

Alexander Massey

Holy Mountain

Midrash on Psalm 87

(Solo + ATB & piano)

including an essay-commentary
on the text and music



Shir Publications

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Midrash on Psalm 87

At first glance, Psalm 87 appears to be quite disjointed, with no clear emotional or theological point to make. While a line from it was used in translation by John Newton in 1779 for the Christian hymn 'Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God', it is otherwise unknown, and seemingly unused. So perhaps I should explain why I decided to set it to music.

Back in 2012, I was looking for a text that might be suitable as a song to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the UK's Council of Christians and Jews that year; but after many weeks, I had drawn a blank, and I was ready to give up on the idea. I was then invited to teach and perform for the 44th International Jewish-Christian Bible Week in Haus Ohrbeck, Germany. That year, they were studying the Third Book of Psalms (Psalms 73-89). I decided it would be a nice to surprise them by writing some new settings of some of those psalms, and perform them during the conference. I ended up writing 7 new psalm settings. When I came to look at Psalm 87, I was very tempted to simply leave it to one side and look at other options.

Psalm 87 seemed just so odd, and impenetrable, and didn't seem worth spending a lot of time on. The opening verses (e.g. see the Jewish Publication Society translation) don't seem to hang together very well or make much sense. The imagery, metaphors and references are obscure. Gates of Zion, Rahab, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, Cush, the register of peoples, singers and dancers. What on earth is it all about?! I was tempted to simply look for an easier psalm. But something made me stick with it and try to make sense of it, and I'm glad I did, because as I decoded it, it began to speak to me. And I realised that if I was to set it to music, a literal translation was not enough – I would have to create a modern text, and interpretation, that might stay true to the intentions of the original, and yet speak to the modern listener. So here is some of the 'code-breaking process' I used to convert it into a modern lyric so that we could appreciate the references.

I wrestled a long time with the original verses 1 and 2 (see JPS translation). They seemed muddled. As it turns out, verse 3, and the middle line of verse 2 should be coupled together. And I confirmed this with a scholar of Biblical poetry, Jan Fokkelman, a Fellow at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem who explained that this is a rare example of fragments of Biblical verses being wrongly sequenced in the ancient sources. The opening verse of the original should read: "Glorious things are spoken of you, city of God, His foundation on the holy mountain." Now it becomes clear that the psalm is about Zion / Jerusalem, the city of God on the mountain. This is where God 'is' and dwells, what I have called in my lyric, the 'home of the Holy One'. The rest of the psalm reveals to us what is important about this place, and what spiritual and ethical lesson we can learn from it.

Verse 2 in the original should now read: "The Lord loves the gates of Zion / More than the dwellings of Jacob." Yes, God loves Jacob's people (Israel), but we're being told that Zion, God's 'home' as it were, is the centre, not Jacob's people or their dwellings. The poet is making sure that we focus on this place called Zion. Why? What are we supposed to understand about this place? What is the character of the city of God, and in particular, what is special about the gates? Gates are places where people can enter or be barred from entering. In v2 of my lyric, I have anticipated my interpretation of Ps 87 by suggesting that

this psalm is about inclusiveness. God loves the gates of Zion most, because “God loves best where all may enter”.

In fact, I have anticipated the idea of inclusiveness also in the words of the refrain lines. “Each of us was born there” is taken from the phrase found in the original vv5 and 6. And with my phrase “Welcomes all from everywhere” I am taking theological licence to offer my conclusion of what I think is the subtext of the whole psalm.

So let’s return to the question I asked earlier. What is so important about the “gates of Zion”? I think verses 4-7 of the original give us the clues. To decipher them, we’re going to need to jump around a little.

In my verse 3, I draw from the original verse 6. The ‘register of peoples’ in which God writes all names, I interpreted as the Book of Life referred to in the Jewish High Holy Days – where our souls are remembered and cherished. From the original verse 5, I converted the word Zion, the poetic name for Jerusalem, to ‘city of peace’ – the Hebrew word *Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem) can be heard as a sound-play on *ir shalom* (meaning ‘city of peace’). So the ‘gates of Zion’ admit us to a place of peace, harmony and wholeness.

In my verse 4, I tackled the references which, as modern readers, we are likely to find obscure. Rahab (literally meaning ‘monster’) and Babylon were Egypt and Syria, traditional enemies of the Israelites when the psalm was written; with the inclusion of the other place names, all the four points of the compass are represented. We could read that as a poetic shorthand for indicating that all the world and its peoples are said to acknowledge God in their own way, and that each was born in Zion, the ‘home of God’, and therefore have their origin in God. And the writer has daringly ensured that we take this point seriously, by changing the pronoun to ‘I’: in the original verse 4, God is speaking in the first person ‘I’. My refrain lines stress this point that God welcomes and loves all people equally, regardless of who the people are, where they come from, or how we might personally view them. My line “faithless and faithful, the greatest and least” is a creative attempt to express this.

And so to my verse 5, which corresponds to verse 7 in the original Hebrew and the JPS translation. The usual translation refers to “singers and dancers”. However, it should really read ‘singers and pipe players’. It is hard to fathom why these particular people have been singled out. My very personal reading here is that these are code words to mean ‘every soul’ (does not a soul sing?) and ‘all that breathes’ (for to sound a pipe, we put our own life breath into it).

So what can we learn from Psalm 87? We are reminded that we are to love our neighbours as ourselves (Lev 19:18); that we are not to hate an ‘Egyptian’, nor anyone we regard as enemies (Deut 23:7), nor anyone we regard as The Other; that if we are made in the image of God, who in this psalm clearly loves all, then, like God, we are the keepers of our brothers and sisters (Gen 4:9), and all are our brothers and sisters. Our Bible story that God created the first human, from whom we are all descended, teaches that humanity is one inter-connected family. *Midrash* - the creative Rabbinic commentaries of ancient times - expresses this through saying that we are all descendants of the 70 nations from Noah, that the ten commandments were written in 70 languages on the two tablets of stone, that there are 70 ‘faces’ to the Torah so that all may find a pathway to truth, and that at the Jewish festival of *Sukkot* prayers are made for all the 70 nations of the world that they may receive the blessing of rain and life. For me, Ps 87 says that no nation or faith tradition has special Divine favours above any other. As we bring to mind the Shoah, ethnic cleansing, and all

atrocities inflicted by people throughout human history and current times, we need to remember that each nation is special in its own way, each person is special in their own way, but nobody is more special than anyone else. Psalm 87 is quintessentially an interfaith, universal, human psalm, embracing the equality of all humanity – each nation and person comes from and returns to the same Source, and is loved equally.

1. Holy mountain, home of the Holy One, / *Each of us was born there;*
Glorious city, Rock of Zion, / *Welcomes all from everywhere.*

*Holy mountain, holy mountain,
Each of us was born there.*

2. No place on earth, but God's the centre; / *Each of us was born there;*
God loves best where all may enter, / *Welcomes all from everywhere.*
3. Written in the Book of Life, / *Each of us was born there;*
City of peace that ends all strife / *Welcomes all from everywhere.*
4. Faithless and faithful, the greatest and least, / *Each of us was born there;*
Lover of North, South, West and East / *Welcomes all from everywhere.*
5. Every soul and all that breathes sings: / *Each of us was born there;*
Holy Source of all Life's springs / *Welcomes all from everywhere.*

*Holy mountain, holy mountain,
Each of us was born there.*

So much for the lyrics – what about the music? Writing for the 70th anniversary of the CCJ, and setting a psalm that is used in both Jewish and Christian traditions, I wondered what musical language could honour both paths. Just as I believe the psalm itself challenges our thinking, my musical setting is intended to do so too, and I've been a little mischievous in how I've composed it. It sounds like a Christian gospel song, with its jazzy 'blue' notes, but in fact is based on a centuries-old Jewish musical prayer mode called *Adonai malach*, that's used in services for Shabbat and the High Holy Days. So is it Christian music, or Jewish, or both, or neither?

Suggestions for use:

1. A 'gospel' number like this cries out for improvisation, and adding more instrumental and voice parts, so feel free to experiment.
2. In the SATB version, the top 'solo' part can be sung by any voice type, singing as 'caller'.

Holy Mountain (Ps 87) is a joyous psalm that celebrates diversity, inclusion and interfaith. The music blends the Christian Gospel singing tradition with the Jewish Adonai Malach mode. There is a solo voice & piano version of this piece as well.

Holy Mountain

Composed for the 70th anniversary
of the Council of Christians and Jews

This sheet music booklet includes an essay-commentary on the text and music.

Music: Alexander Massey

Words: Alexander Massey (based on Ps 87)

Joyfully ♩=102

1

2

Piano

5

1. Ho - ly moun-tain, home__ of the Ho-ly One, Each of us was born there;
 2. No place on earth but__ God's__ the__ cen - tre, Each of us was born there;
 4. Faith-less and faith-ful, the great-est and__ least,__ Each of us was born there;

5

1. Each of us was born there;

Pno.

Holy Mountain

9

Glo - rious ci - ty, Rock of Zi - on Wel - comes all from ev' - ry - where.
God ___ loves best where all ___ may en - ter, Wel - comes all from ev' - ry - where.
Lov - er of North, South, West and East Wel - comes all from ev' - ry - where.

9

Wel - comes all from ev' - ry - where.

Pno.

9

13

Ho - ly moun-tain, ho - ly moun-tain, each of us was born there!

13

Ho - ly moun-tain, ho - ly moun-tain, each of us was born there!

Pno.

13

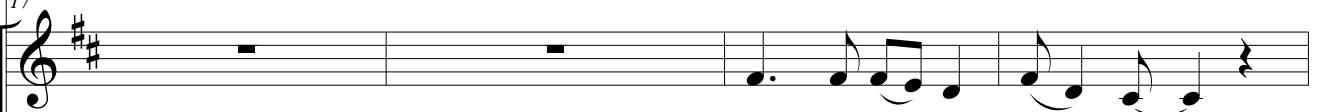
Holy Mountain

17

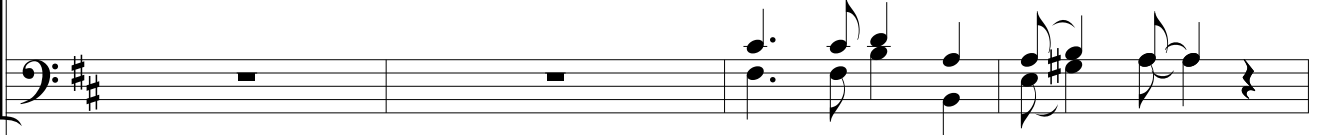


3. Writ - ten in the Book of _ Life, _____ Each of us _ was born there;
5. Ev' - ry soul and all that breathesings: "Each of us _ was born there;

17

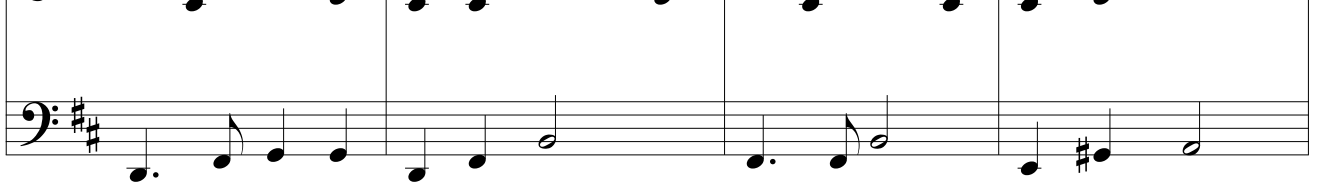


Each of us _ was born there;



Pno.

17

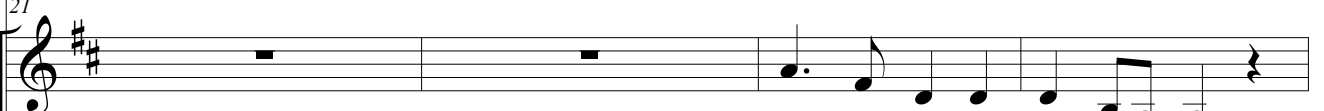


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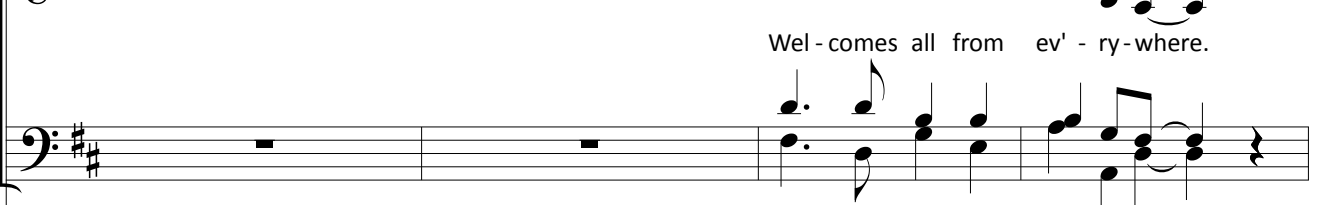


Ci - ty of peace that ends all strife _ Wel - comes all from ev' - ry - where.
Ho - ly Source of all _ Life's springs Wel - comes all from ev' - ry - where."

21

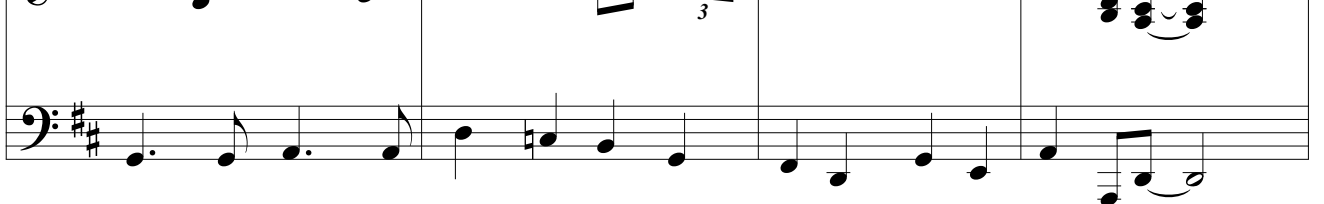


Wel - comes all from ev' - ry - where.



Pno.

21



Holy Mountain

25

Ho - ly moun-tain, ho - ly moun-tain, each of us was born there!

25

Ho - ly moun - tain, ho - ly moun - tain, each of us was born there!

Pno.

25

29

29

Pno.

29