good life, the enjoyment of the fruit of your labours and general well-being.

The blessing of the Lord is expressed in the imagery of the vine and olive shoots, suggesting growth, strength, fruitfulness and enjoyment of harvest. Vines and olive trees were sources of bounty and blessing, associated with the rest enjoyed through wine and anointing. These are more eschatological fruits, fruits associated with the Sabbath.

The house and its table are here described like the intimate setting for a vine and olive grove, being a place for growth and the spreading out of life. It should be borne in mind that the household seen here is rather different from the typical modern household. It is a site of production, life and governance, which lies at the heart of its society and spreads outwards in the realm of its dominion through the industry, wisdom and fruitfulness of its members.

Psalms 127 and 128 conclude with words of blessing, which as in Psalm 127 trace the blessings described in its earlier verses back to their true source. It also connects the blessing of the individual Israelite with the prosperity of Jerusalem, within which it participates, to which it contributes and from which it grows. A question to consider.

What are some ways in which we can practice recognising the form of our blessings and, like Psalms 127 and 128, show wisdom in tracing them back to their true source? Revelation chapter 15 Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished. And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire, and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy, all nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.

After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls, full of the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

In Revelation chapter 12 we saw two great signs in heaven, the woman and the dragon. Now at the beginning of chapter 15 we encounter another, seven angels with seven plagues. We are reaching a climax here.

In the first verse we are told that the seven plagues that the angels will bring will complete the wrath of God. As heavenly signs, the woman and the dragon had connections with the zodiac, with the woman being Virgo and the dragon being Scorpio

and the claws, which we know as Libra. Now with the seven angels with plagues we have further signs.

We have seen sets of seven angels on a number of occasions before, for instance in the angels of the seven churches and in the trumpet blowing angels. The angels here will be given bowls and should probably be connected with the seven planets of the ancient solar system and also with comets, which as Peter Lightheart notes, were referred to as bowls. Austin Farrer suggests that we might see a descent through heavenly hierarchies here, as Christ himself opens the seven seals, the archangels or angels of the presence blow the trumpets and seven angels pour out the bowls.

Perhaps with the bowls we should also, as Farrer argues, see a connection with the cherubim like a man, which relates to the sign of Aquarius, the water bearer. The ordering of the final seven plagues here is interesting, as they will fall after the 144,000 of Israel have passed through the sea. This company seems to precede the greater company of the redeemed.

There is a threefold exodus here as Lightheart observes. The lamb, the bridegroom, precedes everyone else, then the 144,000 of the core bridal company, the first fruits of the earth, and then the wider multitude that follow after them. At the heart of chapter 15 is rich and subtle exodus imagery.

Themes of the exodus pervade the book of Revelation, but here they are especially dense. There are the great plagues, and then there is a scene reminiscent of the Red Sea crossing, on the other side of which a great company of Jews sing the song of Moses, much as Israel, led by Moses, sung the song of the sea in Exodus chapter 15, after their deliverance from Pharaoh, the great sea monster of the story of the exodus. There the waters through which the Israelites were saved destroyed their enemies.

And here the 144,000 are brought through a new sea of glass mingled with fire, which will be a means of destroying their enemies. They have passed through the sea of blood that was described at the end of chapter 14, and are now safe on the other side. The fiery character of the sea of glass here is one that connects it with the stream of fire that came out from God's throne in Daniel chapter 7. Yet the sea that they passed through was not so much a boundary on a horizontal plane than it was a boundary on a vertical plane.

They have passed through the firmament, and now stand above it by the sea of glass before the throne of God, the same sea that we saw back in chapter 4 verse 6. This fiery firmament sea will come down upon their pursuers in the bowls in devastating judgment, but they themselves are now entirely safe on the other side. They have been harvested from the earth and are now in God's presence. Earlier in chapter 14 verses 1 to 3 we read, Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with Him 144,000 who had His name, and the Father's name written on their foreheads.

And I heard a voice from heaven, like the roar of many waters, and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps. And they were singing a new song before the throne, and before the four living creatures, and before the elders.

No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. They were taught a new song back then, and now they are singing it. The preceding throne scenes were characterized by great companies joined together in song, and the same is the case here.

They are now being included into the liturgy. Earlier in chapter 5 verse 9 a new song was introduced as the Lamb ascended to the heavenly company. Now the renewing of the song of heaven continues with the inclusion of the company of the 144,000.

The redemption is the formation of a choir. The company are described as singing the song of Moses, connecting them with the Israelites in Exodus chapter 15. Some have also seen an allusion to the song of Moses that he sung at the end of his life, which Joshua helped with in Deuteronomy chapter 32.

However allusions to that are much weaker. The reference to the song of Moses here is strange and somewhat surprising. Apart from its setting after a great Exodus-like crossing of a sea, the song of the 144,000 does not seem to be that closely related to the song of Moses in Exodus chapter 15 at all.

Rather the Old Testament background of the song seems to lie more in Psalms 86 and 98 and the book of Jeremiah chapter 10. Psalm 86 verses 8 to 10 read, There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours. All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.

For you are great and do wondrous things. You alone are God. Psalm 98 verse 2, The Lord has made known his salvation.

He has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. In his treatment of this passage Richard Borkham reminds his readers of Isaiah chapter 11 verse 15 to chapter 12 verse 6, which presents its readers with a reframing of the Red Sea crossing deliverance and subsequent song in the context of a new deliverance. And the Lord will utterly destroy the tongue of the Sea of Egypt and will wave his hand over the river with his scorching breath and strike it into seven channels, and he will lead people across in sandals.

And there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that remains of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt. You will say in that day, I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. Behold, God is my salvation I will trust and will not be

afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw waters from the wells of salvation. And you will say on that day, Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted, sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously. Let this be made known in all the earth.

Shout and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. Balkam observes that this song in Isaiah chapter 12 is clearly playing off the song of Moses from Exodus chapter 15. It is not an entirely novel composition.

It picks up the words of the opening verses of Moses' song in that chapter in verses 1 to 2. Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying, I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously, the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation. This is my God, and I will praise him, my Father's God, and I will exalt him.

However, the stronger background for the songs of Isaiah chapter 12 is found in Psalm 105. In verses 1 to 2 of that Psalm we read, O give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, sing to him, sing praises to him, tell of all his wondrous works. Balkam observes the way that Psalm 105 was verbally linked with Exodus chapter 15, albeit principally in places other than those in which its language is adopted by Isaiah chapter 12.

In its sharing of key terminology with Exodus 15, Psalm 105 was seen to function as a sort of an interpretation of the earlier song. Isaiah chapter 12 is using the interpretation of the Psalm to develop its own resetting of the Song of the Sea. Revelation does much the same thing.

Balkam identifies a number of key elements of the message of the original Song of Moses that Revelation is taking up. He writes, In John's reading of the song in Exodus 15, the following points are likely to have been of significance. 1. God's mighty act of judgment on his enemies, which was also the deliverance of his people.

Exodus 15 1-10, 12. 2. God's mighty act of judgment demonstrated his incomparable superiority to the pagan gods. Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders? Exodus 15 11.

3. God's mighty act of judgment filled the pagan nations with fear. Exodus 15 14-16. 4. It brought his people into his temple.

Exodus 15 13-17. 5. The song concludes the Lord shall reign forever and ever. Exodus 15 18.

The words with which the song ends, the fifth point, clearly connect with Revelation's

overall theme of the establishment of God's eschatological kingdom and so they have already been quoted at chapter 11 verse 15. The significance of the new Exodus for John is ultimately that it leads to God's eternal kingdom. John's vision doesn't directly allude to the original Song of Moses so much as it indirectly alludes to it.

The introduction of the song as the Song of Moses alerts the hearer to the fact that the Song of Moses is in the background but without making clear how. When the hearer hears the song that follows, their initial reaction will be confusion at the lack of apparent relation between the original Song of Moses and the song recorded here when they were led to believe that one existed. However, then they start to recognise other Old Testament scriptures in the background which tips them off to the fact that something very similar to what occurs in Isaiah chapter 12 is occurring here.

The principal background texts are Psalm 86 verses 8-10, Psalm 98 verse 2, both of these I have already mentioned, and then Jeremiah chapter 10 verses 6-7. There is none like you, O Lord. You are great, and your name is great in might.

Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For this is your Jew, for among all the wise ones of the nations, and in all their kingdoms there is none like you. The hearer of Revelation chapter 15 should recognise a number of things. First, that somehow or other the words of the song connect with the original Song of Moses in Exodus chapter 15, while also being the new song described in Revelation chapter 14 verse 3. Second, that other Old Testament texts are being alluded to, most notably Jeremiah chapter 10, Psalm 86 and Psalm 98.

Third, that these Old Testament texts are themselves explorations and developments of Exodus chapter 15, more especially verse 11. Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? This verse of the original Song of Moses, Exodus chapter 15 verse 11, is the key to the whole thing. As Borkham expresses it, it is the common denominator which links the passages to which the Song in Revelation chapter 15 alludes.

Its focus is upon the incomparability of God in His redemption. It also makes it more apparent that the Song of the 144,000 is being juxtaposed with the false worship described in chapter 13 verse 4. And they worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast. And they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it? Once we recognise the way that Revelation chapter 15 is working with the original Song of Moses, the theological message of the Song becomes quite apparent.

Borkham concludes, Revelation's version of the Song of Moses is not, as has usually been thought, a medley of Old Testament phrases with no relation to the Song of Moses and Exodus chapter 15. On the contrary, it is a careful interpretation of the Song, achieved by skilful use of recognised exegetical methods. The effect is to interpret the

Song in line with the most universalistic strain in Old Testament hope, the expectation that all the nations will come to acknowledge the God of Israel and worship Him.

This has a most important bearing on the significance of the whole of the New Exodus symbolism, which is so prominent throughout Revelation. It shifts the emphasis in the significance of the New Exodus from an event by which God delivers His people by judging their enemies, to an event which brings the nations to acknowledge the true God. In chapter 15 verses 2-4, the martyrs celebrate the victory God has won through their death and vindication, not by praising Him for their own deliverance, but by celebrating its effect on the nations, in bringing them to worship God.

This gives a fresh significance to the earlier use of New Exodus imagery with reference to the Lamb's victory, in which by His death He ransomed a people from all nations to be a kingdom and priests for God. Chapter 5 verses 9-10, we now see that this redemption of a special people from all the peoples is not an end in itself, but has a further purpose, to bring all the peoples to acknowledge and worship God. The Red Sea crossing ultimately led Israel to the encounter with the Lord at Sinai, to the tabernacle and to the gift of the law.

Much the same movement occurs here, as we now see the sanctuary of the heavenly tent of the testimony opened up. This also recalls the earlier scene at the end of chapter 11. This will initiate a new Pentecost-like event, as Lighthart observes, the pouring out of the bowls is the flip side of the pouring out of the spirit.

Christ entered into the heavenly place and then the spirit was poured out in blessing. The 144,000 martyrs passed through the firmament into the heavens and now the spirit has poured out in devastating bowls of judgement. Ideally bowls of incense and wine ascend to God and are received by Him, but now bowls of incense are tipped over with fiery coals descending and bowls filled with the wine of the blood of the saints, mixed with the fire of God's wrath, are poured down upon those who fill them with their murders.

A question to consider, how might Revelation's resetting of the Song of Moses change the way that we read the original?