

Psalm 82

- 1 A psalm of Asaph.
God stands in the divine assembly;
among the divine beings He pronounces judgment.
- 2 How long will you judge perversely,
showing favor to the wicked? *Selah.*
- 3 Judge the wretched and the orphan,
vindicate the lowly and the poor,
- 4 rescue the wretched and the needy;
save them from the hand of the wicked.
- 5 They neither know nor understand,
they go about in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth totter.
- 6 I had taken you for divine beings,
sons of the Most High, all of you;
- 7 but you shall die as men do,
fall like any prince.
- 8 Arise, O God, judge the earth,
for all the nations are Your possession.

This short psalm is one of our daily psalms. According to a rabbinic text, the Levites used to sing this one in the Temple on Tuesdays, and we continue that tradition. In the cycle of the daily psalms, this one marks the low point from which we gradually rise until we reach next Monday. It is a strange psalm in that it raises a number of interesting questions that the rest of our Biblical corpus does not help us to answer! On the other hand, we can understand the words; and, doing that, we can put together an interpretation of the psalm as a whole.

The major problem that this psalm raises is theological. We can recognize that our religion has evolved over the millennia. How the Israelites worshiped at Mount Sinai, or how our people worshiped in the temple in Jerusalem, or even how the Rabbis ordained the prayer services is not how we today worship. And how they thought about God in each of those periods is not how we think about God today. So we know that the language the Bible uses to talk about God is not the language we would prefer to use, but we can understand it through a lens of symbolism.

This psalm is different from most of the rest of the Bible! This psalm opens with a view of the Heavenly Court and mentions divine beings. It is worth pointing out that the Hebrew word for those divine beings is *elohim*, a word we are more familiar with as referring to God (and which appears in that way in the first part of the verse!). Here, instead, it seems to refer to other gods, those that would have filled out a divine assembly in the ancient world. Yes, this psalm emerges from a polytheistic society – just as Israelite culture did. As such we can look at this psalm and the imagery in it in a number of different ways. First, it is a window on ancient religion. Second, this psalm helps us

to see just how far the religion of Israel has come. Third, we can read it symbolically. Of course, we can also dismiss it out of hand, but I encourage against that. This psalm has been kept by our people for thousands of years – and not hidden in a back closet, but prominently featured in our liturgy.

In this image of the divine assembly, we see God presented as Judge. Unfortunately, however, in the world of the psalmist, justice is not being done. Things are not going as they should – a feeling that many of us share today. Yet the psalmist does not give up on God as judge. After crying out that justice has been perverted, the psalmist asks God to resume judging fairly. Make sure that poverty is not equated with guilt. Make sure that unfortunate circumstances do not condemn a person to a life of misfortune.

Toward the end, the author of this psalm challenges the image of the divine assembly. By declaring the divine beings mortal and condemning them to fall and die, the psalmist hopes to end this perversion of justice. Surely God was not responsible, but it was the rest of the assembly. Now that God stands up in the assembly, the principles and the values that God represents will be restored.

In the middle of the psalm is an interestingly difficult verse. Verse 5 does not offer us a clear subject. Does the “They” refer to the wretched, the orphan, the lowly, and the needy of the previous verse? Or does it refer to divine beings of the following verse? If this refers to those divine beings, then we can understand that the psalmist thinks them misguided. Walking around in darkness may mean that they do not see clearly, and therefore they are making bad decisions. These bad judgments are threatening the stability of the world! If, on the other hand, those who walk in darkness are the lowly, the ones who have been wronged by society, then it is a powerful statement indeed that their wretchedness endangers the foundations of the earth! It is nice to find an ambiguous line that can be so powerful either way.

This psalm is a cry for justice, for help, when the world seems to be heading in the wrong direction. The group responsible for administering justice, for steering the ship, is leading us astray. This poem knows that all it takes is one voice to stand up, assume a leadership role, and do right. Once that happens, once the argument for justice and righteousness can be heard over the din of apathy and over the self-interest of those in power, their power will fall away.

While the psalmist knows that only God can save those in need from those harsh forces in the universe, I think that we can understand this in a way that is more relevant, more connected to our experiences. In this case, our psalm is calling out for *imitation Dei*, imitating God: Stand up. Stand up for justice. Make the argument for equity. Remind people how our shared values do not add up to the world we are living in!